

State and local policy innovations that promote increased investments in institutions, community programs, and youth services are developing across the country and can inform out-of-school-time strategies for older youth.

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Supporting older youth: What's policy got to do with it?

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WITH THE EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT shifting to secondary schools and conversations about dropout rates, high school redesign, and workforce readiness taking place in government agencies, schools, universities, businesses, and foundations across the country, teenagers have become a focus of serious policy discussion. It is imperative that the evolving conversation not simply consider school reform or the challenges presented by teens' nonschool hours. Too often we respond to youth issues with fragmented and disjointed responses, lacking a clear plan for promoting positive outcomes. The policy conversation should be about—and in some states and communities it increasingly is about—what it will take for young people to be ready for college, ready for work, and ready for life.

The good news is that pockets of innovation are developing in districts, communities, and states across the country as ambitious

public and private agencies and creative individuals push the envelope in terms of where, when, and how teens learn and develop. Noteworthy policy examples are emerging at the administrative/regulatory and legislative levels, informing the design and implementation of services as well as broader policy initiatives and mandates. This chapter begins at the service delivery level, highlighting specific policy innovations related to teens' involvement in out-of-school-time activities. We then broaden our lens to look at three principles we believe can help ensure that youth policy supports the full range of older youth's developmental, social, and economic needs.

Maximizing out-of-school-time for older youth

The nonschool hours are an underused tool in supporting older youth in their transition to adulthood. High-quality programs can help young people become ready for college, work, and life, but such opportunities decline with age, and older youth participation is inconsistent.¹ Given competing demands on many teens' time and a host of other developmental realities, effective strategies for engaging high schoolers look much different than they do for their younger counterparts, and those differences have both programmatic and policy implications.²

We have chosen to highlight five issues that demonstrate how policies related to out-of-school time can be aligned with the developmental needs of older youth: financial incentives, school credit, alternative pathways to credentials, participation requirements, and funding. We then broaden our discussion beyond administrative and regulatory policies that inform program implementation and beyond out-of-school time to discuss several principles we believe can help guide youth policy development at all levels and on a range of issues.

Financial incentives

Idleness is not the norm for teenagers in the afternoon. Many teens, particularly those from low-income families, have no choice but to work or take on family responsibilities after school. At the same time,

employment opportunities for low-income teens are on the decline. Between 2000 and 2003, the annual average number of employed sixteen to twenty-four year olds declined by nearly 1.1 million, or 5.2 percent, far exceeding employment declines for all other age groups.³ While some work is considered healthy for this age group, studies suggest that working twenty hours per week or more is linked to sleep loss, reduced school performance, and health risks.⁴ Programs that provide young people with career development opportunities through internships, job shadowing, employment training, and on-the-job experience can address two important developmental tasks simultaneously: preparing young people for adulthood and the world of work and compensating them for their time.

After School Matters (ASM) is a citywide partnership between the City of Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Park District, the Chicago Public Library, and the Chicago Department of Children and Youth Services. Through this partnership, ASM provides three-day-a-week paid apprenticeships to over four thousand high school youth in a number of creative and professional disciplines. Apprenticeships, led primarily by adult professionals working in each discipline, are intentionally designed to lead to summer or even longer-term employment. In addition to providing stipends, ASM offers real-world experiences and environments, access to mentors who are experts in an area of interest, and a schedule that appropriately accommodates the realities of teenagers' weekly responsibilities and commitments.

The After-School Corporation (TASC) in New York has developed an academic support and career development program using Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds to target high school students at risk of dropping out of school. The program engages cohorts of teens during the after-school hours and the summer in activities geared toward academic achievement, career planning, and work experience. Participants receive stipends for internships around the city at places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mt. Sinai Hospital, the United Nations, and local middle and elementary schools. They are supported by fellowship advisers in their high schools who use a case manager approach to advise on career planning and academic improvement and help coordinate and maximize teens' school and out-of-school activities.

These programs and others that provide financial incentives to participating youth have done so by blending funding streams and building creative partnerships with the business community and other agencies. Placing a greater emphasis on career development in out-of-school-time programs and ensuring flexibility in how funds are spent will help more programs compensate young people for their time. This move is both developmentally appropriate and strategic if we hope to offer compelling after-school options for older youth.

School credit

Teens want to develop skills and participate in opportunities that support their goals for the future by helping them understand, prepare for, and navigate their post-high school options. And they want their nonschool hours to count toward these goals.⁵ While many school districts around the country have put in place community service requirements and allow students to fulfill them through community-based activities, after-school programs are rarely considered formal learning environments where academic credit can be earned. There are some exceptions, however, where community-based resources are being brought to bear on formal learning in concrete ways.

