

## I. Introduction

The Boston After-School for All Partnership requested that the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) investigate how after-school programs can most effectively promote positive youth development as a support to academic achievement. **Boston's After-School for All Partnership** is a public-private venture to expand, improve, and sustain a system of quality out-of-school time programs for the city's children and youth. Specifically, the Partnership asked NIOST to answer the following questions:

1. What role can quality after-school programs play in meeting the developmental needs of children that are critical preconditions to academic success?
2. What characteristics and features of effective learning environments incorporate the supports and opportunities necessary for young people to succeed both developmentally and academically?
3. How can after-school programs help overcome some of the risk factors to academic learning?
4. What kind of systemic support would be necessary to build the capacity of after-school programs in Boston to promote positive youth development as a support to academic achievement?

NIOST's investigation activities included a literature review, three focus groups with after-school program providers and youth development leaders, and multiple personal and phone interviews with program, policy, and organization leaders. NIOST also conducted approximately 15 site visits to after-school programs in Boston. NIOST enlisted research and writing assistance

from the Forum for Youth Investment. The Forum for Youth Investment (FYI) is a national initiative dedicated to increasing the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement in the United States by promoting a "big picture" approach to planning and policy development.

This report intends to: (1) provide a review of learning theories; (2) explain the features and rationale of the positive youth development approach; (3) provide local and national examples of programs utilizing positive youth development strategies to support youth development and academic achievement; (4) articulate the particular challenges facing Boston in its efforts to build the capacity of after-school programs to promote positive youth development; and (5) provide both short-term and long-term recommendations regarding local actions and policy activities.

## II. Context

### Overview

Recently researchers and educators have begun to broaden their definition of learning and the role positive youth development programs can play in solidifying the developmental needs of children that are critical pre-conditions to general well-being and academic success. Increasingly after-school programs have recognized the value of the positive youth development approach as a primary strategy for supporting the overall development of young people.

There is a wide variety of types of after-school and out-of-school time programs currently in operation in Boston and nationwide. In this report "after-school programs" generally refers to programs that:

- Provide programming from the end of the school day until 5:00 or 6:00 P.M.
- Operate a minimum of three days per week
- Run throughout the school year (from September to June)
- Serve a set group of students who are enrolled in the program (rather than drop-in students)
- Serve school-age youth (K-12<sup>th</sup> grades)

While this report focuses on programs that meet this definition, it is important to acknowledge that the conceptual, practice, and policy conversations that follow are just as relevant to out-of-school opportunities broadly as they are to after-school programs in particular. Moreover, youth development research and practice underscore the importance of thinking about after-school programs in a larger context, emphasizing that young people are developing throughout their waking hours, and throughout at least the first two decades of life. With that important caveat in mind, this report primarily focuses on after-school programs.

Presently, approximately 16,000 youth in Boston are engaged in some type of after-school program organized by schools, local youth organizations, community based organizations, churches, etc. Despite the variety of program models, there appear to be some consistent characteristics and qualities of after-school programs, which warrant investigation and consideration as to their utilization of youth development principles and their impact on academic achievement.

There is significant research which shows that participation in after-school programs is positively associated with better school attendance, more

positive attitude towards school work, higher aspirations for college, finer work habits, better interpersonal skills, reduced drop out rates, higher quality homework completion, less time spent in unhealthy behaviors, and improved grades (Clark, 1988; Hamilton & Klein, 1998; Huang, Gribbons, Kim, Lee, and Baker, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000; Posner & Vandell, 1994, 1999; Schinke, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Research has involved and been conducted by national youth organizations, major research institutes, state and local school districts, and higher education institutions.

Developmental psychologists have challenged the prevailing distinction between social and academic development in children citing that several studies now indicate that social and emotional development are inextricably linked to academic success in youth. (Panel Discussion, After-School Settings Conference, Harvard University, February 2002). This is a critical conclusion at which to have arrived. Because of the relationship between human development and academic development, efforts to enhance and improve opportunities for quality after-school as a support to academic learning are well motivated and correctly focused.

This report is commissioned by The Boston After-School for All Partnership. The first half of this report discusses: (1) the developmental needs of children that are critical preconditions to academic success and how after-school programs can help meet these needs; (2) how after-school programs can help overcome some of the risk factors to academic learning; and (3) the characteristics and features of effective learning environments. The second half of the report examines effective practices in Boston and nationally, and explores the needs of providers, funders, and the field as a whole in trying to reach “best practice.” Section