

After-School Programs for Adolescents

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This article discusses survey data and research evidence in favor of providing after-school programs for middle and high school students. It explains the benefits and key elements of after-school care, and examines existing initiatives. Community and youth responses to different programs are noted.

During the past two decades, more families have entered the workforce, creating a growing demand for before- and after-school programs for school-age children. A national poll funded by the C. S. Mott Foundation and JCPenney found that Americans overwhelmingly support after-school programs in the public schools; more than 90 percent said they favored making daily enrichment programs available to all children (Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Group 2001). In the most comprehensive survey ever done of voter attitudes on this issue, respondents strongly endorsed the creation of safe, affordable after-school enrichment programs—even when asked if they would be willing to raise their state taxes by \$100. Three out of five voters claimed that they would pay higher taxes to fund after-school programs (Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Group 2000). These findings held true for households with children, for households with no children, and across all political party affiliations, racial groups, and age groups. More than two-thirds of those queried considered providing after-school programs more important than cutting taxes (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids 2001).

Both parents and nonparents have a strong concern about safety and supervision that underlies support for extended learning in after-school programs. In response to a survey about child activity during after-school hours, participants said that they worried most about children being left alone and

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unsupervised, as well as about the effects of peer influence and time spent watching television. Only 4 out of 10 participants thought that their communities offered programs to address this need (Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Group 1998). Also, statistics indicate that the hours between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. on school days are peak hours for teens to commit crimes and engage in sexual activity; for innocent children to become crime victims; for 16- and 17-year-olds to be in or cause car accidents; and for youth to smoke, drink, and use drugs (Newman et al. 2000). After-school programs can help curtail this trend by providing secure, alternative environments for young and older children alike.

Such programs offer more than safety; they encourage learning. According to a recent survey, parents of elementary and middle school students want after-school programs that go beyond babysitting. Parents want programs that will teach their children how to use computers; provide arts, music, and drama enrichment; offer service-learning opportunities; and reinforce basic skills such as reading (National Opinion Research Center 1998). The public views after-school programs as a way to give children access to computers and technology, to offer them opportunities to learn and master new skills, to prepare them for productive futures, to generate excitement about learning, and to provide tutoring (Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Group 2000).

Schools are aware of the growing demand for enrichment opportunities. In one survey, 84 percent of elementary school principals believed that children in their communities needed supervision before and after school, and two-thirds believed that the schools should offer after-school activities (National Association of Elementary School Principals 1999). A 1994 Harris poll found that more than half of the teachers surveyed singled out "children who are left on their own after school" as the ones most likely to have difficulties in class (National Commission on Time and Learning 1994); however, school districts tend to develop after-school programming more for elementary school children than for middle and high school students. Families, students, and educators have begun to realize that this needs to change.

In 1994, only 30 percent of all elementary and combined schools offered after-school programs (National Center for Education Statistics 1996). A recent survey found that that number had almost doubled (Academy for Educational Development 2001). Currently, 6 million out of 54 million children in kindergarten through grade 8 participate in before- and after-school programs; however, experts estimate that despite these school-based and community-sponsored programs, an estimated 7 to 15 million latchkey children and youth go home alone after school (Capizzano, Tout, and Adams 2000; National Institute on Out-of-School Time 2000; School-Age Child Care Project 1997; Seppanen et al. 1993). About half of these

children are adolescents who live in communities where after-school programming is not yet a priority for their age group. The study does not reflect figures for high school students who could benefit from organized activities during after-school hours. The indication that 35 percent of 12-year-old children are left alone regularly while their parents work hints at the magnitude of the problem (Fox and Newman 1997).

Benefits of After-School Programs

After-school programs offer tremendous opportunities to extend the school day for students who need academic support in areas such as homework and reading and for students who want to participate in cultural and technological enrichment as well as recreational activities. Research shows that middle and high school students in quality after-school programs demonstrate better academic performance, behavior, and school attendance and have greater expectations for the future than their peers who do not participate. According to the Shell Education Survey, high school youth in after-school programs are at least 5 percent to 10 percent more likely to earn As and Bs, to have attended a cultural event or visited a museum in the past month, to say that they love school or like school a lot, to believe being a good student is important, and to say that their schools are preparing them very well for college and that they plan to continue their education after graduation (Hart Research Associates 1999).

Approximately 8 out of 10 teenagers (79 percent) who participate in after-school programs are A or B students. Teenagers who do not engage in after-school activities are five times more likely to be D students than teenagers who do (YMCA of the USA 2001). About 75 percent of 12- to 17-year-old students who participate in a cocurricular activity are on track academically (i.e., are in the grade expected for their age group), compared with 60 percent of youth in this age group who do not participate in such activities and do not advance through school as expected (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). High school freshmen randomly selected to participate in the Quantum Opportunities after-school and graduation incentives program were twice as likely to continue their education beyond high school and almost three times as likely to have received an award or honor as those not selected. Students omitted from the program were twice as likely to drop out of school (Newman et al. 2000).

