

School Partnerships as On-Ramps to Informal Digital Learning

Peter Wardrip - University of Wisconsin-Madison

Schools are important entry-points for youth into digital learning experiences. This resource explores how youth development organizations can form various types of partnerships with schools to on-ramp youth into digital learning.

What's the Issue?

Building partnerships between youth organizations and schools is valuable to both parties, especially around goals of supporting youth pathways in digital learning. By bringing together key professionals in youth development and education, partnerships can exceed what one single school or organization is capable of accomplishing alone.

Youth-serving organizations can seek partnerships with schools to meet a variety of issues that can benefit both parties in the partnership. For example, working with schools is a way to help youth-serving organizations to reach a bigger and, potentially, broader audience. Also, many experienced youth-serving organizations that support out of school learning experiences hold significant knowledge about learning, from pedagogical design to facilitation techniques to assessment strategies. School partnerships with

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youth organizations can create the conditions for sharing that knowledge with teachers. This could range from informal conversations to more formalized professional development opportunities.

Ultimately, forming and cultivating partnerships between schools and youth organizations reflects a broader philosophy that both sides may value. A pure, student-centered approach to learning means that we think about all the settings in which students are participants. Schools and youth organizations represent two potentially significant institutions in a student's life, and partnerships can create opportunities for deeper, more productive youth development.

In this resource, we will explore what partnerships can look like in practice, point to real-world examples, note challenges, tensions and questions, and consider the role of school partnerships to develop on-ramps for informal digital learning in out-of-school time (OST) contexts. In particular, we will consider partnerships that might exist at three different levels: school partnerships that operate at the school, district and/or administrative level, partnerships that involve working with teachers and partnerships that involve working directly with students.

What Does it Look Like?

Youth organizations seeking to build school partnerships to support digital learning in OST contexts have addressed this issue by partnering with schools at three different levels. First, youth organizations might find it beneficial to work at the leadership level whether this be the leader of a school, school district or another school management organization. Second, youth organizations can partner with teachers collaboratively supporting an educational experience. Third, some partnerships involve youth organizations working with students based at a school directly. As we will show, each of these three levels of partnership can be valuable depending on the goals of the partnership. And in most cases, partnering with one level is contingent on a partnership at another level.

Four organizations that have actively and intentionally cultivated school partnerships are the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT), AS220, Beam Center and DreamYard.

Guiding Questions

As you and your organization consider school partnerships, there are some questions you might consider:

- What are the schools in my community, and how do they align, or not, with my organization's goals?
- Are there particular strategic priorities we have that school-partnerships can help us achieve?
- Based on our goals, which kind of school faculty are most important to engage with (district leaders, principals, teachers, tech specialists, etc.)?
- How can we invite school staff (leaders, teachers, or guidance counselors) to events we organize?

What it Looks Like at WMCAT

Located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, WMCAT is a youth organization that aims to create social and economic progress in people's lives and community through visual arts and tech engagement, workforce development and social enterprises. To help achieve this, WMCAT has built a long-standing partnership with their local school district. Through this partnership, the school district has provided transportation for students from district schools to WMCAT programs, eliminating a critical barrier to student engagement with their arts and digital learning programs. Through their relationships with the district, WMCAT is also able to communicate more directly with schools and students to build awareness of their programs. Finally, through this local school partnership, WMCAT has signed on to a data sharing agreement, where student data shared with the organization about student attendance and grades. This data proves to be critical for WMCAT student coordinators, who are able to understand what is happening at school for the students participating in their programs and provide necessary support. In discussing the partnership, WMCAT has noted the importance of having a champion in the partnership at the administrative level in central office to ensure continued support and communication around emerging needs.

What it Looks Like at AS220

AS220 Youth is a community arts organization in Providence, Rhode Island. For AS220, their school partnership is in a unique setting, the Rhode Island Training School (RITS), which serves youth from the juvenile justice system inside a prison. Here, AS220 staff provide direct arts-based learning experiences with youth currently incarcerated. In this way, the partnership provides AS220 with a way to reach and support particularly high needs youth who otherwise might not be able to access creative arts and digital learning opportunities. At RITS, AS220 mirrors the programming that they provide in their center, like fashion design, performing arts, illustration and media production. They see this as an opportunity to fulfill their mission of reaching all members of their community. And when the youth are released, they have an opportunity to be fast-tracked into AS220's broader programs.

