

Issue in Brief: Community-Based Learning Options



Overview

Schools are being asked to do more than ever before to prepare all students for success in the twenty-first century. They are expected to bring all students to proficiency, close persistent achievement gaps, develop social and emotional competence, produce engaged citizens, and support inquisitive and creative learners—all while successfully transitioning students to college and careers. Educators have responded impressively to these varied and interconnected goals, but the traditional school structure is not designed to adequately address such diverse needs. *Community-based learning*—structured learning activities that take place in partnership with businesses and other community partners—can help students explore interests that fall outside of traditional school settings. As students venture outside the school building, they gain a new perspective on their education and their futures.

In this policy brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy hopes to support the development of innovative strategies that expand the definition of public education to include communities as learning laboratories. To that end, the team:

- Scanned recent literature on community-based learning to find research-based, effective practices in developing community partnerships to support student learning opportunities;
- Identified three district programs (Institute of Contemporary/Boston Public Schools partnerships; Community Service Learning program at Whitman-Hanson Regional High School; Newburyport High School’s work-based learning program)—focusing on practices that promote student-centered, credit-bearing learning experiences that transcend school walls—and documented their practice; and
- Compiled cost estimates for replicating program strategies across Massachusetts public school districts.

The Massachusetts Context

In 2013, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education adopted a common definition of college and career readiness. This definition stipulates that students who are college and career ready “demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are necessary to successfully complete entry level, credit-bearing college courses, participate in certificate or workplace training programs, and enter economically viable career pathways.”^a To reach that level of readiness, the state recommends that students complete the Massachusetts High School Program of Studies (MassCore), which articulates both academic coursework *and non-academic learning opportunities*, to best prepare students to meet the demands of the highly skilled 21st century workforce. Through service projects, internships, and other community-based programming, students can acquire and apply real-world skills, hone their interests and aspirations, and develop confidence as learners.

The Evidence: Promising Practice in Community-based Options

This document presents findings from the research study *Opening the School House Doors: A Cost Study of Community-Based Learning Options* featured as part of the project *Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity: Evidence on What Works in Education*. Findings present the cost of research-based promising practices, and the characteristics of the community-based learning models examined for this study. While there are many types of community-based learning models throughout the Commonwealth, this report focuses on programs that are *credit-bearing* and designed to meet specified student learning objectives that progress toward a high school diploma.

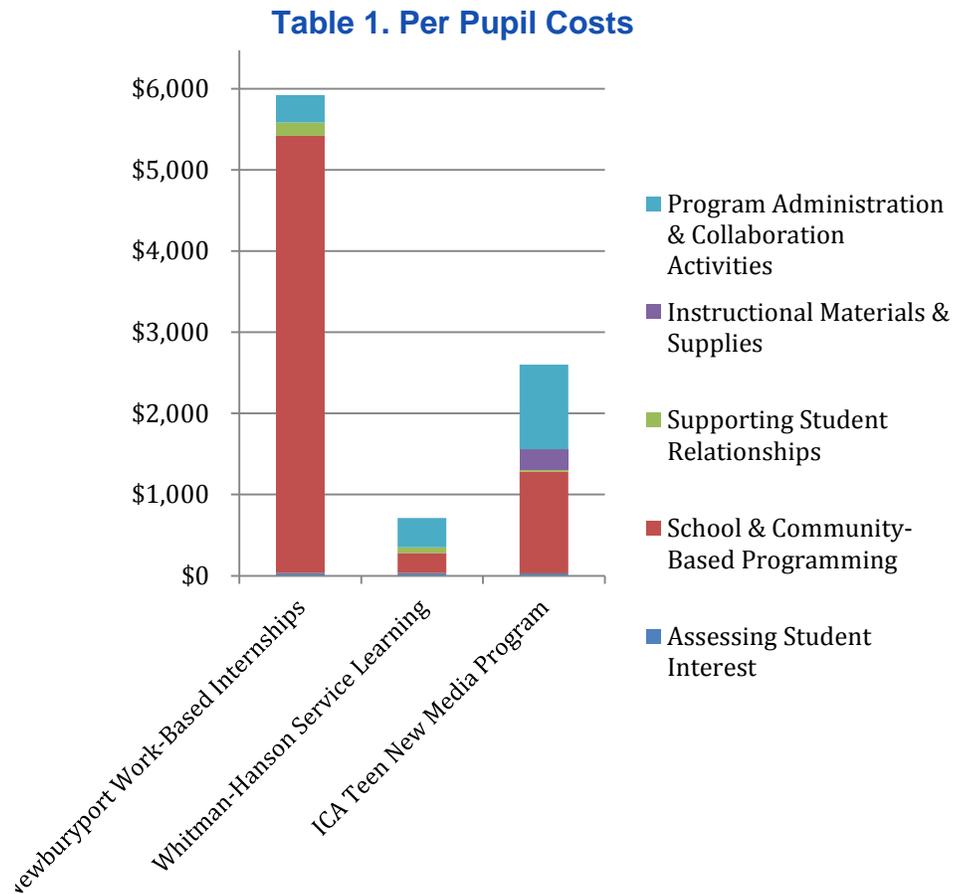
Common characteristics of these programs include:

- Educators conduct student interest inventories that create ownership and shape student learning.
- School-based personnel dedicate time to actively engage in community learning experiences.
- Supportive relationships with adults and peers nurture student learning.

^a Massachusetts Definition of College and Career Readiness:
<http://www.mass.edu/library/documents/2013College&CareerReadinessDefinition.pdf>

- Learning opportunities are authentic and are connected to the social/economic fabric of the community and often require different instructional materials and supplies.
- Educators collaborate to assess student learning and growth using innovative methods.

For the 2013-14 academic year, total per participant costs for the studied programs ranged from \$712 to \$5,920. These costs are driven by the intensity of program activities (e.g., number of internship hours), the number and mix of program-based staff (e.g., teachers, counselors, administrators), as well as the number of students who participated (see table at right for total costs and the cost of each component).



Policy Considerations For State Policymakers

Clarify what types of credit-bearing community-based learning opportunities are permissible. State laws and regulations impose very few limits on community-based learning; therefore, a clear and consistent message should be broadcast to educators and community organizations at every opportunity. In addition, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) could publish and publicize data that illustrate the current scope of programming across the Commonwealth.

Use the Connecting Activities initiative as a model for community-based partnerships. ESE should continue to highlight practices that cut across various types of learning experiences, and encourage the application and/or adaptation of tools and resources from the Connecting Activities initiative, focused on providing structured work-based learning experiences for students.

Promote the use of existing resources to expand credit-bearing learning opportunities. With all of the community-based learning programs that are thriving across the Commonwealth, as well as all of the knowledge and supports available through ESE, no district should have to develop a community-based learning program from scratch.

For Districts and Schools

Develop protocols for establishing credit-bearing, community-based learning opportunities. Protocols should reflect standards set by school and/or district leaders, and should include opportunities for school leaders, teachers, students, and partners to provide feedback about their experiences. Protocols also must ensure that students are venturing into safe, nurturing learning environments when they leave the school building.

Create aligned learning opportunities that help advance student progress through curricula.

Alignment allows educators to build a strong connection between academic curriculum and community-based learning, and supports more purposeful conversations between partners and educators.

Join the Connecting Activities School Network. Connecting Activities links schools to local business through the 16 local workforce investment boards (WIBs), and by publishing information and free resources that promote the development of meaningful career development education.

For Community Partners

Work with schools to understand how you can best support student learning objectives. Through thoughtful, structured partnerships, community organizations and businesses are poised to play a role in shaping the future lives of students by enhancing current educational experiences.