After School Programs for Older Youth:
Challenges and Promising Practices

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Since the late 1800's, there has been an interest in children's activities after school (Halpern, 2002). During that time, adults simply wanted to provide a space for children to play, typically off school grounds, and did not hold high expectations for what children would accomplish after school (Halpern, 2002). Now, young children have opportunities to participate in academic and enrichment activities, as well as physical and recreational activities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Afterschool Alliance), that are strategically planned by program staff. In fact, the perceived value and potential of after school time has grown since after school programs first emerged, as seen with the increased attendance of programs and the federal government providing funds to support them (Capaldi, 2009; Afterschool Alliance, 2009a). This is due in part to a 14% increase in the amount invested by the federal government in afterschool programs since 2004 (Afterschool Alliance 2009b).

Unfortunately, funding is often only targeted to children in elementary and middle schools, with the belief that more substantial benefits would come from such an investment (Hall & Gruber, 2007). Although high school programs might have the potential to impact students academically and emotionally, less than 10% of the six million children who join after school programs are in high school (Hall & Gruber, 2007). In addition, only fifteen percent of the programs funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program include students from high school (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.) and there are currently no federal funds available that exclusively target this population (Afterschool Alliance, 2009a). However, the Forum for Youth Investment (2003) reports that attention to youth should be maintained as youth get older and enter high school, as they have a unique set of needs and interests that should be supported.

Several factors may contribute to the shortage in programs targeting high school youth. However, it is not due to a lack of interest from older teens. More than half of all teens who

participated in one study by Hall and Gruber (2007) expressed that they would attend an after school program if one was offered in their community or neighborhood. Instead, the shortage of high school after school programs may be due in part to the fact that many programs in general are turned down for federal financial assistance, even when high quality proposals are submitted (National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2001). Moreover, budget cuts have impacted activities available after school for high school students by reducing the number of programs offered or requiring students to pay to participate (Hall & Gruber). This is especially unfortunate for students from low-income families who might not be able to afford the costs of participation.

Therefore, the current literature review will review relevant research regarding after school participation for high school youth. Benefits observed from participation will be presented, as well as the necessity of offering such programming. Considerations for working with older youth after school will also be provided, and challenges will be discussed.

Methods

A review of the scientific literature was conducted in the first half of 2010 to identify current research on after school programs serving high school students. A method similar to Apsler's (2009) in his literature review on evaluation research for after school programs targeting adolescents was followed. This review began with a formal search for articles that had been included in the social science literature using Academic Search Premier, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Results were limited to full text and scholarly (peer-reviewed) journals published between 2000 and 2010. The initial search began by searching within the full text of articles including the following term: "high school after school programs."

Due to the limited amount of scientific research in this area using the above method, a secondary search using the World Wide Web (www.google.com and www.googlescholar.com) revealed several more articles, and included information from websites such as After School Alliance and National

After School Association. In addition, as more general information was reviewed, more specific areas were researched, including "costs of high school after school programs," and "After School Matters program outcomes."

Results

Need For After School Programs Targeting Older Youth

Fortunately, attention to the potential benefits of after school programs for high school youth is increasing. This is especially important given that relatively few teens participate in after school programs and many students who are unsupervised by an adult after school tend to engage in negative behaviors (Tebes et al., 2007). In fact, the times when teenagers typically commit crimes, and experiment with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and sex are during after school program hours (Afterschool Alliance 2009a; Hall & Gruber, 2007). Therefore, after school programs for high school youth could prevent some of these negative behaviors.

In fact, increased attention to high school after school programs is evidenced by a few states making high school programming a priority. Specifically, California has allocated a portion of state funds for after school programs serving this population (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). Additionally, while Indiana has been identified as trailing other states in the number of after school programs available to students (Afterschool Alliance, 2009c), there are a few programs in the state that do target high school students specifically (Indiana Afterschool Network). In addition, beginning in the fall of 2010, more than one-third of all Indiana 21st CCLC programs will serve high school students.

Benefits Observed in Current High School Programs

A few organizations have served the high school population after school for several years and can provide a model on how to provide such programming to students. These programs include: *The After School Corporation (TASC)* based in New York City, and *After School Matters (ASM)*

in Chicago. *TASC* was the first nonprofit organization to create a city-wide after school program for students in kindergarten through 12ᵗʰ grade (The After School Corporation, 2007) and for almost a decade, this organization has served over 40,000 students (Afterschool Alliance, 2008). According to the TASC InfoKit (www.tascorp.org), all of TASC's programs vary in terms of when they are offered (after school, weekends, and summers) but all share similar goals. These include offering worthwhile activities and experiences that increase students' chances of graduating high school and achieving in their post-graduation pursuits. Additionally, these programs include opportunities for high school students to work with younger students, receive mentoring and supervision from community organization supervisors, and participate in apprenticeship programs.

