

Benefits from Afterschool Program Participation

A review of over 50 studies of afterschool programs conducted by The Afterschool Alliance suggests: (1) quality afterschool programs improved school attendance, engagement in learning, test scores, and grades; (2) frequency and duration of afterschool participation increases benefits; and (3) high-risk youth show the greatest benefits. [1]

Participation in various structured out-of-school time activities has been shown to have the greatest impact and most positive effect on those who are most at-risk. Research suggests that out-of-school time programs can benefit youth socially, emotionally and academically, however those who participate more frequently and for longer periods of time are most likely to benefit from out-of-school time opportunities. [2]

A decade of research, evaluations, and review of literature provides powerful evidence that afterschool programs make a difference in the lives of youth who attend. Afterschool programs improve academic performance, social and developmental outcomes, contribute to healthy lifestyle options, and prevent many risky behaviors. The key factors in supporting positive outcomes include access to and sustained participation in quality programming with strong partnerships with schools, families and the community. [3]

Community schools (integrated focus on academics, health, social service, youth and community development) offer positive out-of-school time opportunities for youth and can make a difference for students in four ways: (1) Improve student learning by addressing the needs of the whole child; (2) Promote family engagement with students and schools by providing families with access to services and opportunities to participate as leaders and learners; (3) Help schools function more efficiently by working together to support learning; and (4) Add vitality to communities through engagement with the schools and resources that works both ways. [4]

Research suggests youth who participate in afterschool programs improve significantly in three major areas:

(1) Feelings and attitudes; (2) Increased indicators of behavior adjustment which includes positive social behaviors and reduction in aggression, conduct problems, and drug use; and (3) Increased school and achievement test scores. One study concludes that programs that used evidence-based skill training approaches were consistently successful in producing multiple benefits for youth, while those that did not use such procedures were not successful in any outcome area. [5]

Research from an eight state study known as the Promising Afterschool Programs study suggests that disadvantaged elementary and middle school students who regularly attend high quality afterschool for at least two years are academically further ahead of peers who spend more out-of school time in unsupervised activities. The researchers found, over the course of the three-year project, that the more engaged students were in supervised afterschool activities, the better they did on a range of academic, social, and behavioral outcomes. [6]

The Communities Programming Resources to Advanced Learning (CORAL) initiative began in selected California afterschool programs in 2003. Some of the strategies used include read alouds, book discussions, independent reading, and writing. Key findings indicate positive gains in children's reading scores as well as higher levels of engagement. [7]

Spirituality for Kids (SFK) program is a 10-week program that focuses on building personal strengths including social competences, problem solving, autonomy and self-efficacy, and sense of purpose. RAND evaluated the program and found positive outcomes in nearly every area examined. Many of the program effects continued 12 weeks after the program ended. Since its inception the program has expanded to include other U.S. sites as well as international locations. [8]

Evidence suggests a correlation between frequent attendance in out-of-school time activities and positive outcomes, including an increase in academic achievement, school attendance, time spent on homework, extracurricular activities, improved effort in school, and better student behavior. Out-of-school time programs offer supportive contexts for youth development and offer excellent opportunities for youth to develop skills in supervised, safe, and engaging environments. [9]

Afterschool programs can increase engagement in learning by providing middle school students with opportunities to meet needs that schools often can't, e.g., personal attention from adults, a positive peer group, and activities that hold their interest and build their self-esteem (Vandell, et al. 1996; Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Clark, 1987; Masten, et al. 1990; Comer, et al., 1984; Werner, 1993; Halpern, 1992; As reported in Miller, 2003). [10]

Engagement in the arts whether the visual arts, dance, music, theatre or other disciplines, nurtures the development of cognitive, social, and personal competencies. Arts focused afterschool programs can increase academic achievement, decrease youth involvement in delinquent behavior and improve youth attitudes towards themselves and others and their futures. [11]

A new study of Chicago's After School Matters program which offers paid internships in the arts, technology, sports, and communications to teenagers in several underserved schools has found a relationship between participating in afterschool activities and higher class attendance, lower course failures and higher graduation rates. [12]

Adolescent mental and emotional well-being is associated with teens' environments. Links have been found consistently between teens' well-being and environments that are emotionally positive and warm and that provide support for developing adolescent autonomy. Some research suggests that positive experiences in one area (for example, in the family, among peers, at school, through youth community service...) may lessen the effect of negative experiences in other areas. Adolescents who spend time in communities that are rich in developmental opportunities for them experience less risk and show evidence of higher rates of positive development. [13-14]

