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JORDAN BEAL

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING CALIFORNIA'S EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS (ELOP)

HELPING PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS IN
CALIFORNIA IDENTIFY HIGH-QUALITY
AFTER-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMMING AND
WHAT ELOP OFFERS THEM

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*Please note that this section of the guide can be universally used by caregivers to evaluate if programming is high-quality and by practitioners to ensure they have policies and systems in place that support high-quality programming.

The intention of this project

Growing up, my parents went out of their way to enroll me in after-school activities and summer programs they thought I would enjoy. The time I spent in these out-of-school time programs largely shaped me into the person I am today. While I could go deeper into my story, this is about your story. This project aims to help parents and caregivers identify high-quality after-school time programming for their children and aid California residents in understanding what their state's Expanded Learning Opportunities Programs (ELOP) offer.

A brief understanding of what expanded learning programs are

California Education Code 8482.1 defines expanded learning programs (also referred to as ELO Programs) as “before school, after school, summer, or intersession learning programs that focus on developing the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of pupils through hands-on, engaging learning experiences.”

ELO programs are designed to complement school by providing children with opportunities to engage in enriching activities, play, and developmentally appropriate activities. Programs accomplish this by being pupil-centered and partnering with community agencies (California Education Code 46120).

The importance of this project

Since the pandemic, we have seen an explosion of research advocating for after-school time programs due to the plethora of academic, social, and behavioral benefits associated with them. However, many caregivers falsely assume that program quality is uniform and sufficient. It is important that we understand what makes high-quality after-school time programming, as the benefits are only present when program quality is high. When caregivers understand what makes high-quality after-school time programming, they can make informed decisions on what programs their children attend and are better equipped to advocate for more high-quality programming. With collective commitment, high-quality programs can transition from rare finds to common spaces.

For the same reasons, it is important for caregivers to have a strong understanding of what ELOP offers. Understanding what ELOP offers makes it more accessible to Californian families and informs them of its resources. Additionally, understanding what ELOP offers students is now more important than ever for California residents, as the 2025 Palisades fires have devastated hundreds of homes, making access to safe community spaces even more critical for children.

WHAT CHARACTERISTICS MAKE HIGH-QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMMING?

Researchers have yet to agree on how to distinguish what makes high-quality after-school programming. Part of the reason for this is that high-quality programming is largely context-specific and based on the students.

However, from my research and experience working in after-school programming (ASP), I believe that four overarching tenets make high-quality programming: *having a whole child based design, prioritizing student engagement, having quality staff members, and strong administration.*

A Whole Child Based Design

A whole child based design recognizes the interconnectedness of students' needs (e.g., social, emotional, and academic) and how these needs impact development. Simply put, ASPs should act as support systems for students and work to help fill pockets of need.

High-quality ASPs consider the interconnectedness of students' needs to create supportive environments by:

- Prioritizing positive and supportive social relationships
 - Between students, this creates feelings of safety, inclusion, and connection, leading to positive social processes and youth development.
 - Between staff and students, this helps youth mitigate the impact of stress and build skills such as confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy.
- Continuously adjusting programming to respond to the needs of students
 - This can look like tailoring activities to students' age and developmental needs, providing health and social service support, and creating partnerships with other community organizations to meet needs.
- Having environments that reflect the diversity represented in students, families, and their communities.

Prioritize Student Engagement

Student engagement refers to how meaningfully involved students are in the program. Multiple studies have found that programs can promote engagement by:

- Encouraging student choice and leadership
- Having students share their history, expertise, and sense of self
- Challenging students to think critically and creatively

CONTINUED: WHAT CHARACTERISTICS MAKE HIGH-QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMMING?

High-Quality Staff Members

High-quality staff members are the backbone of high-quality programs. Staff members should embody characteristics such as being:

- Committed to the vision and mission
- Qualified to implement programming effectively through experience, training, or education
- Skilled at creating engaging, positive, supportive, and culturally responsive social environments
- Consistent and stable adult figures

While these characteristics may seem simplistic, staff quality is often argued to be the most important characteristic of program success because of how much influence staff members have on students, program climate, and implementation.