A similar program, *The After School Matters* program, is based in more than 30 public high schools in Chicago, has served more than 20,000 teens, and has been identified as the nation's largest system providing after school services to students in high schools (Afterschool Alliance 2005; Barr, Birmingham, Fornal, Klein, & Piha, 2006; The Bridgespan Group, 2004). This program reflects a partnership between the city, Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Park District, and Chicago Public Library (Afterschool Alliance, 2005). Characteristics of *ASM* include offerings of apprenticeships; job trainings in sports, technology, and communications; listening to teens to determine what they want; and paid stipends to students (Afterschool Alliance 2005; Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007).

Despite limited research on the effectiveness of high school after school programs, there have been a few studies demonstrating promising results and outcomes. Benefits observed from high school after school programs included greater school attendance from their participating students, as well as improved grades, and a greater likelihood that they would graduate on time, especially when students were allowed to gain high school credit during programming (TASC, 2007; Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007). Considering that only about 70% of students

entering high school in the U.S. graduate four years later (TASC; Greene & Forster, 2003), this demonstrates the potential for improving graduation rates by offering after school programming to high school youth. *TASC* also found that students felt more attached to their school, which encouraged interest in their schoolwork and increased motivation. This attachment may have also been present for students involved with *ASM*, as it was reported that they failed fewer classes and the program saw a reduction in dropout rates (Goerge, et al., 2007). In addition, the Afterschool Alliance (2009a) and CityScan (2004) highlighted more academic benefits for older students involved in after school programs. These included an increase in homework assignments completed, increased standardized test scores, increased socialization and problem-solving skills, better study habits and motivation, and a decreased risk of dropping out of school. Moreover, students who participated after school were hopeful about the possibilities for their future and had high expectations they wanted to meet (Afterschool Alliance, 2009a). Lastly, being involved with a high school after school program that offers valuable experiences has been found to decrease the likelihood that students will be involved in dangerous activities or commit crimes (Hall & Gruber, 2007).

Challenges

Although numerous benefits of after school program participation for older youth exist, numerous challenges also exist. Being aware of the potential challenges high school after school programs could face will allow program leaders to be proactive in addressing such challenges before they become too problematic. The Afterschool Alliance (2005; 2009a) as well as the Forum for Youth Investment (2003) have identified several challenges to implementing an after school program for high school students. These challenges can include creating learning environments that are supportive, retaining excellent staff members, and obtaining support from the school building to create an integrated system (After School Alliance, 2005).

In addition to these challenges, keeping older youth engaged after school can be quite challenging (After School Alliance, 2005). Fewer academic enrichment activities are offered outside of school as students get older. Therefore, ensuring students have access and are engaged in programming can be a challenge because of students' transportation needs and greater efforts required to promote activities that are available and appealing (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). For programs that do not offer financial incentives for participation, some students, particularly from low-income families, may be unable to participate because they must work after school or help the family with responsibilities at home. Also, students may not be as motivated to participate if they are required to pay a fee to attend programming. Lastly, there may be a perception that after school programs are not developmentally appropriate for high school students. To help change this perception, it is suggested to make activities developmentally appropriate and more specialized to match their interests and capabilities (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003).

Some suggestions for keeping youth engaged after school include: providing opportunities for students to be leaders and gain real world experience, allowing flexibility in attendance, having the program in an accessible location, and integrating with the school and community (Afterschool Alliance, 2009a). By increasing youth involvement in the design and implementation of the program, teens can gain or improve skills in conflict resolution, planning, communication, and decision making (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California, 2004).

Promising Practices of High Quality High School After School Programs

Several elements of high quality after school programs serving high school youth have been identified in the research which has been found to overcome these challenges. This section will discuss in detail the importance of choosing appropriate activities, efforts to recruit students, offering programs that promote preparation for post-graduation pursuits, and hiring professional and knowledgeable staff. Although some promising practices found to be effective for younger

youth may be applicable to older youth, the additional strategies outlined below must be employed, as activities offered to older youth must look different to meet the varied interests and needs of high school students. In addition, teens, as opposed to younger youth, often have the choice of how to spend time after school, and typically do not want to be involved in something that does not offer some perceived benefit to them. Therefore, after school programs serving older youth should consider the promising practices outline for out of school time, as well as strategies specifically geared towards older youth.

Program Activities

It is not a surprising fact that high school youth desire social time with their friends (TASC, 2007). If peers are not drawn to the program, or if there is very little downtime for students to talk to their friends, students may not attend. Allowing some time during the transition between the end of the school day and beginning of the program might provide teens the time to meet with friends before participating in a program activity. In addition, activities planned by program staff should allow students to interact with each other. In fact, Hall and Gruber (2007) found that important aspects in an after school program identified by teens included the following: having fun, having the chance to meet new people, and having some of their friends attend.

Activities offered for high school students should also look different than activities for elementary and middle school students as they are at a different developmental level and have various interests and needs. However, it is important to remember that activities in after school programs can still offer high school youth the chance to be successful academically, and increase their connection to the school environment (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Yet, it is important to remember that teens have a desire to learn new skills that are different than what they are exposed to during the school day (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003) and active participation could be

encouraged by offering activities that are not consistently available within their classes (Lauver, 2004).