Continued Need for Out-of-School Time Opportunities

Young people build skills, acquire passions, come to understandings and take on responsibilities for changing their worlds as they grow, learn and develop. Practice suggests that young people are most likely to develop these strengths when they are connected to programs and organizations that have effective youth engagement strategies explicitly designed to address these core needs. [15]

The Harvard Family Research Project has reported on several evaluations of afterschool programs focused on increasing the physical activity levels of children and youth. These evaluation results showed that the afterschool programs did increase levels of physical activity in participants. [16, 17]

There are approximately 73.9 million children living in the United States ranging from 0-17 years of age. Current statistics show there are approximately equal numbers of children 0-5 year (25 million), 6-11 years (24 million) and 12-17 years (25 million). These numbers are predicted to increase to 80 million children by the year 2020. [18]

A 2006 survey of over 600 California 12-17 year-olds found that kids left unsupervised three or more days per week were twice as likely to hang out with gang members and three times as likely to be engaged in criminal behavior, and more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs. [19]

Child Trends reports that school engagement is on the decline. Parents report that 39% of girls and 20% of boys are engaged in school. Researchers define school engagement in three domains, behavioral, emotional and cognitive. Afterschool programs can help youth reconnect and increase engagement in school by adapting well-established measures to help identify youth who are not engaged in school and develop services to address their needs. Programs that offer, sequenced, active, focused and explicit (SAFE) programming have been known to have positive effects on student engagement and other positive developments.[20]

A recent survey by the Afterschool Alliance found that in 2005/2006, three in four afterschool programs were full or overcrowded and 86% of the providers surveyed said that children in their communities who need afterschool programs do not have access to them. [21]

Research demonstrates demographic differences in participation in out-of-school time programs. Children from lower income families were more likely to participate in tutoring programs and children from higher income families participated in virtually all out-of-school time programs. [22]

In the hours after the school bell rings, violent juvenile crime soars and the prime time for juvenile crime begins. The peak hours for such crime are from 3:00 to 6:00 PM. These are also the hours when children are most likely to become victims of crime, be in an automobile accident, smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs. [23]

Researchers from Brandies University have identified a level of stress that parents experience regarding their children's afterschool arrangements. This parent stress is costing companies between \$50-\$300 billion in healthcare and lost job productivity each year. [24]

Findings from selected cost studies of out-of-school time programs suggest a wide variation in costs – from \$449 to \$7,160 per child per year – more than a fifteen-fold range. Much of this variation can be attributed to program characteristics and methodological differences in sample sizes, how costs are calculated, whether in-kind resources are taken into account, and whether start-up, operating, and system-building costs are included. [25]

Children and Youth Spend Time After School in a Variety of Ways

America After 3 PM reports that 11% (6.5 million) of the nation's youth are in afterschool programs and 25% (14.3 million) care for themselves in the afternoons. [26]

Nearly a million school-age children participate in afterschool academic enrichment programs and other youth development and support activities under the auspices of the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center Program. [27]

A study by Public Agenda showed that nearly 36% of kids report that they spend time home alone after school at least once a week. Sixteen percent (16%) spend at least three to four days a week alone and 13% spend five days a week alone at home after school. This same study reported that 57% of middle and high school students participate in some organized activity every day, or almost every day, after school. When surveyed,

85% of students say that kids who participate in organized activities during the after school hours are better off than those who do not. [28]

More than half of teens say they would not watch so much TV or play video games if they had other things to do after school. [29]

When asked what they desire from afterschool programming parent reactions are mixed: 54% of parents feel that children need a break from academics during the afterschool hours while 38% of parents feel that children need afterschool programs that are focused on academic skills. [30]

Health and Well-being

A new survey indicated that cigarettes smoking rates among younger adolescents are on the decline. The survey results show that 3% of 8th grade youth, 7% of 10th grade youth and 12% of 12th grade youth reported smoking cigarette regularly. These percentages are down from the 4% of 8th grade youth, 18% of 10th grade youth and 25% of 12th grade youth who reported smoking in 2006. [31]

Findings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that childhood obesity has hit a plateau. The report indicates that since 2006 the number of children who fall in the category of obese remains unchanged at 15.5%. Although researchers report that obesity rates have stabilized, a total of 32% of American schoolchildren remain overweight or obese. [32]

