Executive Summary
Circus Smirkus worked with educational consultants and Winooski Middle School to pilot an extended in-school Expanded Learning Provider (ELP) model. This residency aligned circus arts programming to educational and social emotional standards and expectations, and worked to measure student growth and improvement through a series of assessments.

This project:

- Brought an ELP into a school setting for a 7 week residency;
- Aligned a circus methodology to educational and social emotional standards; and
- Provided student assessment tools in SEL, school climate, and circus specific skills.

Project Background
Following the passing of Act 77 in 2013, Vermont created a “Flexible Pathways Initiative” and Education Quality Standards (EQS) to provide students access to flexible pathways to graduation. In a time of career- or college-ready expectations for all students, this initiative allowed the use of outside organization resources including community learning centers, museums, nonprofits, and other educational outlets, to extend learning opportunities for students. The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) has defined these groups as “Expanded Learning Providers” or “Informal Educators.” These Expanded Learning Providers provide an experiential learning component which allows the student to apply their own knowledge, skills, and passions to their learning and growth.

Flexible Pathways works in conjunction with student Personalized Learning Plans (PLP) to fulfill specific graduation requirements for secondary school students. Although these personalized plans have broadened options for Vermont students,
schools throughout the state are challenged to provide enough outside resources to meet students’ personalized goals.

The partnership between Circus Smirkus and Winooski School created an Expanded Learning Provider (ELP) model that allowed the school to better support the Vermont Agency of Education’s shift to a personalized-learning standard. This Flexible Pathways grant funding allowed Circus Smirkus and Winooski School create program examples of how external learning opportunities might be incorporated to expand student PLPs.

The Agency of Education required the following as part of the grant process (Integrating Expanded Learning Opportunities Grant Requirements, 2017, p. 3):

1. Creating shared learning targets and performance scales;
2. Redesigning or modifying both internal and external learning opportunities (in schools or through ELPs) to incorporate these shared learning targets; and
3. Creating a process by which a student’s external learning experience can be endorsed by their school of record.

ELPs can work with students outside the school facility or inside the school in a more traditional residency setting. Circus Smirkus brought a Circus Artist to Winooski Middle School to implement a seven week residency with middle school students. The project was planned and evaluated by a steering committee of educators and researchers from Winooski School, American Youth Circus Organization, Vermont Arts Council, Marlboro Graduate School, and Cornell University. These consultants worked with Winooski School teachers and staff to develop a proficiency-based measurement system within a personalized learning environment.

The project goals, established in collaboration with the Winooski Schools Superintendent, were to:

1. Create an effective partnership between a school district and an arts education organization and Expanded Learning Provider (ELP),
2. Deliver effective programming that meets the district’s educational targets and student-defined goals,
3. Measure proficiencies and integrate these assessments into learning goals and Grade/Graduation Expectations (GXs) and PBGRs,
4. Demonstrate how ELPs can work within schools to provide personalized learning paths,
5. Provide a range of deliverables including a Case Study, a curriculum alignment
guide (Appendix A), and student assessment tools for the school district, the AOE, and ELPs statewide, and

6. Establish a network to provide information to artists and ELPs to support state educational objectives.

School and Organization Background

Winooski Middle School’s (WMS) current student population is well-positioned for student-derived learning opportunities. Seventy-seven (77%) of students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches, 30% of students are English Language Learners, and 30% receive special education support. These factors greatly influence social emotional literacy and, as a result, the learning environment can be challenging due to the diverse emotional, developmental and behavioral needs of the student population. This student body is also unfortunately limited in access to high-quality arts programming and education.

Circus Smirkus, as an in-school Expanded Learning Provider, provided a model of arts engagement that incorporated PLPs and the ability to review and measure student success and learning in the provided content areas. Additionally, the focus on student-defined goals led to better engagement and more growth towards our specified Graduate Expectations and will allow for future collaborations with ELPs.

Circus Smirkus is an arts education organization that provides circus education to youth through three main programs; The traveling Big Top Tour, Smirkus Summer Camp, and In-School Residencies. Circus Smirkus has been providing artist-in-residency programs for twenty-two years. The current residency methodology uses a pedagogy that is predicated and primarily reliant on student directed learning, which makes it highly appropriate and advantageous for this learning model.