Strong Administration

Administrators must ensure that program implementation is strong and funding is steady.

While program design is important, implementation is how the design comes to fruition.

- Implementing design features is often a key determinant of program characteristics and outcomes, as it affects every aspect of ASP previously mentioned.
 - Understanding the power of implementation helps us see why some ASPs outperform others. Administrators should work with staff to uphold program design features through implementation.

Inconsistent funding is a major hindrance to having resources and amenities available, like snacks, sunscreen, and materials for activities.

- Administrators should strive to have program budgets that support, align, and meet program goals and objectives.
- It is important to note that the amount of funding doesn't determine program quality. The consistency of funding and its management determine quality.

While perspectives on what high-quality ASPs look like may vary due to personal preferences, these tenets establish a strong baseline for evaluating if programs are high-quality.

ELOP FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

ELOP INCLUDES “BEFORE SCHOOL, AFTER SCHOOL, SUMMER, OR INTERSESSION LEARNING PROGRAMS THAT FOCUS ON DEVELOPING THE ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF PUPILS THROUGH HANDS-ON, ENGAGING LEARNING EXPERIENCES.”

CALIFORNIA EDUCATION CODE 8482.

WHO ARE ELO PROGRAMS FOR?

ELO Programs (ELOP) are for unduplicated pupils in Transitional Kindergarten/ Kindergarten through grade six. **Unduplicated pupils** are students who are English learners, eligible for a free or reduced-price meal, or foster youth. Non-unduplicated students are also eligible to participate (California Education Code 46120).

Where are ELO Programs offered?

ELOPs are at **local educational agencies (LEA)**. LEAs include public schools that are a part of a California school district and independent charter schools (California Education Code 46120).

Where can I find an ELO Program?

You can find programs at most elementary schools serving students in Transitional Kindergarten/Kindergarten through 6th grade in low-income communities and at community partner programs, like YMCAs. LEAs prioritize offering services at school sites in low-income communities. This is decided by previous yearly percentages of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals (California ELO Program PowerPoint presentation).

As of the 2023-2024 school year, **LEAs with an unduplicated pupil percentage at or above 75% shall offer all students inclusive access to programming per parental or guardian request.** LEAs with an unduplicated pupil percentage *below 75%* shall *prioritize and offer all unduplicated students* inclusive access to programming first per parental or guardian request (California ELO Program PowerPoint presentation).

What if my child’s school does not have an ELO Program?

If your school does not have an ELO Program, transportation shall be provided. The provided transportation will take children to a site that offers a program and take students back to their original location or another location established by the LEA (California ELO Program PowerPoint presentation).

ARE ELO PROGRAMS AFFORDABLE?

ELOP is free for students who are experiencing homelessness, part of the foster care system, or eligible for Free & Reduced Price Meals. Pricing for students not experiencing the above is determined using a sliding scale that considers their family income and ability to pay. California intends to have ELOP be free for all students in low-income communities by 2025-2026 (California ELO Program PowerPoint presentation).

WHAT ELOP OFFERS

California Education Code 46120

ELOP offers students in Transitional Kindergarten/Kindergarten through grade six no less than nine hours a day of in-person enrichment time that focuses on developing student interests and their academic, social, emotional, and physical needs through hands-on, engaging experiences.

During the school year, these nine hours include students' time in school and ELO Programming. ELO Programming extends when school days are shorter due to early releases or breaks.

The funds that ELO Programs receive go towards providing students snacks/meals, hiring support staff -- including literacy coaches, high-dosage tutors, school counselors, instructional teachers, and aides -- and enrichment activities ranging from history and social science to fine arts.