The National School Lunch Program (NLSP) offers cash reimbursement to help schools serve snacks to children after their regular school day ends. Afterschool snacks can help to ensure that children receive the nutrition they need to learn, play, and grow. [33]

Children who are overweight are at greater risk for heart disease, such as high cholesterol or high blood pressure, Type II diabetes, bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, asthma, and social and psychological problems such as stigmatization and poor self-esteem. [34]

Rates of participation in physical activity have declined in the past 30 years for both children and youth. According to the Centers for Disease Control 61.5% of children ages 9-13 do not participate in any organized physical activity outside of school hours, and 22.6 % do not engage in any type of physical activity during their

free time. Participation rates are even lower for urban children. [35]

A recent study assessed the physical-fitness levels of 239 3rd and 5th graders from four Illinois elementary schools. Findings show that children who got good marks on two measures of physical fitness – those that gauge aerobic fitness and body-mass index – tended also to have higher scores on state exams in reading and mathematics. That relationship also held true regardless of children’s gender or socioeconomic differences. [36]

Eleven out of fourteen published studies analyzing data from approximately 58,000 students between 1967 and 2006 have found that regular participation in physical activity is associated with improved academic performance. [37]

Students with Special Needs

Afterschool programs can play a vital role by providing children with disabilities central opportunities that will help to increase their skills while building on their potential and can facilitate relationships among youth of all abilities. [38]

Historically, persons with disabilities have been isolated from mainstream youth development programs, including afterschool programs. Afterschool programs have not been well-equipped or willing to incorporate children with special needs in their programs for fear that students with disabilities would require exhaustive attention and may require costly renovations. Both the civil rights movement and the efforts of parents of children with disabilities contributed to the passage of legislation that ensure that students with disabilities have rights to participate and be accommodated in public and private programs. [38]

The goal of the American Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations is not to put strain on afterschool programs, but rather to encourage programs to “make reasonable accommodations” for individuals with disabilities in order to integrate them into the program to the degree possible. [39]

Out-of-School Time for Middle and High School-Age Youth

The TASC After-School Education Apprenticeship program hires high school youth to work in afterschool programs serving youth from K-8. Findings on youth outcomes suggest younger youth showed increased

interest in science, higher attendance rates, and decreased behavior problems. Older youth benefited by learning more about science and their own abilities. [40]

According to new research programs serving preteens can achieve greater success by following six guiding principles. The principles include focused strategy, dosage, supportive relationships, family engagement, cultural competencies and continuous program improvements. [41]

Research involving youth who participated in LA’s BEST found that the short-term benefits of afterschool participation by middle school youth were maintained into high school. In particular, students who had participated in LA’s BEST posted higher academic achievement and lower engagement in crime. [42]

A new longitudinal study that looked at the role of Boys and Girls Clubs for teens suggests that teens use the clubs in different ways than younger youth. Programs with flexible attendance policies and special programming helped to keep more teens involved. Some of the factors for sustained teen attendance included the number of years the teens had been involved in the club, number of friends who attend, leadership opportunities available, and variety of activities. Some of the benefits for teens included character development, positive school related outcomes, increased health by lower risky behaviors. [43]

A three year study that looked at teens and their use of digital media found that youth are developing important social and technical skills needed to be competent citizens of the digital age. The study identified two distinct categories of teen engagement with digital media: friendship-driven and interest driven. Both categories help youth learn basic social and technical skills. Researchers found youth are motivated to learn from their peers as well as adults on-line and the Internet provides public space for teens to interact and receive feedback from one another. [44]

The challenges facing youth who are disconnected from our nation’s employment and education systems are expansive. Research has suggested that youth services and supports offered during out-of-school time, that are grounded in a developmental approach, not only help young people avoid self-destructive behavior, but also enable them to acquire the academic and workforce-readiness skills and personal attributes that employers seek. [45]

Out-of-school time programs for older youth need to look very different than the middle or high schools young people attend. To retain older youth, out-of-school time programs must offer high interest programs and employ staff who can develop strong partnerships with and want to work with adolescents. [46]

Research has identified key components for middle school afterschool programming including: (1) allowing middle school youth to be creators of their own afterschool experiences; (2) quality standards that are asset-based; (3) staff who are credible and trained to work with middle school youth; and (4) programs that balance a connection to and are independent from school and maintain family connections. [47]

