

# Digital Badges in Expanded Learning

## Case Study #2: Digital Badges for the Central Valley Recognizing Exemplar ELPs

By Sam Piha



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### Background

If the growing afterschool movement is to prosper, these programs must be recognized as important places of learning. The use and awarding of digital badges to recognize the learning that takes place within these programs represents an excellent strategy to accomplish this.

Digital badges can be used to recognize exemplar programs, staff trainers, program staff who have completed professional development sessions, or youth who have acquired new knowledge and skills through participation in afterschool activities. When we use the term “afterschool” or “expanded learning programs (ELPs)”, we are referring to those youth programs that take place after the school day, during the summer months, and can be based in a school or broader community. These programs are primarily informal learning settings.

The Center for Digital Badges (CDB) and our partners believe that by using digital badges to acknowledge the learning of staff and youth participants, these programs will benefit in the following ways:

- Because program leaders must think through and explicitly state what learning will go on in specific program activities or clubs that is being recognized by a digital badge, this specificity raises the bar for learning accountability.
- The awarding of digital badges defines the learning that goes on in programs for outsiders, which is vital if afterschool programs are to be recognized as important places of learning. These badges are important, visible evidence that afterschool programs take learning seriously.
- The adult program staff members often acquire important knowledge and skills through professional development and years of experience. Youth acquire valuable skills and knowledge through their participation in specific afterschool activities. Both deserve an artifact that documents their learning and—importantly—can be shared with peers, future employers, and those allowing admittance to higher education.

## Overview

This case study focuses on the use of digital badges to recognize high school afterschool programs that are exemplar in demonstrating the Learning in Afterschool & Summer (LIAS) learning principles<sup>i</sup>. These principles promote the necessity for learning activities to be active, collaborative, meaningful, promote mastery, and expand the horizons of the participants. This project was a partnership between the CDB, Fresno County and Tulare County Offices of Education (FCOE, TCOE), the Central Valley Afterschool Foundation<sup>ii</sup>, and the California Teaching Fellows Foundation<sup>iii</sup>. Each organization served as a member of a work group, which we labeled the Central Valley Digital Badge (CVDB) project. This group also included an advisor from the California Department of Education (CDE) After School Division.

*“We entered into this project to recognize programs for exhibiting quality as defined by the LIAS learning principles. Our objectives include reinforcing the use of LIAS learning principles as a best practice, driving the field towards quality, recognizing quality programs and their staff, and perhaps most importantly, increase youth ownership and impact.”*

- Lori Carr, FCOE

This project was unique in that it required not only the design of orientation trainings but also the means for gathering evidence to qualify a program as “exemplar”. This included the development of application forms, a scoring rubric for applications, a rubric to guide observations<sup>iv</sup>, and the preparation of observation teams to verify and score what they noted in their program observations. We also took measures to ensure that youth were involved in the assessments of afterschool programs and whether they fully demonstrated the LIAS learning principles.

## Design and Development

Because this project was designed to recognize exemplar programs, it required the development of unique project tools as described above. It also required the formation of observation teams that included adults and youth, and the sponsorship of a one-day leadership and best practices training for the observation teams.

Afterschool programs were awarded digital badges for each of the learning principles they demonstrated based on the scoring of their applications and site observation. The digital badges used in this project were designed by Youtopia<sup>v</sup>, and issued by the LIAS project in partnership with the CVDB project. Because the LIAS project was already familiar with issuing digital badges, this project did not require additional training on the use of the digital badge software. See figure 1.1 to view the CVDB badges.



Figure 1.1

## Implementation

Programs interested in applying for recognition were required to participate in an orientation to digital badges and the specifics of the CVDB project. Applying programs were also asked to recommend youth who could join the observation teams which visited applying sites. These observation team members participated in a one-day leadership and observation best practices retreat led by ARC<sup>vi</sup>. After further training by the FCOE, the observation teams conducted site visits to each of the applying programs.

The high school afterschool programs that earned digital badges also received a framed certificate, a letter of recognition from the CDE After School Division, and press coverage. Their district superintendents and school principals also received notification of their awards. See example in figure 1.2.



Figure 1.2

## Evaluation

The pilot project with CVDB did not include a formal evaluation. According to Carr, “Based on anecdotal evidence, the digital badge program assessments assisted program leaders and youth identify strengths and weaknesses in activity content and delivery.”

Superintendents and principals expressed their appreciation for this project recognizing program quality rather than just compliance.

*“They were also grateful to have positive feedback to bring before their School Boards. Site Leads and staff were proud of the program and motivated to expand youth involvement. Youth observers were empowered to influence program design and proud to recognize program accomplishments. They now have higher expectations for program and a tool for measuring quality. The sites are more intentional with using the LIAS learning principles when building classes and designing lesson plans.” - Lori Carr, FCOE*

The biggest challenge, according to Lori Carr, was scheduling workshops for staff and youth and then following up to make sure all applicants received training. “The biggest surprise was how much youth gained from the experience. Youth shared their enthusiasm for having a set of clear standards to evaluate programs. They left the training inspired and equipped to assess and impact programs in meaningful ways.”

**Conclusions**

This project was very successful in engaging a small number of high school afterschool programs, as Ms. Carr articulated above. Her advice to people thinking about using digital badges to recognize exemplar programs is, “Don't wait. Recruit partners and set a window for planning and launching a digital badge system for programs and/or youth!”