ELO Programs are required to have a [Program Plan Guide](#) that clearly describes the program's activities that staff will use on-site to support the whole child and students' Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and development. Each ELO Program will have a personalized guide, but all must be approved by the LEA Governing Board in a public meeting and posted on the LEA's website ([California ELOP Program Plan Guide](#)).

The ELOP Program Plan Guide includes requirements pertaining to:

- Students' physical and emotional safety
- How to create active and engaged learning environments
- Skill building
- Youth voice and leadership
- Healthy choices and behaviors
- Diversity, access, and equity
- Staff quality and standards
- How to build relationships with families and community organizations

HOW ELOP STANDS UP TO QUALITY STANDARDS

A WHOLE CHILD BASED DESIGN

| Characteristic | Is this characteristic met? | Evidence -- Requirements that ELO Programs must meet per legislation |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Does ELOP prioritize positive and supportive social relationships and environments? | Yes! Positive and supportive relationships and environments are fostered through these requirements. | <p>Education Code 46120</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program activities must support the whole child and students' Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and development <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program prioritizes students' physical and emotional safety The program provides opportunities for students to engage in healthy choices and behaviors |
| Does ELOP continuously adjust programming to respond to the needs of students? | Yes! These requirements allow ELOPs to meet students needs holistically and as they change. | <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on student needs and preferences programs will determine activities. Such as, fine arts, career technical education, recreation, physical fitness, and prevention activities Programs are encouraged to hire necessary support staff like literacy coaches, high-dosage tutors, and school counselors The program is encouraged to partner with community based organizations to support student needs and enrichment |
| Do ELOP environments reflect the diversity represented in students, families, and their communities? | Yes! Programs are required to be culturally and linguistically responsive. | <p>Education Code 46120</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs will recruit, advertise, publicize, or solicit through culturally and linguistically effective and appropriate communication channels <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program addresses cultural and linguistic diversity and provides opportunities for all students to experience diversity, access, and equity The program accounts for how it will provide access for students with disabilities |

HOW ELOP STANDS UP TO QUALITY STANDARDS

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

A main priority of ELO Programs is to “provide opportunities for students to experience active and engaged learning that either supports or supplements, but does not duplicate, the instructional day” ([ELOP Program Plan Guide](#)).

| Characteristic | Is this characteristic met? | Evidence -- Requirements that ELO Programs must meet per legislation |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Does ELOP encourage student choice and leadership & offer students opportunities to share their history, expertise, and sense of self? | Yes! Students are given ample opportunities to share their lived experiences and selves. | <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The program must provide opportunities for students to engage in youth voice and leadership • The program should consider and describe what opportunities youth have to lead activities or provide mentorship within the program • Youth must be included in program quality assessment and improvement • Students and families must be given the opportunity to participate in the creation of the program plan • Students and families must be given the opportunity to engage in program planning throughout the year |
| Does ELOP challenge students to think critically and creatively? | Almost! The vagueness of this makes it very program dependent. However, looking holistically at ELOP requirements, we can assume creativity and critical thinking are present. | <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The program provides opportunities for students to experience skill building |

HOW ELOP STANDS UP TO QUALITY STANDARDS

HIGH-QUALITY STAFF MEMBERS

A main priority of ELO Programs is to “provide opportunities for students to engage with quality staff” (ELOP Program Plan Guide).

Many characteristics that make high-quality staff members, such as them being committed to the vision and mission and consistent and stable adult figures, are characteristics that managers have to evaluate during the hiring process. This type of screening is outside of the scope of the legislation. Therefore, this table only evaluates staff member qualifications related to teaching capabilities.