The physical space for teen programming needs to reflect their activity interests. Research on designing program spaces suggests that the “design and layout of the physical environment which includes interior finishes, outdoor spaces, room arrangement and selection of equipment can have a profound impact on how young people interact in the space. Teens will interact with space by arranging it, personalizing it, and readjusting it to meet their needs. Well-designed space will allow for flexibility and creativity. [48]

The delivery of program activities and opportunities to high school-age youth during out-of-school time would be enhanced by a systemic approach with infrastructure elements, such as (1) Funding collaborations; (2) Planning and cooperation among stakeholders; (3) Formal linkages between high schools, community, and local government organizations; (4) High school age program standards; (5) An agreed upon set of objectives; and (6) Designated citywide leadership. [49]

A recent report from the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development shows increased participation of high-school teens from 8,332 to 13,097 in one year. The report outlines specific program features that contributed to increases in participation and positive outcomes such as: preparing youth for college and careers; leadership opportunities within the programs; and internships. The study suggests outreach approaches such as: stipends for participation; social networking opportunities; and technology for reaching out to current and potential program participants. [50]

The Growing Need for 21st Century Skills

There remains a profound gap between the knowledge and skills most students learn in school and the

knowledge and skills demanded for the 21st Century. Students need to learn academic content through real-world examples, applications and experiences both inside and outside of school. [51]

The U.S. Department of Labor projects an increase in STEM related jobs that it will be unable to fill with American students. Less than 50% of U.S. Students are meeting proficient levels in math and science. Furthermore, many science and engineering doctorates are being awarded to students on temporary visas. [52]

Experiences in informal settings can significantly improve science learning outcomes for individuals from groups which are historically underrepresented in science, such as women and minorities. Evaluations of afterschool programs, museum-based programs and environments that are interactive, designed with specific learning goals in mind, and provide multiple ways for learners to engage with concepts within a single setting – support academic gains for children and youth in these groups. [53]

The Girls Scouts of America and the Motorola Foundation identified three key elements needed to improve engagement of girls in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education programs. The first is to “make it real.” Girls learn by doing and hands-on activities help girls see how STEM is used in their daily lives. The second is to “make it relevant.” Use project-based activities that girls can relate to. The third is to “make it possible.” Mentors and role models help girls see themselves as successful and help them to develop their full potential in STEM related careers. [54]

Youth tend to be more engaged in technology-oriented programs when they are given choices in activities, when program staff provide technological support, and when they are given opportunities for reflection, discussion, and interaction. [55]

A growing body of research underscores the importance of caring relationships and is helping to unpack the specific social processes that unfold between young people and youth workers inside of programs. As our understanding of supportive relationships and program processes becomes more fine-grained, the more we learn about what it takes to create engaging, high quality environments. That understanding, in turn, must inform our efforts to support those individuals who are working, often with very limited guidance, to create

such environments for children and youth every day in organizations across the country. [56]

The Out-of-School Time Workforce

Youth workers who staff afterschool and community-based programs play a critical role in providing a bridge of vital supports and opportunities for children and youth during the after-school hours, however many leave the profession after a few years. The results from a recent survey found that nearly 80% of youth workers are satisfied with their jobs, but low wages significantly impact the high turn over rate in this field. Increases in wages and access to benefits could stabilize the workforce and advance the profession. Salary is the number one factor that influences people's decision to leave a job over demographics, status, job satisfaction, or place of employment. [57]

The out-of-school time field lacks a national professional development system. However, several statewide initiatives are in pursuit of building components for a statewide system. Alaska, California, Connecticut, Indiana, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, and New York are at various states of developing core competencies, career lattices, and school-age credentials. Indiana and Missouri have launched a combined school-age and youth development credential. Local efforts are also underway in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. [58]

The characteristics and capabilities of the youth worker are paramount to program success, and programs for youth are most successful when youth workers are creative, well trained, skilled at building relationships, and can make long-term commitments to programs. Finding and retaining the right staff is critical to helping youth participants develop and sustain an interest in program participation. [59]

The Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (MARS) found that programs with more highly educated staff, both at the program director level and direct service levels, were rated significantly higher on elements of program quality, such as staff engagement, youth engagement, activities, and homework assistance. Additionally, the study found that higher wages were linked with higher quality programming while high staff turnover was linked with lower quality ratings in both youth engagement and homework assistance. [60]

In a national survey of afterschool programs (n= 273), California Tomorrow found that 56% of responding

programs enroll youth from more than one language group, and one in four serve English Language Learners (ELL). Very few program directors reported having enough bilingual staff to work with these youth in their home languages, and even fewer have staff that are trained to effectively serve youth who speak little English. Half the programs that enroll a significant number of English learners do not have any staff who speaks the home languages of the participants and their families. [61]

