IMPROVING ATTENDANCE AND RETENTION IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

Elena Kennedy, B.A., Brooke Wilson, M.S.W., Sherylls Valladares, B.A., and Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND

Regular participation in out-of-school time activities is associated with benefits for children.[1,2] However, children cannot reap the benefits of program participation if they do not attend programs in the first place. This brief focuses on ways in which out-of-school time programs can improve the attendance and retention of children and youth in their programs during the elementary, middle, and high school years and provides ideas for overcoming common barriers to attendance. The brief also describes an action plan that program practitioners can use to measure attendance and retention in their programs.

DEFINING ATTENDANCE AND RETENTION

Attendance refers to being present in an out-of-school time program, whereas *retention* refers to regular attendance over time. Both attendance and retention are related to but distinct from engagement, which refers to children's participation and interest in program activities.[3] (A subsequent brief in this series will address engagement). Before addressing engagement, however, the primary challenge faced by many practitioners in out-of-school time programs is how to encourage initial and ongoing attendance and retention.[4,5]

WHY ARE ATTENDANCE AND RETENTION IMPORTANT?

Attendance and retention of children and youth in out-of-school time programs are positively associated with many academic and other outcomes.[6] Based on experimental and non-experimental research, studies have found that attending these programs is linked to:

§ Increased social competence, communication skills, and problem-solving skills;[7,8]
§ Higher academic performance through improved grades, more time spent on homework, decreased dropout rates, and enhanced intrinsic motivation and feelings of belonging at school;[9] and
§ Reduced antisocial behavior, drug and cigarette use, and increased civic engagement.[10]

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

While the benefits of participation in out-of-school time programs have been well documented, the reality remains that few benefits can be gained without first breaking through the many barriers to participation that exist for children and youth today.[11] This section of the brief will identify common barriers to participation and suggest practical steps that programs can take to reduce these barriers and promote participation. Barriers preventing attendance and retention differ depending on children's ages and the other demands in their lives. Broadly speaking, the barriers fall into five categories:

1. **Safety, Transportation, and Cost**

Unsafe neighborhoods, the cost of out-of-school time programs, and problems getting to and from a program are persistent barriers that limit participation for many children. The cost of enrolling children and adolescents in programs—especially for low-income families—can be prohibitive, and out-of-school time programs are often faced with the challenge of offering high-quality programming for little or no cost.

What can your program do?

§ Partner with schools and community-based organizations to cut costs by sharing transportation, materials, and program space.

§ Locate programs in the neighborhoods of the children and youth that they serve, so that children do not have to travel to the programs.

§ Consider partnerships with schools, businesses, and other organizations that might be able to offer material, financial, and volunteer resources to your program.

§ Enhance your program's visibility in the community through "special interest" features in local newspapers, community service projects, and participation at town and PTA meetings.

§ Urge supporters to propose local legislation that will provide more funding for out-of-school time programs.

§ Search for additional funding and apply for supplemental grants that will allow programs to reduce their fees and enhance infrastructure. **See the Funding Resources section at the end of the brief for more detailed information.**

2. **Family Responsibilities**

Many adolescents who are targeted by out-of-school time programs have other responsibilities—such as babysitting a younger sibling, preparing meals, or taking care of household chores—that prevent them from participating in out-of-school time programs.

What can your program do?

§ Work together with parents to brainstorm ways to accommodate both family responsibilities and regular attendance. Consider conducting focus groups with parents, where they can discuss the specific barriers to their children's program attendance and explore possible avenues programs can take to alleviate those barriers.

§ See if your program can redistribute resources so that siblings of varied ages can attend together—eliminating the need for older youth to look after younger siblings. Alternatively, if programs do not have the capacity to include young children, programs can research others in the neighborhood that do and can share that information with parents.

§ Help parents to form partnerships and support each other in caring for their children and promoting healthy development. Solutions as simple as carpools or rotating in-home child care and playgroups for younger siblings may lighten the burden of family responsibilities for youth and parents alike.

