

Conclusion

This report has examined a number of ways parents and youth around Minnesota utilize and think about community learning opportunities in the non-school hours. As is often the case, there are areas where Minnesota does better than the national average. For example, Minnesota parents report slightly higher quality in the programs in which their youth most often participate than parents nationally and that it is somewhat less difficult to find various types of programs in their community—including those that are affordable, conveniently located, and run by trusted adults. Regarding finding programs during specific times, Minnesota parents, like those in the nation generally, believe summer programs the most difficult to locate.

But this report is much more than a comparison to national findings. More importantly, it provides a look inside the geographic and social communities within our state and reveals major differences that must be addressed. Families with lower incomes and families in the urban metro area are especially likely to experience a gap in opportunities—opportunities that are not affordable, high quality, and available in their communities. Families of color, Hispanic families, and new immigrants also face difficulties in supporting the learning and development of their young people through community learning opportunities during the non-school hours.

The good news is that most of these gaps appear to be more about the supply of such opportunities than the demand for them. Parents of all income levels, in all community types, and of all racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups, appear largely equal in their desire to have their youth take advantage of positive community learning opportunities. If anything, families with lower incomes, families of color, Hispanic families, immigrants, and those living in the urban metro are more likely to want community learning opportunities to support formal educational learning. They understand these opportunities are an important avenue to reinforce and practice “in school” learning in community settings.

In short, Minnesota faces disparities in community learning opportunities, *an opportunity gap*, that mirrors its gaps in other critical areas of education and health. This opportunity gap, results suggest, is more a function of the ability to access such opportunities due to a limited, unequally distributed, or unaffordable supply of programs than to the lack of motivation or demand for such opportunities. While much work remains to be done to fully understand the local supply and demand dynamics for community learning opportunities (in particular from the perspective of the people and organizations that provide them), there is now little question that an opportunity gap exists. The issue now is how we as a state and as communities choose to act to close the gap. Only when it is closed will we ensure all children are engaged in learning and development, every family has access to quality opportunities during the non-school hours, and every community has a clear plan and adequate support for the community learning opportunities its parents and youth need and want.

Community learning opportunities are no longer just nice for those who can afford them. They are increasingly an important and essential tool for assuring the future of Minnesota. ■