We are currently engaged in a second round of this recognition project. Our advisor from CDE suggested that “in the next round we need to determine the real costs of badging in afterschool so that we can best determine how it can be taken to scale.” We are now seeking to measure the actual time and costs required to launch a digital badge project similar to the one described above.

**About the Center for Digital Badges (CDB)** <http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/>

The mission of the Center for Digital Badges is to ensure that afterschool and summer youth initiatives and expanded learning programs (ELPs) have the capacity to recognize learning by youth and adults where it happens.

If ELPs, such as those found in afterschool initiatives and community-based organizations, are to prosper, they must be recognized as important places of learning. A growing number of programs and ELP systems are using digital badges to acknowledge the learning and capacity building by their youth participants and adult staff. However, finding information on resources and best practices is very difficult. To address this problem, Temescal Associates launched a *Center for Digital Badges (CDB)*.

The CBD is designed to:

- Advocate for the use of digital badges;
- Promote state and local policies and guidelines that are supportive of digital badges;
- Promote the recognition of others that digital badges are valuable evidence of learning;
- Serve as a clearinghouse to offer the most up-to-date information on best practices, and where they are being applied;
- Direct services to ELPs and trainers wishing to issue digital badges; and
- Contribute to national and global discussions on digital badges by participating in digital badge summits and working groups.

**About Temescal Associates** <http://temescalassociates.com/>

Temescal Associates is a private consulting firm and will serve as the primary consultant for this project. Temescal is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. We serve our clients by offering gifted and highly experienced consultants who excel at eliciting the internal knowledge and wisdom of those they work with while introducing new knowledge and strategies that can transform the day-to-day practices that lead to improved youth outcomes.

**About the Learning in Afterschool & Summer Project** <http://www.learninginafterschool.org>

The Learning in Afterschool & Summer Project (LIAS) is an effort by afterschool advocates and leaders to unify the field of expanded learning programs (ELPs) and focus the movement on promoting young people's learning.

The idea of promoting young people's learning and broader development after the classroom day is not new. What is new is the vast number of children who are now able to access ELPs. We believe that afterschool programming is a unique institution that must offer more than safe havens or homework help after school. If ELPs are to achieve their true potential, they must become known as important places of learning – learning that complements, but is distinguished from, the learning that happens at school or home.

The goal of the Learning in Afterschool & Summer project is to position ELPs as places for learning. The project will draw upon an extensive and growing body of research and be informed by the national discussions on education reform and youth development. Achieving this goal will require that we assist programs in improving their practices that promote learning among young people. This includes the incorporation of specific learning principles, the intentional design of learning objectives for its clubs, and approaches in program delivery.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### **Articles**

Auburn University, Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES); “4-H Digital Badging Support”; [<http://www.hastac.org/files/stagetwoproposal-au-1-17-2012final.pdf>]; August 2014

Harvard Family Research Project; “Data Sharing Resources for Afterschool and Expanded Learning Programs and Systems”; [<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/data-sharing-resources-for-afterschool-and-expanded-learning-programs-and-systems>]; August 2014

Carey, Kevin; “Show Me Your Badge”; [<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/show-me-your-badge.html>]; August 2014

Fleming, Nora; “R.I. Students Gaining ‘Badges’, Credits Outside School”; [<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/02/06/20credits.h32.html>]; August 2014

Fleming, Nora; “Chicago Launches Largest Citywide Summer Learning Effort”; [<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/02/06/20credits.h32.html>]; August 2014

Piha, Sam; “Briefing Paper: Steps in Implementing a Digital Badge System in Expanded Learning Youth Programs”; [<http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Steps-in-Implementing-a-Digital-Badge-System.pdf>]; March 2015

Piha, Sam; “Briefing Paper: Legal Issues in Awarding Digital Badges in Expanded Learning Youth Programs”; [<http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Legal-Issues-and-Digital-Badges-Briefing-Paper.pdf>]; March 2015

Piha, Sam; “Guide for Expanded Learning Youth Programs Interested in Awarding Digital Badges”; [<http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Guide-for-Expanded-Learning-Youth-Programs-Interested-in-Awarding-Digital-Badges.pdf>]; March 2015

**Videos on the CDB Website** [<http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/other-resources/additional-videos/>]

- “What is a Badge?”
- “Chicago Summer of Learning”
- “Digital Badges: Unlocking 10 Millions Better Futures”
- “Digital Badges & Mozilla’s Open Badge Backpack”
- “Digital Badges, a New Currency for Professional Credentials”
- “Global Gateway Digital Badging System”

### **Websites**

- <http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/>
- <http://www.2mbetterfutures.org/about>
- <http://openbadges.org/>
- <https://www.openbadges.me/>
- <http://www.youtopia.com/info/>
- <https://www.forallrubrics.com/>
- <http://citiesoflearning.org/learn/>

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> For more information on LIAS Learning Principles:

<http://www.learninginafterschool.org/position.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> For more information on the Central Valley Afterschool Foundation:

<http://www.centralvalleyafterschool.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> For more information on the California Teaching Fellows Foundation: <http://ctff.us/>

<sup>iv</sup> For more information on the rubric to guide observation of the LIAS learning principles:

<http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/>

<sup>v</sup> For more information on Youtopia: <http://www.youtopia.com/info/>

<sup>vi</sup> For more information on ARC: <http://arc-experience.com/>