3. **Desire or Need to Work**

Many older youth take on part-time or even full-time jobs in the hours after school. Young people's reasons for working are diverse, ranging from wanting to buy clothing or music, to supporting families, to seeking vocational experience. Research is divided about the consequences for adolescents of taking on unskilled, low-paying after-school jobs. Some studies find that work promotes self-sufficiency and responsibility, whereas other sources indicate that the jobs available to adolescents rarely enhance development and regularly detract from time spent on educational activities.[12] Out-of-school time programs have the potential to supplement adolescents' job-place experiences with educational and supportive programming.

What can your program do?

§ Offer incentives for participation such as money, periodic raffles for gift certificates, and other items

donated by local merchants that might appeal to youth.

§ Incorporate vocational and apprenticeship activities into programs, or consider hiring teenage participants to take on paid roles within your organization. This practice could allow adolescents to gain valuable work experience and skills, while also enabling them to earn the money that they need and want. In addition, successful out-of-school time programs that incorporate vocational elements regularly form partnerships with community and business leaders, who can serve as role models and references for participants.

4. Lack of Identification with Staff Members

Trusting relationships between youth participants and staff members are a central feature of strong out-of-school time programs. Although children and youth often prefer staff members who are similar to themselves in race, gender, and experience, the most important consideration is to hire people who *care* about children and youth and who can connect with participants.[13]

What can your program do?

§ Recruit leaders, volunteers, and practitioners who are committed to the mission of providing novel and enriching experiences to youth. Consider involving individuals who already have a stake in participants' well-being, such as older siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives.

§ Seek volunteers or paid employees from various cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds and provide training to raise cultural competence for program staff and participants.[14] Programs also can foster mentoring relationships between adults and students and can invite speakers and visitors from the community, so that children and youth can gain exposure to adults from a range of backgrounds.[15, 16]

§ Recruit alumni from your program to serve as volunteers and staff members, because, as former program participants, they will be in an ideal position to relate to and communicate with current program participants.[17]

§ Conduct routine training and discussion sessions with staff members and volunteers to give them an outlet to talk about their successes and frustrations, while collaborating to improve programming. Match experienced staff members with staff members who are relatively new to the program, so that more knowledgeable staff can support the development of new staff, and new staff can contribute innovative ideas to the routines of more experienced staff.

5. Lack of Interest in Organized Activities

Adolescents, more so than children, often have little or no interest in activities offered through out-of-school time programs. Adolescents frequently cite boredom, a desire to relax and hang out with friends, and dissatisfaction with program activities as reasons that they would rather not participate. By assessing adolescents' ideas and opinions, organizations can design dynamic programs that continue to evolve, based on participants' needs and interests.

What can your program do?

§ Offer activities that are tailored to the age groups and interests of participants. Determine what activities adolescents will enjoy by conducting periodic surveys and discussion groups, in which participants can comment candidly on their preferred activities and schedules.

§ If possible, create spaces that older youth can make their own to enable them to create their own activities and experience autonomy within the program.

§ Advertise activities, and encourage participants to invite their friends. Vary activities on a daily and monthly basis so that young people have opportunities to look forward to the program and reasons to return. When asked, adolescents say they prefer out-of-school time programs that offer novel activities, such as field trips, which allow them to leave their day-to-day environments.[18]

§ Do not allow your program to be just an extension of the school day. Although many programs

hold academic enrichment at the center of their missions, children and adolescents consistently cite dissatisfaction with programs that focus solely on homework and remedial academic activities.[19]

EVALUATING PROGRESS: HOW YOUR PROGRAM CAN MEASURE AND ENHANCE ATTENDANCE AND RETENTION

Understanding whether or not your program is reaching the children and adolescents that it intends to serve is crucial to your program's success. The steps listed below can help create an action plan for evaluating the attendance and participation of children and youth in your program. Ideally, such a plan should be developed when first designing and implementing your program, but it is never too late to incorporate evaluation strategies into the program.

1. **Identify your program's purpose and target populations.** First, reflect on your program's purpose and mission. Developing a logic model is helpful for determining which children and adolescents your program intends to serve and the inputs necessary to reach them. See the Child Trends Research-to-Results brief "Logic Models in Out-of-School Time Programs" for more information (www.childtrends.org).

