

More Than Supply & Demand

The State of Technical Assistance for Expanded Learning Programs in California Executive Summary

After-school and summer learning programs—also known as expanded learning programs—can be powerful interventions for stemming summer learning loss, closing the achievement gap, and building nurturing communities. As awareness increases about the importance of how children spend their time outside of the traditional school day, the California Department of Education (CDE), and in particular its After School Division (ASD), have directed funding and attention to improving the quality of publicly-supported after-school and summer learning programs hosted by school districts and located on school sites. In addition, the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have expanded their scope of support for expanded learning programs. After-school and summer learning programs draw on a diverse collection of technical assistance (TA) providers to support quality improvement for the ultimate goal of better serving students. All of these groups (program providers, TA providers, state agencies, the nonprofit sector, and the philanthropic sector) connect and interact in complex ways—some systematically and others more organically—in California’s TA ecosystem.

HOW DOES THE TA ECOSYSTEM FUNCTION?

An ecosystem is a dynamic web of interdependent entities. A lively TA ecosystem functions when resources connect to the individuals needing them—in other words, when supply and demand meet. The major entities in California’s expanded learning TA ecosystem are the after-school and summer learning programs in need of TA (the demand) and three categories of TA providers (the supply): the California Department of Education and its contractors; a small number of state-level TA partners focused on expanded learning; and locally-focused resources that vary from place to place, including nonprofits, city agencies, and peer networks.

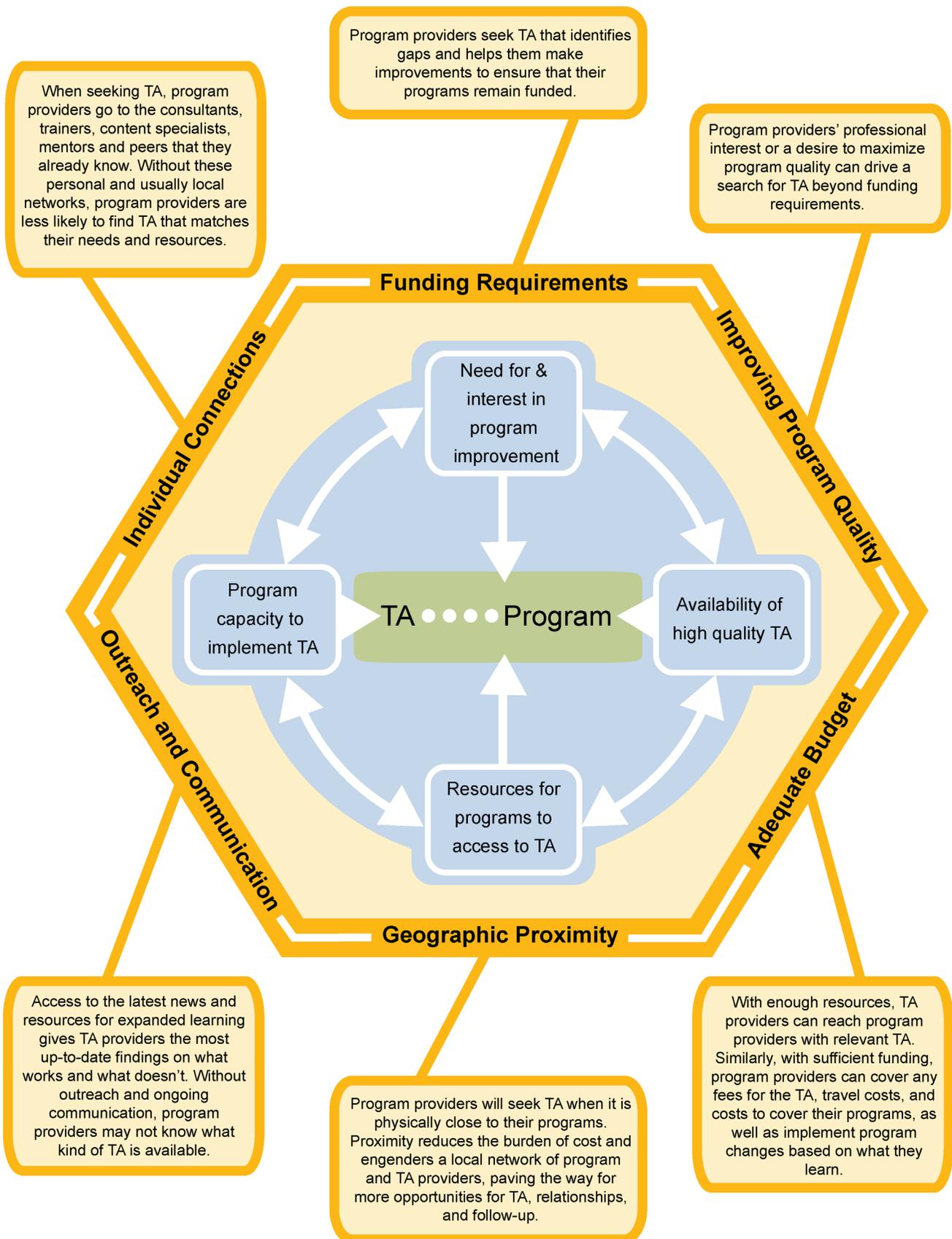
Four **conditions** determine whether programs connect with, receive and use TA. These **conditions** vary throughout the ecosystem and mutually reinforce one another.