All of the Boston School-Age and Youth Development Credential (SAYD, January 2007 – June 2008) participants completed pre- and post-participation competency-based self-assessments (11 competencies). Survey respondents select their perceived level of ability in each competency area. The three ability levels are: Beginning or Building Awareness, Developing Skills and Knowledge, or Mastery and Consistent Application. Responses to the self-assessment post-survey after completing the credential showed positive change (movement from beginning to developing) in all of the competency areas. A higher percent of respondents viewed themselves as developing or mastering competency areas on the post-assessment than on the pre-assessment. The Boston SAYD experience helps to move the field forward in understanding how the competencies can be used as a core organizing feature to professional development and improving quality practices. [62]

While a large number of federal programs support youth programming in some way, this support does not necessarily translate into adequate funding to systematically build and retain a well-trained workforce. A critical next step is to ensure that the programs being funded are of the highest quality and therefore likely to positively influence the life trajectories of youth participants. Program quality is dependent upon having staff that possess the knowledge and skills to work with youth effectively and are capable of building positive supportive relationships. Without strong staff, the increasing expectations being placed on youth programs are unrealistic. [63]

Trends in Public Support and Public Funding

President Obama plans to provide critical support to young children and their parents with the development of the "Zero to Five Plan," quadruple funding for the Early Head Start programs, and increase funding for Head Start. In addition the new administration plans to make math and science education a national priority, and double the funding for the 21st Century Learning

Centers to serve additional children. Arne Duncan, a strong proponent of early childhood education was recently selected and approved to be the new Secretary of Education. [64]

In a recent national phone survey, the Afterschool Alliance reported that seven in ten voters want the new congress to increase afterschool funding. Voters across party lines see that afterschool programs are necessary for their communities and would support increase funding to afterschool programs even if it leads to a tax increase. [65]

The proposed “After School Partnerships Improve Results in Education (ASPIRE) Act” (H.R. 6928), is aimed at increasing school engagement/success of middle and high school youth. The proposal offers alternative ways for youth to gain credit towards graduation. [66]

Every dollar invested in high quality afterschool programs saves tax payers on average \$3.00, according to a study by the Rose Institute. Additional saving can be realized if crime reduction is factored in. [67]

Finding and sustaining funding to support out-of-school time programs is critical to developing and continuing promising afterschool efforts over the long-term. Financing strategies include making better use of existing funds; maximizing available federal dollars; creating more flexibility in funding streams; developing new dedicated revenue sources for afterschool programs; gaining access to additional resources; and creating partnerships between public and private-sector organizations and funding sources.[68]

Despite increased funding, disparities in access and quality still persist. Programs in affluent or middle class neighborhoods were more likely to include direct instruction in the arts, enrichment activities, and sports, and are more likely to provide snacks or meals than programs in poorer neighborhoods. Wealthier communities are also more likely to have computer labs, playing fields, and gyms, open enrollment slots, and resources for art and enrichment materials. Programs in low-income areas have much tighter budgets, more facilities in need of repair, longer wait lists to get into the program, and higher staff-to-youth ratios. [69]

Strengthening Out-of-School Time Program Quality

High quality afterschool programs can have significant,

positive effects on student outcomes, whereas low quality programs can fail to show positive effects or even have negative impacts. States are seeking to support high quality programs by developing definitions of quality embodied in program standards, creating measures of afterschool quality, and improving quality at the program level through licensing and accreditation, professional development, and incentives for reaching higher quality levels. [70]

Updated research from the Harvard Family Research Project explores key emerging themes from 13 recent reports and provides insight into how programs can utilize evaluation for program improvement: (1) get feedback from key stakeholders; (2) seek parent perspectives; (3) inform other afterschool initiatives; and (4) improve the workforce [71]

A recent research finding on quality afterschool programs is that connections matter. Relationships among staff, schools, families, youth, and communities are crucial and many after school programs link with schools by aligning curricula and sharing resources. Complementary learning initiatives are growing—and so is the evidence that they have tangible benefits for youth, families, and communities. [72]

Researcher Gil Noam proposes that there are three elements needed to strengthen and support the field of afterschool: stronger OST leaders; training and technical assistance for staff to create strong and caring relationships; and support for program goals focused on becoming intentional around learning. [73]

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