| Characteristic | Is this characteristic met? | Evidence -- Requirements that ELO Programs must meet per legislation |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Are ELOP staff members qualified to implement programming effectively through experience, training, or education? | Yes! Staff are held to high standards by the program administrator and school district they work on. Additionally, staff capacity is developed through training. | <p>Education Code 46120</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local educational agencies may provide up to three days of staff development to support staff quality Program supervisors are encouraged to use the yearly allotted funding for technical assistance, evaluation, and training services to support program improvement <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The administrator of every program shall establish minimum qualifications for each staff position All staff members who directly supervise students must meet the minimum qualifications of an instructional aide which is determined by school district policies The selection of all program supervisors is subject to the approval of the school site principal |
| Are ELOP staff members skilled at creating engaging, positive, supportive, and culturally responsive social environments? | Yes! Same as above. | <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrators create a staff training and development plan that includes tools and resources for staff to help them gain or further develop the competencies needed to engage and enrich students <p>Diversity box on page 6</p> |

HOW ELOP STANDS UP TO QUALITY STANDARDS

STRONG ADMINISTRATION

| Characteristic | Is this characteristic met? | Evidence -- Requirements that ELO Programs must meet per legislation |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Does ELOP prioritize high-quality program implementation? | Yes! While not explicitly stated, the regular program quality and assessment evaluations imply that implementation is a priority. | <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To promote continuous quality improvement, administrators are required to collect data on student social, behavioral, or skill development to engage in reflection and be intentional about program management practices and activities Programs must have a clear vision, mission, and purpose that is regularly reflected upon in addition to an implementation plan |
| Do ELOP administrators have program budgets that support, align, and meet program goals and objectives? | Yes! All programs are required to have a budget and training on how to budget is offered to those who need assistance. | <p>ELOP Program Plan Guide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must have a program budget plan <p>Education Code 46120</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers training and support which includes, but is not limited to, supporting programs on how to leverage multiple funding initiatives to support expanded learning |

HOW ELOP STANDS UP TO QUALITY STANDARDS

Caveats & Areas for Additional Oversight

CAVEATS

Overall, California has robust legislation and guidelines that support high-quality ELO Programming when compared to what the literature shows us. However, it is important to note that having high-quality requirements in place does not guarantee that the requirements are being followed or upheld by all programs. While the state monitors ELO Programs, it is vital that parents and community members know what makes high-quality programming so that they may make informed decisions on where they send their children, have clear expectations regarding programming, and advocate for programming changes if necessary.

AREAS WHERE THERE COULD BE MORE OVERSIGHT

In September 2014, the California Department of Education After School Division and the California AfterSchool Network created and produced “[Quality Standards for Expanded Learning in California](#).” Often referred to as the Quality Standards, the report does not serve as a compliance tool but as a “framework of clear expectations and a shared vision of quality among multiple stakeholders” ([California Quality Standards and CQI](#)). The Quality Standards provide individuals with more detailed information about what high-quality after-school programming looks like in action ([California Quality Standards and CQI](#)).

While the Quality Standards are not required, they provide in-depth resources that ELO Programs should consider. Standards from the report that should be adopted to fill in gaps where ELOP requirements could be stronger include:

Explicitly name creativity and critical thinking in skill building

“Participants are involved in projects, activities, and events that increase their understanding and use of 21st century skills (e.g., **creativity, critical thinking**, and information and communications technology)” ([California Quality Standards and CQI](#), p. 9).

Establish quality staff characteristics in the Program Plan

“Staff exhibit:

- Integrity, professionalism, caring, and competency as a positive role model
- Commitment to building positive relationships with a culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse community of students, staff, and parents” ([California Quality Standards and CQI](#), p. 13).

HOW TO USE ELOP TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

ELOP provides families access to high-quality before and after-school programming at little to no cost. The design of these programs supports students holistically by fostering their personal and academic growth. Here are a few ways you can make the most of it:

UTILIZE THE ELOP PROGRAM PLAN GUIDE:

Know what plans, activities, and guidelines your local ELOP has in place. This will help you know if ELOP is right for your student and what to expect from your local program.

STAY UPDATED ON ENROLLMENT:

Programs fill up quickly and spots are limited based on the amount of staff available. Regularly check for deadlines and application requirements.

ADVOCATE FOR YOUR STUDENT'S INTERESTS & NEEDS:

If you notice your student is struggling or would benefit from a certain activity, talk to ELOP staff. Staff members want to support you and your student as best as possible.