In addition to academic content, program staff should seek to establish a program that meets the interests of the high school students. This could be done by surveying students on an ongoing basis or allowing youth to contribute to program planning and decision making (Hall & Gruber, 2007). Students can also be asked to serve on a Youth Advisory Committee, allowing students to have representation in staff planning meetings, as well as providing leadership opportunities to youth. Another option is to offer a choice of various activities to students that are organized into eight-week blocks (Lauver, 2004). This might prevent students becoming bored with activities, as well as allow some flexibility when students do attend.

After school programs should consider providing guidance to students in regard to their options after high school. One way to do this is through apprenticeship opportunities (Barr, Birmingham, Fornal, Klein, & Piha, 2006). An apprenticeship program could be created to provide students with knowledge about different career fields, as well as offer training in job skills that would benefit them in the future (Capaldi, 2009). Such an opportunity would allow students to feel a sense of independence, especially if they are compensated for their work or contributions in an apprenticeship program (Hall & Gruber, 2007). This experience might also increase students' interest in the after school program if this type of opportunity incorporated a chance to interact with several community and business leaders, and provided exposure to quality experiences in places outside of students' neighborhoods. At-risk students would also likely benefit most from this type of experience as they typically do not receive much job training prior to graduation (Capaldi).

Moreover, activities and opportunities provided by high school programs should be highly structured (Capaldi, 2009). This is contrary to the popular belief that high school programs should

be unstructured, free time for teens. Programs should be structured because negative outcomes could result from unstructured activities such as students displaying delinquent and antisocial behaviors and experiencing higher levels of victimization (Mahoney, 2000; Capaldi).

Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Several strategies have been identified that could help attract high school students to attend after school programs. These strategies include providing financial incentives for attendance and participation, offering school credit that helps students graduate on time, offering alternative activities that meet school requirements for graduation, providing flexibility in attendance, and making attempts to acquire sustained funding so there is not a lapse in programming for students who age out of elementary or middle school programs (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Ferber & Gaines, 2006). In terms of time commitment, allowing students to attend programming 10-15 hours a week is considered a reasonable and attainable goal for high school students according to the Forum for Youth Investment (2003). In this way, students do not have to worry about being penalized or missing a lot of information if they were unable to attend every hour of programming.

In addition, more efforts may be needed to attract and retain at-risk students, as they are likely to not consistently attend high school programming (Capaldi, 2009). However, it was also suggested by Capaldi that programs not try to aggregate at-risk youth, and to keep the after school group size a small one, as large groups could create harmful effects and lead to more behavior problems. To attract at-risk students, program leaders could build relationships with teachers to help identify and encourage the students to attend (Lauver, 2004). Additionally, the program could designate a certain number of slots to be filled by students who are at-risk or hard to reach, so that they can receive the benefits of programming, and hopefully become more engaged with school (Lauver), as well as pro-social peers.

Program Staff Characteristics

The staff and instructors employed by after school programs play a more critical role in high school programs as compared to elementary school programs. Positive and supportive relationships with staff can keep students coming to the program and encourage active participation (Hall & Gruber, 2007). Those in charge of hiring staff should have a system in place to identify and hire program staff who have been well-trained to lead teenagers and who are knowledgeable in the subject or field they are teaching (Capaldi, 2009). Seniority among classroom teachers should not be the deciding factor when determining which teachers (if any) are to be employed by the program (Barr, Birmingham, Fornal, Klein, & Piha, 2006). A high ratio of adults to students has also been suggested to be a promising practice (Capaldi), along with ensuring that students have access to the staff (Barr et al., 2006). This could be done by allowing for some time where staff are free to interact with students on an informal level (Barr et al.).

Summary

After school programs have traditionally served students in elementary and middle schools, with students "aging out" by the time they reach high school. However, in the past few years, there has been an increase in the attention given to the potential benefits for after school programs for older youth. Teens have expressed interest in having after school programs available, and getting students involved after school could prevent exposure to unsafe and risky behaviors. Several academic, personal, and social benefits have been found for high school students who regularly participate in after school programs. Academic benefits typically include: improvements in grades and school attendance, greater likelihood of graduating on time, lower risk of dropping out, more high school assignments completed, better study habits, and increased test scores. On the other hand, social benefits include: increased in socialization and problem-solving skills, more hope about the future, and students creating higher expectations for themselves.

Despite the benefits, after school programs for older youth do face numerous challenges. However, if leaders take the time to be aware of and recognize potential challenges, they can be effective at minimizing the effects on the program. Specifically, one challenge might include creating a program that appeals to teens. Solutions to this might include surveying students to find out what they want to know more about or where they want to increase their skills. In addition, reducing or eliminating costs to students, making it accessible, and being flexible with attendance, may make teens more able to consistently participate. Providing an incentive for participation, such as paid stipends, could also reach students who might have otherwise had to earn money working at a part time job after school.

Overall, the future of after school programs for older youth appears promising. While the information on how to best serve teens is somewhat limited, program leaders can take what is already known to build a foundation for a successful program. After school programs have the potential to increase graduation rates and expose teens to experiences they might not have otherwise. Therefore, after school programs for older youth should continue to be provided, and more research on promising practices for this population should be determined.

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