In addition, students who participate in cocurricular activities maintain better grades, have lower rates of truancy, attain higher levels of achievement in college, and feel more attached to their schools, according to a 17-year study that followed 1,800 sixth-graders in 10 Michigan school districts through high school and college (Gally 2000). A study of the relationship between parental monitoring, adult supervision, and problem behaviors

among ninth-graders living in California found that youth who lacked adult supervision after school exhibited more problem behaviors—such as substance abuse, risk taking, depressed mood, and poor grades—than youth who were supervised by an adult (Richardson et al. 1993). Students who spend no time in cocurricular activities are 49 percent more likely to use drugs and 37 percent more likely to become teen parents than those who spend one to four hours per week in cocurricular activities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1995). Teenagers who do not participate in after-school programs are nearly three times more likely to skip classes at school than teenagers who do participate. Also, they are three times more likely to use marijuana or other drugs, and they are more likely to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and engage in sexual activity (YMCA of the USA 2001).

Youth Attitudes Toward After-School Programs

When asked where the age-group priority for after-school programming lies, voters placed the priority on programs in elementary schools, followed by middle schools, then high schools; however, this ranking switched when families with middle-school-aged students were asked. Families with youth ages 13 to 18 placed after-school programming in the middle schools as their top priority (Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Group 1998). Clearly, the need for safe and enriching environments for this age group has been identified.

All families are eager to have their children in quality extended-day programs rather than at home watching television or hanging around streets and malls. Students in their pre- and early teen years are growing rapidly, both physically and mentally, but they still need adults on whom they can rely and to whom they can talk. Schools have been central to youth development activities and initiatives because these activities enhance young people's educational success. Keeping schools open before and after school and during the summer provides communities with safe, drug-free places where youth can learn and play. But what do teenagers think?

Many youth agree that after-school programs benefit them. According to the Online After-School Program Poll conducted in 1998 by *Teen PEOPLE*, 78 percent said "they're fun and teach you cool things." Youth want programs that emphasize community service, cooking, film-making and photography, webpage design, music, dance, drama, team sports, fashion design, and beauty. Each of these fields allows for teachable moments in math, reading, technology, and science, as well as in character education and team building. In focus groups conducted by the After-school Alliance, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing

“after-school for all by 2010,” youth replied that after-school programming does the following:

- Offers activities that are more fun than school
- Helps with homework
- Engages them in new and challenging activities
- Tailors activities to specific age groups.

Focus group participants described the difference between after-school programs and the regular school day in terms of not having to worry about teachers “nagging” them. Although after-school programs are similar to school activities in structure, youth find them more fun and interesting. Also, focus group participants responded that after-school programs give them an opportunity to interact with friends whom they do not have time to see during the school day; however, they cautioned that the programs need to be more than a place to “hang out.” The youth interviewed preferred programs that offer learning opportunities and homework help, as well as activities that challenge them and let them try new things. Older youth expressed a concern that after-school programs are designed more for children younger than they are; they enjoy programs that place them with their peers.

Opportunities for Youth Programming

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, authorized under Title X, Part I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, is designed to help school districts fund public schools as community education centers that provide additional academic support to children who need it, expanded learning opportunities that complement the school day, youth mentoring by caring adults in the community, learning opportunities for community members, and a safe place for such activities.¹ In FY 2001, Congress authorized \$846 million for these programs, which give families the confidence that their children are well cared for while parents are at work. The programs also assure families, educators, and the community that youth will receive homework help, academic skills development, and wider community experience.

In 2001, U.S. Department of Education grants supported more than 6,800 21st Century Community Learning Centers in almost 1,600 communi-

¹ Congress is reauthorizing the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Bush administration reforms passed by Congress include opening the eligibility for funding to community-based organizations; decentralizing the program from a federal-to-local discretionary grant program to a formula-grant program from the federal government to the states, which will run discretionary competitions; and targeting low-performing schools for services.

ties. These programs served approximately 1.2 million youth and 400,000 adults before and after school, on the weekends, and during the summer; however, demand for programs and funding exceeds current resources. In the most recent grant competition, only 308 of the 2,783 applications could be funded (for more information, see www.ed.gov/21stccle).

The initiative is implemented nationally through a unique public-private partnership between the U. S. Department of Education and the C. S. Mott Foundation. The Mott Foundation, which has supported community education for almost 70 years, is partnering with the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance, training, best practices identification, access and equity support, and evaluation tools to help communities develop quality programs. Together they have pledged more than \$100 million to this effort over seven years (for more information, see www.mott.org).