1. Need for and interest in program improvement
2. Availability of high quality TA
3. Resources for programs to access TA
4. Program capacity to implement TA

A set of six influencing forces—**influencers**—shape these four conditions (see graphic on next page). When all influencers are operating at full force, the expanded learning TA ecosystem can thrive. When the influencers are turned off or down, they minimize and sometimes even erase the conditions necessary to connect TA to programs. Whether or not TA and the improvements it sets in motion impact children in expanded learning programs depends on each of the influencers driving the TA ecosystem toward better awareness of, access to, availability of, and capacity to implement TA.

Informing Change, in partnership with the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, has studied the field of expanded learning since 2009. For more information, please visit informingchange.com.

Conditions & Influencers in California's Technical Assistance (TA) Ecosystem



Understanding the influencers and their effect on each TA provider group is important to finding prime leverage points for improving the TA ecosystem. Given their role of raising every program's awareness about TA and linking them to relevant resources, **state entities** (including Regional Leads, CDE analysts, and consultants) are program providers central entry point into the ecosystem. **State-level TA partners** (including ASAPconnect, CalSAC, CAN, PCY, and others) support programs throughout the state through advocacy, convening, training-of-trainers, indirect support of program providers, and raising and sub-granting additional program funds for out-of-school-time initiatives. Lastly, **locally-based networks** play a crucial role in filling the TA gaps when efforts from the two state level groups do not fully filter down to program providers.

Most expanded learning programs are receiving TA support to some degree and express general satisfaction with its quality and availability. However, program directors are typically the staff member who receives the direct TA, and many admit they do not have adequate time to share what they learn with their teams. The costs of TA, including travel and staff time, curtail the amount of TA reaching programs. Even if the TA is free, programs still need to cover staff time to participate in it, including any overtime costs and substitute staff time. When given the choice between spending resources to enroll more students in their program or to receive TA, program providers prioritize making the programs available to more students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAXIMIZING THE TA ECOSYSTEM

Awareness of and access to California's rich and diverse array of expanded learning TA resources is often blocked. Below are some examples of changes to the ecosystem's influencers that would strengthen or expand the reach of the current ecosystem:

Create regional information hubs – Program providers are interested in having a central location for finding TA, such as a web portal that can help them identify regional providers and state sources. While a state-wide depository might be too cumbersome, regional sources may be more feasible and useful.

Lower the barriers to entry of TA – Players in the TA ecosystem should continue to expand the types and locations of free TA that targets program providers' most pressing needs. TA providers should explore new ways to use online resources, electronic communications and smartphone apps to expand program providers' access to free and convenient TA.

Disseminate best practices regionally – State-level TA partners should try to secure grants to disseminate best practices to programs through experimental, less structured channels (e.g., local learning communities, peer coaching, site lead gatherings) to help lessons learned better permeate throughout the state.

Prioritize discussion on the need for TA in times of scarce resources – Organizations that convene program providers can help them think through the dilemma of using funding for TA that could be put toward serving students by providing forums for sharing and discussing their experiences with balancing quantity and quality. Hearing other program providers' experiences with investing in improving quality for the long-term could support program providers who are faced with some tough decisions.

Link communications – Getting the right TA to program providers requires an intentional chain of communications, rather than single-source announcements. By reviewing current communication tools and channels and assessing how each one promotes TA, field leaders may see new ways to encourage program providers to access and apply TA.

Diffuse field leadership – Creating a multi-tiered, networked set of emerging expanded learning leaders (i.e., skilled and experienced program directors and site directors) can lead to increased TA access throughout the state. CDE, CAN, CalSAC, and other organizations could incorporate TA skill development into program and site directors' preparation for larger, regional leadership roles and encourage these leaders to provide hands-on TA to other programs.