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What it Looks Like at Beam Center

Beam Center is a ‘maker’-focused youth organization in Brooklyn, New York that enlivens students’ curiosity and bridges the opportunity gap through involving youth in hands-on learning. Beam Center is involved in extensive school partnerships, many of which have emerged from network initiatives that they’ve participated in. One key form of school partnership for Beam focused on professional development for teachers. In these relationships, Beam Center staff partner with teachers to co-design lessons, activities or curricular units as a form of professional development, working with both principals and teachers to coordinate around their professional learning needs. A key element of working with the principal is to ensure that they are willing to provide time for teachers outside the classroom to work with Beam to learn and design projects. And then they work directly with the teachers to carry out the curricular codesign work. This high leverage model of partnership where staff from a youth development organization work with a teacher to transform both instruction and the learning experiences of the students is dependent, Beam states, on the principal’s willingness to “let go and create opportunities for a change to happen in the school.”



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What it Looks Like at DreamYard

DreamYard is a youth arts and social justice organization in the Bronx, New York that builds opportunity and pathways for teens and families through the arts. DreamYard also has extensive partnerships with schools that cut across all three levels, from leadership to working directly with students. For DreamYard, one pre-K to 12th grade school located in a community center, in particular, has offered a variety of ways to work together. For example, DreamYard teaches in programs at the school and is creating a 150-foot mural with the school. They also held a conference, Art is a Weapon, and convened the conference at the community center. DreamYard even involved a member of the community center staff in their own strategic planning process. In total, DreamYard integration of their work with the school and community center’s work through partnership expanded their impact, built capacity with the partner school and built their own capacity in the process.

While all of these partnership examples are responsive to the needs and capacities of the organizations involved, it is worth stating that these partnerships serve to strengthen the work that the youth organization is already doing by reaching more youth—or different youth populations in different settings. These partnerships relied on people to people relationships between these youth organizations and school personnel.

What Does it Lead to?

These partnerships can lead to a variety of outcomes that can impact both the students and the partner organizations.

- **More responsive youth learning experiences.** Whether through sharing resources, integrating learning experiences across settings or learning from productive elements of the learning activities at the partner sites, school and OST organization partnerships can generate a higher quality learning experience for youth.
- **Bi-directional professional development.** In-school teachers and out-of-school educators can both learn a great deal from different kinds of partnership, from pedagogical approaches to simply better understanding how the varied settings youth spend their time in operate.
- **Alignment between school and out of school experiences.** This can be conducive for youth pathways to professional and post-secondary options, as well as better exploration of their interests when they're in out-of-school spaces and better integration of their interests within school spaces. While alignment does not imply compromising the integrity of what makes out-of-school learning “out-of-school,” sharing data, communicating and recognizing student accomplishments in and out of school and coordinating program times can be examples of how partnerships can support inclusive youth learning and development.

Tensions and Challenges

While in principle, partnership between schools and out-of-school time learning organizations seems like a productive fit, in practice the prevalence of these substantive partnerships is less frequent. There are several reasons for this. For one, schools and OST organizations often have different goals and guiding philosophies that can make alignment difficult at times. This can range from the content being taught, the pedagogies employed and the amount of agency youth have in a given setting, to name a few.

Moreover, even though these partnerships can support the leveraging of resources on both sides, which may extend resources for programs, the hybrid nature of formal-informal partnerships can sometimes fall outside of traditional funding streams.

Furthermore, it may be necessary to be aware of the larger partnership atmosphere within the community. While it can be helpful for a school to have partnerships with multiple OST learning organizations, making sure that those partnerships are working in concert and amicably can be difficult to navigate. In addition, standard evaluation tools may be ill-equipped to help document the impact of these partnerships requiring additional time and capacity to craft new tools. Finally, partnerships can boil down to the relationships that were forged in the development of the work. When leadership changes occur or the people involved in the partnership change, it can become difficult to maintain those relationships over time.