As part of the effort to create long-term sustainability of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other after-school initiatives, the Mott Foundation pushes for ongoing communication and public awareness. The foundation—with the U.S. Department of Education, the Entertainment Industry Foundation, the Creative Artists Agency, the Advertising Council, and JCPenney—founded the Afterschool Alliance, a prominent vehicle for amplifying the after-school message. One joint effort is a national public-service advertising campaign titled, “What Is a Hero?” Television, radio, and print ads developed for the Mott Foundation by the Afterschool Alliance aim to build public support for the development of after-school programs and to encourage public involvement in such programs. Networks across the country have donated 30,000 television spots worth almost \$4 million, almost 10 million Web banners worth \$3 million, and thousands of outdoor ad placements. Now the Afterschool Alliance is working with its partners to develop a national campaign designed to make after-school programs more attractive to youth. Other Afterschool Alliance activities targeted at schools and community-based organizations include Lights On!, the Isuzu Afterschool Hero competition, the Afterschool Ambassador program, and the annual Mott/JCPenney survey (for more information, see www.afterschoolalliance.org).

Elements of Effective After-School Programs

Looking at the spectrum of after-school programs, researchers and practitioners have identified some common elements necessary to developing high-quality programs that meet the needs of a diverse population of school-age youth. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has developed standards for after-school programs and K–8 principals (NAESP 1999). The following characteristics of high-quality after-school

programs support children's continued growth, development, and learning throughout preadolescence and adolescence (Snyder and Sickmund 1999):

- Goal setting and strong management
- Long-term planning
- Hiring, retaining, and compensating quality after-school staff members
- Attention to safety, health, and nutrition
- Building effective partnerships
- Enlisting strong family involvement
- Providing extended learning opportunities
- Providing linkages between school and after-school personnel
- Using data for program improvement and accountability, and evaluating program progress and effectiveness.

Established goals that address student outcomes give after-school programs direction and make effectiveness measurable. Quality programming should focus on the achievement of such goals within a solid organizational structure that adapts demonstrated effective management tools and respects legal obligations. To ensure sustainability, programs need reliable funding and support. After-school personnel and participants need to find advocates in the community and need to maintain public interest by providing access and equity for all children and by incorporating youth and program recognition events. Also, people make the difference. Hiring, retaining, and compensating qualified staff, including a dedicated program administrator, will determine the success of any initiative. Ongoing professional development, effective use of volunteers, a low staff-to-student ratio (1:10), and small group size (no more than 30 participants) help keep staff and youth motivated and engaged.

A driving factor behind after-school programming is the desire to give children a safe environment where they can learn and socialize. Any initiative needs to make sure it has adequate space and materials, and should consider the health and nutritional needs of its participants. The community may offer diverse resources toward these ends through collaboration with parents, educators, community residents, law enforcement agencies, service providers, community and faith-based organizations, colleges, businesses, arts and cultural institutions, museums, parks and recreation agencies, and public officials; however, effective partnerships and use of resources require consensus among key stakeholders, which takes discussion and compromise. After-school programming's most important partner is the family. Planning

and activities should involve children and their families, and program administrators should give special attention to the needs of working parents.

More than program management and support, after-school initiatives hinge on what they provide. Engaging activities directed at learning and improving school achievement attract more interest than programs that lack either fun or direction. Linking school and after-school learning gives a program structure, and offering a diverse set of activities keeps youth motivated. Also, service learning provides another way for youth to expand their skills and interests. To support this, school and after-school personnel need to work together to develop programs that will improve student outcomes, especially in areas such as reading, and to maximize the use of school and other community facilities and resources. Finally, assigning goals makes after-school programming measurable; therefore, program administrators should have evaluation tools in place to judge the effectiveness of different activities, to address accountability, and to recommend ways for improvement.

Summary

After-school programs for youth of all ages provide unique opportunities to link school learning with real-world experiences and peer associations. By building on activities that children find fun and exciting—or necessary for future success, such as reading—after-school programs offer youth time to explore their interests in more depth. Whether an SAT preparation course, a one-on-one tutoring session, a service-learning project, an experiment incorporating technology, or an apprenticeship, after-school programs help inhibit risky behavior, increase learning, ensure safety, and ease concerns of working families. James Armstrong, a ninth-grader in Boston's Citizen School program funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, explains it this way:

I set up an electric car race at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in Boston, sold African violet plants, set up a road race, and worked on public safety. Citizen School is a fun place to come and learn new things, and to do things you've never done before.

After-school programs have long provided alternative care options, especially for younger children. Now, the interest and the resources exist to expand to accommodate another need—safe environments for older youth where they can interact with peers and dedicated adults to explore new fields, advance academically, and develop a wide variety of skills and interests. 🐼

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