In response to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the implementation of the Flexible Pathways Initiative in Vermont, Smirkus’s Ringmaster Residency Program, in collaboration with seven other circus organizations, participated in a year long Social Emotional Learning impact study at Lakeview School sponsored by the American Youth Circus Organization (AYCO) and the Weikart Center for Program Quality. This work sought to measure the influence the circus arts can have on Social Emotional Learning with a wide age range of student populations. The results of this study demonstrated that “Circus arts delivered results measurably better than the comparison group composed of a wide range of school arts and sports activities.”

The figure presented below represents the Circus Smirkus student participants’ standing in SEL skills by domain in comparison to the Weikart Center for Program
Quality’s Network review of other non-circus programs. As indicated on the graph, in 4 of the 6 areas, the Smirkus Residency students at Lakeview School scored higher than the rest of the network.

The Weikart Final Report also states that “AYCO Social Circus Network offerings were of exceptionally high quality and produced substantively important SEL skill change in youth, comparing favorably to an external sample of exemplary programs with long histories of SEL work and validation.” (Agans, J. (n.d.). *Summary of Weikart Center Report for AYCO Social Circus Network - Working paper*).

Circus Smirkus and Winooski Middle School sought to build on those findings by using the skills and pedagogy of the circus arts in an innovative ELP model to enhance and measure student learning within a self-directed and goal setting teaching strategy in line with educational standards and expectations.

**Program Design**

The team of educational consultants and teachers worked from May of 2017 to prepare a plan for the residency that would achieve the goals agreed upon by Circus Smirkus and Winooski Middle School. The group set forth the following process with the associated *italicized* artifacts.

1. In collaboration with WMS administration and educators, identify the set of student proficiency goals (e.g. PBGR, NCAS, SEL) targeted by this program and align those with the teaching methodologies of the residency artist.

2. Engage youth development researcher Jen Agans and circus arts educator and SEL specialist Jackie Davis to produce an *Alignment Guide* that demonstrates to administration, teachers, and students how the specific elements of the artist’s training program can be utilized to meet their personal and organizational educational goals, as well as grade and graduation requirements while allowing students to take ownership of their own learning process.
3. Create a series of **Proficiency Measures** and **Student Self-Assessments** for each of the artist's skill training methods that will enable the measurement of changes in student proficiency and the subsequent endorsement of proficiency progress by the school. Specific goal levels for badges, micro-credits or proficiency indicators will be developed by the school in collaboration with educational consultants on the Steering Committee. These measures include pre and post residency SEL measurements through an engaging activity, a pre- and post-residency school climate paper survey, and a circus skills specific rubric filled out by both the students and the Residency Artist.

4. Using a methodology developed in consultation with evaluation and monitoring Results Based Accountability (RBA) specialists Hillary Orsini and Sarah Mutrux, conduct a semester-long artist-in-residency program to pilot, monitor, and evaluate the program model.

5. Write a **Case Study** that presents the program model, outlines the process undertaken, publishes the measured results, and reflects on opportunities for improvement. This document will be published and made available to artists, ELPs, and educators statewide.

6. Using the tools created throughout this project, a compilation of this work will further as **Training Resources** for teachers and ELPs that describe how to use this process to guide ELPs throughout the state of Vermont to replicate this project within their own subjects and bring further student-led learning opportunities to the classroom.

Forty students engaged in this residency over a seven week period of time, and participated in nearly 34 hours of circus arts contact hours per student culminating in a performance demonstrating both circus skill and goal achievement strategies. The measurement tools demonstrated alignment with national, state, and school expectations, and both the organizations and, most importantly, the students, had a positive experience.

**Results**

Circus is unique; it is well suited for both team building and independent learning. Circus is a non-competitive physical activity that encourages perseverance, goal setting, cooperation, and self-expression. The diverse offerings of the circus arts allowed individual students of Winooski Middle School to find an area in which each could excel. This residency created an opportunity for choice and autonomy, a teaching strategy that is helpful for students of all ages.
Early in the residency, many students struggled to self-regulate behavior, to give their best effort, and were reluctant to take positive risks. As the residency proceeded, students began to feel satisfaction as they developed circus skills, their determination grew, and in most cases students were able to hone in on their SEL techniques and skills.