2. **Set goals for attendance and retention.** Set specific goals and establish a time frame for achieving them. How many participants would you like to attract in the next month? Quarter? Year? What intermediate accomplishments will be necessary to help you meet these goals?
§ *Program in Action***:** Administrators and practitioners work together to set ambitious goals for attendance at the **Higher Achievement** program.[20] For example, staff members determined that they should strive for 85 percent attendance each day, and they consistently refocus their efforts based on participation rates. (See page 7 for more on Higher Achievement).

3. **Uncover barriers you must overcome.** Survey or talk with youth and parents in your community to reveal the obstacles that keep young people from attending your program. Each community is different; it is critical to determine the specific challenges facing youth in your community.
§ *Program in Action:* Through conversations with parents and students in its programs and at local schools, **Summerbridge Manchester at the Derryfield School**, in New Hampshire, identified transportation as a critical barrier to participation in its year-round and daily summer programs. Accordingly, Summerbridge administrators made a commitment to providing bus transportation to all of its students.

4. **Define your indicators.** What measures—or "indicators" —will demonstrate that you are making progress toward the desired goals? For example, will you simply count the number of new participants attending your program, or will you also calculate whether current participants are increasing their attendance over time? Will indicators be assessed for subgroups, such as older youth? Detailed indicators can provide ongoing feedback on participation and attendance in your program.[21]
§ *Program in Action:* **Entering the College Zone**, an academically focused out-of-school time program in Greensboro, North Carolina, developed a logic model, which included assessment tools for evaluating attendance as one of the inputs. With this model, the program could evaluate participation and retention periodically throughout its activities.[22]

5. **Engage program participants and staff to participate in the evaluation process.** Practitioners cite the value of making evaluations collaborative projects for all staff members, but practitioners also indicate that involving staff members in this process is one of the most challenging aspects of program evaluation.[23] Despite this, the benefits of staff engagement in evaluations of attendance are invaluable.

This engagement can help programs learn about not only how many children are absent, but also why they are absent and what the organization can do to prevent absences in the future.

§ *Program in Action:* Staff members at **Higher Achievement**, in Washington, DC (See "In the Spotlight") engage in consistent evaluations of participants' attendance by setting goals and assessing progress on a weekly and monthly basis. Program organizers explain that only when staff members are involved in evaluations do they begin to understand and value the information gained from them.

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL PROGRAM RESOURCES

National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST)

NIOST is a central clearinghouse of information on practices in out-of-school time programs nationwide. View the organization's "Publications" page for current research on out-of-school time at http://www.niost.org/.

Harvard Family Research Project

The Harvard Family Research Project received a grant from the William T. Grant Foundation to conduct a quantitative study of the individual and contextual predictors of participation in out-of-school time activities. The project's briefs contribute significantly to the expansion of knowledge about out-of-school time. For more information, visit http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~hfrp/.

Current work includes:

§ *Moving Beyond the Barriers: Attracting and Sustaining Youth Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs*: http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/index.html#moving

§ *Understanding and Measuring Attendance in Out-of-School Time Programs*: http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/index.html#understanding

FUNDING RESOURCES

These Web sites and organizations may be useful for gaining information and resources that will help programs find and sustain funding.

Community Foundations

Community foundations can be a source of funding for out-of-school time programs. The Council on Foundations has a "Community Foundation Locator" Web site, which helps programs locate the community foundation that serves their areas. Access this Web site at http://www.cof.org/Locator/.

The Finance Project and the Forum for Youth Investment

The Finance Project and the Forum for Youth Investment have collaborated to bring information and resources on finding funding, suggestions for applying financing strategies, and strategies for partnership building to programs serving children and youth. Access their Web sites at http://www.financeproject.org/irc/yp.asp and http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/.

The newest resources from these sites include:

§ A Guide to Successful Public-Private Partnerships for Youth Programs: http://financeproject.org/publications/PublicPrivate_PM.pdf

§ Creating Dedicated Local and State Revenue Sources for Youth Programs: http://financeproject.org/publicationsDLF_PM.pdf

§ Finding Funding: A Guide to Federal Sources for Youth Programs: http://financeproject.org/publications/findingfunding_PM.pdf

§ Thinking Broadly: Financing Strategies for Youth Programs:

http://financereport.org/publications/Thinkingbroadly_PM.pdf

§   Profiles of Promising Practices:
     http://financeproject.org/irc/yp/profiles.asp

Afterschool Alliance

The Afterschool Alliance offers resources for funding sustainability, a database of funding sources, and examples of successful programs. Access the alliance's Web site at http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/funding_main.cfm

EVALUATION RESOURCES

The following resources provide ideas and strategies for evaluating program attendance and retention.