BE ENGAGED IN YOUR STUDENT'S PROGRAMMING:

Ask your student about their experiences in ELOP and bond over it. This not only builds connection but makes your student feel important.

REMEMBER!

Students who are experiencing homelessness, English Language Learners, part of the foster care system, or are eligible for Free & Reduced Price Meals qualify for priority access in certain areas.

DON'T BE SHY!

Ask all the questions you need to feel confident in your decision on where to send your student. School and district leaders are there to support you and your student.

ADVOCACY AND STAYING INFORMED

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS

WHAT ADVOCACY CAN LOOK LIKE

Advocacy can take many forms! A common misconception is that advocacy work has to be a big, grand act. In reality, advocacy work includes small and even unseen acts. This can look like calling your representatives, holding people in charge accountable to their actions, attending organizing meetings, sharing information on the value and importance of ELOP in your life or on a broader scale, and vocalizing you/your family's needs. There is no "one way" to advocate.

WHY ADVOCACY IS IMPORTANT

When we advocate, we are making our voices heard and protecting issues that are important to us. Without advocacy work, we would not be able to raise awareness for critical issues, build support and solidarity, empower communities, and influence social change and policy. Advocating for ELOP is how we continue the fight for social justice and equity.

ADVOCACY GROUPS TO KNOW

CALIFORNIA SCHOOL-AGE CONSORTIUM (CALSAC)

Join the annual statewide California Afterschool & Summer Challenge! This event "educates and empowers professionals, youth, and families to engage in grassroots advocacy. In addition to helping advance the out-of-school time field (like before school, afterschool and Expanded Learning programs), this advocacy experience helps show young people and emerging leaders how to speak out and use their voices to create change. In collaboration with policy organizations across the state, CalSAC convenes a collective voice for out-of-school time programs, to raise awareness about the impact these programs have on the success of children and youth in school, work and life" (California School-Age Consortium).

CALIFORNIA AFTERSCHOOL ADVOCACY ALLIANCE (CA3)

Take action with them! Become a member, stay up to date on legislative information and ways you can help, or, if you run a program, host state and local leaders to show them the work you do.

CONTINUED: ADVOCACY AND STAYING INFORMED

CALIFORNIA AFTERSCHOOL NETWORK (CAN)

Listen to their ELOP Fireside Chats, where they review policy updates and interview key stakeholders on current topics and promising practices.

The California AfterSchool Network also regularly posts updates on ELOP resources and technical assistance ([California AfterSchool Network](#)).

PEOPLE TO KNOW

KNOW YOUR REPRESENTATIVES & HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE

Take time to familiarize yourself with your local leaders.

Find your State Senate and Assembly representatives:

<https://findyourrep.legislature.ca.gov/>

Find your Federal representative:

https://ziplook.house.gov/htbin/findrep_house

KNOW THE MEMBERS OF THE CALIFORNIA ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Take time to familiarize yourself with who is on the committee for before and after school programs in California. Do not be scared to reach out to them and hold them accountable:

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ex/advcomm.asp>

CONCLUSION

After a thorough review of what ELOP offers and the requirements in place, it is evident that the program design strives to provide high-quality, accessible before, after-school, and summer programming. When compared to peer-reviewed literature on what makes high-quality after-school programming, ELOP only fell short in two out of nine categories.

The two categories ELOP could improve on are explicitly naming creativity and critical thinking in skill building and establishing quality staff characteristics in Program Plans. ELOP regulations lightly addressed these two categories, but could benefit from additional specific guidelines. As mentioned above, I would like to point out that having high-quality requirements in place does not guarantee that the requirements are being followed or upheld by all programs. This is why knowing what you are entitled to under ELOP legislation and regulations is important.

It is my sincere hope that this guide has helped you better understand what ELOP offers and how to identify high-quality after-school time programming. I encourage you to take advantage of what ELOP offers and enroll your students in a program that works for them.