Each class started and ended with daily reflection. Students were given journal prompts that correlated with Smirkus’s CircusSecrets™ methodology. The 10 CircusSecrets™ include: Try, try again, Try a new way, Watch, Listen, Reflect, Pause, Imagine, Go slow, step by step, Give/Get Help, and Stop, think, and choose. Through verbal and written prompts scattered throughout each class period, students were able to transfer the use of the CircusSecrets™ and other lessons learned in circus class to other areas of classroom learning, and in their personal lives as well.

The creative arts teacher described one of the CircusSecrets™, Try, try again, as “highly applicable, and proved transferable to our desire for students to invest in the revision process in writing and in other subjects as well” (H.Win, Creative Arts Teacher-WMS-Post Residency Survey, December 20, 2017).

The class finished the residency with a themed circus performance. Through this process the students grew to support each other emotionally and physically, both with words and actions of encouragement. The students’ ability to take safe risks was represented in their performance through their acts consisting of large group human pyramids, choreographed clowning character routines, and well-practiced juggling and object manipulation acts. Students learned that effort, determination, and support can create wonderful and successful results, and that practiced learning strategies enforced by Smirkus’s CircusSecrets™ can work in tandem with school and personal goals.

To objectively measure this experience, the Steering Committee and WMS staff worked to create a series of student assessments. These tools were administered to both the student and the residency artist in a variety of ways, including kinesthetic activities as well as pen and paper reflective work. These student assessment tools consisted of a pre- and post-SEL activity, a school climate survey, and a circus-skills specific rubric given to both the individual student and the residency artist to fill out. The daily journals to track the students’ experience, and the use of reflective and group share techniques throughout each class were welcomed and proved to be influential additions to this experience for the students.

The SEL measurement activity asked students to rate themselves through a series of statements that correlate to specific SEL domains as defined by the Weikard Center for

To start, the students practiced this skill of self reflection and self rating in an everyday type scenario. A foursquare was taped on the classroom floor with labels in each quadrant: Every Time, Almost Always, Usually, and Never. Students placed themselves into the quadrant they believed best reflected their character and abilities for each statement. The same activity was performed at the end of the residency as well. The following graph presents the change in SEL proficiencies between the pre- and post-residency assessments:

![Student Perception of SEL Proficiencies](image)

This residency was the first time this SEL activity was piloted with students. Though there are already realized revisions to how some of these prompts were worded, the activity proved to produce results and represent change and growth with accuracy and relative consistency. Students grew in all areas, and significantly improved in the areas of Empathy and Emotion Management. The CircusSecrets™ that correlate with these domains and enhance student learning were “Watch”, “Listen”, “Stop, think, and choose”, and “Try, try again.”

In addition to this SEL pre- and post- activity, the students were given a self administered pen and paper survey regarding their perception of their school’s climate. The results of the pre-survey were particularly interesting to an outside observer not a part of the WMS community. This short survey consisted of questions with three potential answers that students deemed closest to their perception. The pre- and post-residency survey results are presented on the following page.
Throughout the residency, the artist and teacher witnessed students becoming more proud of their school, the work they do, and each other. When asked "Did you notice a change in your student's behaviors and attitude throughout the residency?" the teacher answered with an astounding:

"Yes, definitely. Even the most skeptical students were able to invest in the work once they were allowed to "watch" in order to learn. We learned a lot about forcing kids into work vs. offering, holding expectations, and waiting for them to join in their own way. Students surprised us with their ability and interest in taking the lead, watching out for each other, and taking responsibility for their roles and the group as a whole." (H.Win, Creative Arts Teacher-WMS- Post Residency Survey, December 20, 2017)

Students were also given a skills assessment to determine their growth specifically within their circus arts skills. The Residency Artist and students filled out the same
rubric. Following the school’s four point rubric model, students were asked to rate their skill level in a variety of residency-taught circus skills. They circled whether they considered themselves to be entering, developing, meeting, or exceeding in ten taught circus areas; feather, plate spinning, flower sticks, diabolo, juggling, tumbling, pyramids, clown, rola bola, and balancing globe.

The residency artist was also asked to fill out the student rubrics after them, to determine how they perceived their new learned art form and growth personally versus an outside observer’s interpretation. Most of the students answered their skills assessment honestly and were self aware of their abilities; very few gave themselves more credit than they deserved in terms of skills achievement, and even fewer gave themselves less credit than reality.