The Finance Project

In collaboration with the Harvard Family Research Project, the Finance Project produced a brief to provide out-of-school time programs with the evaluation resources necessary to improve their programs and to demonstrate results for sustainability.

Documenting Progress and Demonstrating Results: Evaluating Local Out-of-School Time Programs can be found at http://www.financeproject.org/Publications/OSTlocalevaluation.pdf.

The National Science Foundation (NSF)

The 2002 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation, developed by the NSF, can be found at http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/nsf02057.pdf.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT
Program: Higher Achievement
Location: Washington, DC

What is Higher Achievement? Higher Achievement, founded in 1975, is a year-round, multiyear program. Its mission is to develop the academic skills, behaviors, and attitudes of motivated and underserved middle school children with the goal of improving their achievement, attendance, and opportunities in high school. The central tenets of the program are that talent is everywhere; intellect is built through effort; and opportunities matter. In the past year, Higher Achievement has partnered with teachers and schools to help more than 400 middle school children in the District of Columbia and Northern Virginia realize the power of their intellectual potential. Students identified for Higher Achievement programs participate in a rigorous application and interview process. Once students—or "scholars"—begin the program, the organization makes every effort ensure they continue to attend.

Why are attendance and retention important in this program? Consistent attendance of scholars on both a daily and a yearly basis is vital to Higher Achievement's mission, because without regular attendance, scholars cannot fully reap the benefits of the program. Higher Achievement believes in making a long-term investment in its scholars, so all scholars are expected to be involved for the three-year course of the program. Attendance and retention are critical for three specific reasons: 1) Relationships among mentors, scholars, staff, and parents are important, and they cannot be built and sustained without attendance; 2) With a drop in attendance, the relevance of the program must be questioned; and 3) Positive outcomes, such as improved grades, better social skills, and greater self-confidence, are not achieved if students are absent.

What barriers to attendance and retention does Higher Achievement encounter? What strategies does Higher Achievement use to overcome these barriers? Staff members at all levels of Higher Achievement are involved in and dedicated to improving attendance and retention. Higher Achievement recognizes that the barriers to attendance and pathways to overcoming those barriers vary depending on the situation of the child. Thus, to combat common barriers, Higher Achievement uses several strategies.

- **Transportation/Safety.** Standard transportation is not provided. Staff members often assign "traveling buddies" so students can walk or take public transportation together, or set up carpools between parents and other scholars living nearby. Staff members also draw on community resources, for example, a local church that might be willing to provide transportation.
- **Conflicts with other out-of-school time programs.** With so many other choices for out-of-school time activities, Higher Achievement finds itself competing for scholars' time. Since this program focuses on the whole child, Higher Achievement realizes that different children have different interests and needs. Therefore, in most cases, the program accommodates scholars' participation in other activities, such as sports or dance.
- **Homework.** The amount of homework given at school can be overwhelming. Accordingly, the staff members set up arrangements with teachers and parents that will allow scholars to address all their commitments and have implemented study skills workshops and POWER notebooks that help students finish assignments.
- **Fatigue.** It is often hard to go to school all day and then attend an out-of-school time program for five hours at night. The hours of this program can also be a source of conflict, because they regularly extend into the evening. With this in mind, Higher Achievement makes sure to offer scholars time to rest and also provides time for nonacademic "electives" and activities.
- **Lack of Interest.** Higher Achievement believes it is important to make the program relevant to the students' lives. By helping families and scholars understand what this program can do for them, and what they are missing when they fail to attend, Higher Achievement enhances participants' motivation and dedication to the program. Scholars are also trained to speak on behalf of Higher Achievement. By assuming leadership roles within the organization, scholars are able to solidify their identities within the program. Through this process, scholars often develop strong emotional connections to the organization and attend regularly.

How are attendance and retention measured? Higher Achievement uses a management information system to track all attendance data. The staff believes it is important to know not only whether a child is absent, but also to know *why* and *where* he or she is when absent. Staff members strive to have all scholars accounted for every day, whether or not they are physically present. Staff then follow up to trouble-shoot as needed, to regain regular attendance.

What evaluation strategies are used? Attendance and retention data are analyzed every two weeks. By breaking down attendance and retention records at the school, age, or individual levels, staff can easily identify and address problems. Furthermore, trends such as low attendance at particular sites or decreased attendance by a specific child during the winter months, can serve as a red flags to the organization, indicating a need to allocate resources to find solutions to specific attendance issues.

[1] Theokas, C., & Bloch, M. (2006). Out-of-school time is critical for children: Who participates in programs? (Research-to-Results Fact Sheet). Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[2] Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. (Eds.) (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

[3] Simpkins Chaput, S., Little, P.M.D., & Weiss, H. (2004).Understanding and measuring attendance in out-of-school time programs. *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation, Issue 7.*

[4] Weiss, H., Little, P., & Bouffard, S. (2005). More than just being there: Balancing the participation equation. *New Directions for Youth Development, 105*, 15-31.

[5] Simpkins Chaput, S., Little, P.M.D., & Weiss, H. (2004).Understanding and measuring attendance in out-of-school time programs. *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation, Issue 7.*

[6] Simpkins Chaput, S., Little, P.M.D., & Weiss, H. (2004).Understanding and measuring attendance in out-of-school time programs. *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation, Issue 7.*

[7] Little, P. M., & Harris, E. (June 2003). *A review of out-of-school time program quasi-experimental and experimental evaluation results* (Out-of-School Time Evaluation Snapshot). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

[8] Riggs, N. R. (2006). After-school program attendance and the social development of rural Latino children of immigrant families *Journal of Community Psychology, 34*(1), 75-87.

[9] Little, P. M., & Harris, E. (June 2003). *A review of out-of-school time program quasi-experimental and experimental evaluation results* (Out-of-School Time Evaluation Snapshot). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

[10] Zaff, J. F., Moore, K. A., Papillo, A. R., & Williams, S. (2003). Implications of extracurricular activity participation during adolescence on positive outcomes. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 18*(6), 599-630.

[11] Lauver, S., Little, P., & Weiss, H. (2004). Moving beyond the barriers: Attracting and sustaining youth participation in out-of-school time programs. *Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation, Harvard Family Research Project, vol. 6.*

[12] Steinberg, L. (2005). *Adolescence, 7th Edition*. McGraw-Hill Higher Education: New York.

[13] Kennedy, E., Bowie, L., & Bronte-Tinkew, J. (2006). *Bringing research knowledge to practitioners, policy makers, and the media: An integrated agenda to improve programs and policies for children and youth* (Report of the First Youth Roundtable). Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[14] Kennedy, E., Bronte-Tinkew, J., & Matthews, G. (2007). Enhancing cultural competence in out-of-school time programs: What is it, and why is it important? (Research-to-Results Practitioner Insights Brief*).* Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[15] Jekielek, S., Moore, K., Hair, E., and Scarupa, H. J. (2002). Mentoring: A promising strategy for youth development (Research Brief). Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[16] Bowie, L. & Bronte-Tinkew, J. (2007). Recruiting mentors in out-of-school time programs: What's involved? (Research-to-Results Practitioner Insights Brief). Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[17] Higher Achievement. Personal communication February 23, 2007.

[18] Lauver, S., Little, P., & Weiss, H. (2004). Moving beyond the barriers: Attracting and sustaining youth participation in out-of-school time programs. *Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation, Harvard Family Research Project, vol. 6.*

[19] Kennedy, E., Bowie, L., & Bronte-Tinkew, J. (2006). *Bringing research knowledge to practitioners, policy makers, and the media: An integrated agenda to improve programs and policies for children and youth* (Report of the First Youth Roundtable). Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[20] Higher Achievement is a year-round, multi-year program founded in 1975 whose mission is to develop academic skills, behaviors, and attitudes in motivated and underserved middle school children to improve their grades, test scores, attendance, and opportunities, with the ultimate goal of getting these students placed in a top high school program.

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