Aside from the SEL post activity, all other assessments were given post-residency by the school. Based on the experience and observations of the Residency Artist and the Creative Arts Teacher, the residency proved to be successful. Students improved in all areas: SEL, perception of school climate, and circus skill technique. Based on teacher observation, students were also able to transfer the skills taught in circus class to a variety of other subjects, and students still refer to the CircusSecrets™ in various aspects of their school and social lives weeks later. Residency artist, Josh Shack shared:

“I witnessed a lot of growth in the students, as individuals, team players, learners and performers. One particular student, early in the residency, sat in the corner of the classroom disconnected from the group. However, she really loves circus, and she was proud of her skill development. She quickly became one of the more engaged and enthusiastic students, and after the final performance, commented that she wished we could take our show on tour to other schools” (J.Shack, Smirkus Residency Artist- Post Residency Survey, December 20, 2017)

In addition to the student success, all goals of this project were met; the alignment guide was created to correlate the CircusSecrets™ to SEL domains, WMS specific unit principles, National Core Arts Anchor Standards, and two WMS chosen Graduation Expectations, three student assessment tools were created, and the teaching tool resources packet is put together to be provided to other Extended Learning Providers in Vermont. The intention for these tools, is to help measure and legitimize the influence the arts and other expanded learning opportunities can have on student learning in all Vermont Schools. Additionally, these tools represent a successful collaboration between an organization and a school system in hopes that this work together will lead the way for other schools and organizations to work together in this type of setting.
Project Management Challenges, Celebrations, and Reflections

The Steering Committee worked remotely throughout this project and weekly email check-ins were provided by the Project Manager (PM) to keep team members on track with the scheduled deliverables. The planned timeline remained relatively intact, and the goals were met. The use of Google Drive as the cloud-based source for the team’s materials and work provided ease in communication, allowed for online collaboration.

The biggest challenge working with a large project team in multiple locations is availability. The majority of the deliverables were crafted during the summer months, an anticipated busy time. Finding a time for everyone to attend phone calls or workshop meetings was at times a challenge. To accommodate this timeframe and the people included, the schedule had to remain moderately flexible and fluid.

Another potential project set back occurred a month prior to the scheduled in-school residency. The initial signed-on circus artist unfortunately had to step off the project to pursue another performance opportunity. Smirkus was able to sign on a veteran circus residency artist to take on the role a few weeks following this change and Winooski Middle School was very flexible throughout this adjustment to the program, and was willing to work with a new person and their particular schedule. Ultimately, the artist that attended the school was a good fit for the students and worked effectively with the Creative Arts Teacher throughout the residency. The weeks between artists provided a minor set back to the school and Smirkus’ preparation of the program, but both groups remained flexible.

With little time between the end of the residency and the completion of the grant period, collecting and analyzing post-residency results proved moderately difficult, especially once a Smirkus representative was no longer at the school site. For future extended residencies, it would be helpful to have a week following the performance for reflection, student celebration, and final assessments. This would allow further depth in finding out the impact of this experience for the students, as well as more time to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze and compare the collected data to the pre-residency assessment answers, the circus performance, and student perception/reflective work.

Overall, this experience provided a group of middle schoolers with a once in a lifetime experience, a chance to pilot and develop a program that meets Flexible Pathway standards, and the ability to assess/measure student growth in an artist-in-residence arts setting. The collaboration between the Steering Committee, the Winooski Staff, the Circus Residency Artist, and Smirkus Staff proved to bring a new and exciting
experience to students thirsty for the arts, and created a large amount of potential for other Expanded Learning Providers to utilize across Vermont.

**Applicability for Future Programs**

Looking ahead, Smirkus is interested in providing this experience to other schools in Vermont and New England. One student thanked the Smirkus Residency Artist from this extended residency with this quote: “I just went to the doctors on Thursday, and she said I am happy and healthy. I think it’s because of circus.” (Winooski Student- Post Residency Thank You Letter, December 6, 2017)

Since the piloted extended residency model seemed to allow for the students and the school to dive deeply into the circus arts and its benefits, Smirkus is eager to continue to engage with school districts and a variety of student populations as an in-school ELP program.

The alignment guide and student assessment tools developed throughout this project are adaptable and can be tailored to specific school needs and programming. These tools can also be altered to work with other arts disciplines. ELPs across Vermont will have access to this Case Study, as well as a series of resources to use the work developed in this program to help them achieve their program’s learning objectives.