Camdenton, Missouri, has used 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) funds to launch an extended-hours program called Credit Recovery that enables high school students who have failed one core subject to regain credit in that subject and get back on track toward graduation. Students work with certified teachers who use a range of support strategies, including discussion groups and individual tutoring instruction. The course work is self-paced, individualized, and intentionally designed to align with core curriculum courses.

Educational Video Center helps New York City public high school students earn school credit each year through its semester-long after-school Documentary Workshop. Students learn to shoot and edit documentaries on issues important to their lives as urban teens, and in the process, they develop skills in media analysis, script writing, interviewing, editing, camera work, and video documentary production using state-of-the-art equipment. At the end of each semester, students present their work in public screenings

and are assessed in portfolio roundtables. The tapes and viewer guides are then made available for public distribution.

These two examples and others around the country, where students earn credits for work accomplished outside the school day and school building, are possible only through strong partnerships between schools and out-of-school-time providers. Creative leaders in the school and after-school settings are working together to identify and overcome potential administrative obstacles, discuss student needs, and align curricula. These kinds of relationships can be facilitated or discouraged based on the accessibility and flexibility of funding opportunities and the graduation expectations and mandates of the school system.

Alternative pathways to credentials

Relatively isolated policy discussions have taken place over the past decade about the idea of competency- or proficiency-based assessment. However, with the spotlight on high school dropout rates and employer concerns about workforce readiness on the rise, these discussions are likely to move into the mainstream. As they do, the full range of school- and community-based learning environments where young people spend time should be part of the conversation, particularly if, in order to graduate, students must demonstrate mastery of both academic subject matter and skills like teamwork, communication, and cultural competence. Research about adolescent time use suggests that youth in voluntary out-of-school-time programs report very high levels of both concentration and motivation compared with other places they spend time.⁶ These settings should be taken seriously as additional contexts for learning and for developing and demonstrating mastery.

Oregon has had in place since 1993 the Proficiency-Based Admissions Standards System (PASS), an effort to align the K–12 education system with university admissions by awarding certificates of mastery to high school students that both help them graduate and contribute toward the college admissions process. In 2002, the state board of education approved a proficiency-based credit system, where districts can award diploma credits based on

the satisfactory completion of work that takes place in an alternative program, which may include career-related experiences and project-based learning that takes place outside the school day or school building.⁷

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, along with several states, cities, and other national partners like the National Urban League and the National Association of Manufacturing, are working together to promote the Equipped for the Future Workforce Readiness Credential, intended to become a national credential to assess whether young people have a solid foundation in the skills and abilities they will need to succeed in the workplace. The credential would be voluntary and portable across states and is not intended to compete with the high school diploma. Earning a credential would require successfully demonstrating a range of interpersonal, decision-making, and communication skills—skills that many out-of-school-time programs are well positioned to help students develop.⁸

While Oregon's PASS program remains unique and a national credential like the one described would take years to implement and presents a range of complex policy challenges, discussions about competency-based assessment are increasing, as is the urgency to do something to address the fact that too few young people leave high school ready for work, college, and life. The full range of learning environments where young people spend time warrants close consideration in a competency-based system, where what matters is whether students master skills, not where they develop them.

Participation requirements

By high school, most teens have some degree of freedom to manage their schedules, and many have increased family and work responsibilities. This increased discretion means they are likely to be more selective about when and where they choose to participate in voluntary activities, which has important implications for scheduling and attendance requirements. Funding and other administrative regulations should reflect the real participation patterns of teens and the need for greater flexibility.

The After-School Corporation (TASC) allows teens to check in with after-school program staff on days they are attending an internship with a local employer and still be recognized as participating in an after-school activity. This strategy honors the fact that teens are using their time constructively and facilitates regular connections between teens and staff liaisons who play a case manager role, connecting school and after-school activities and advising students on college and career planning.

The California Department of Education created tiered participation targets for 21st CCLC-funded high school programs that link with different levels of expected outcomes. So rather than expect all participants to attend programs four or five times a week, as is required of elementary programs, high school programs are asked to set targets for engaging a certain percentage of teens for whom program expectations are higher and who therefore will attend frequently, another percentage who will attend less frequently and for whom expectations are adjusted, and so on.

Opening the doors to programs does not guarantee student participation, particularly when it comes to older youth and those at risk for school failure. Attendance-based funding regulations should take into account developmental differences in participation, and checks and balances should be put in place so that programs are not incentivized to recruit less vulnerable or younger participants who are likely to attend programs more frequently.

Funding

Efforts to substantially expand out-of-school time opportunities for older youth face a basic policy challenge in that existing funding streams disproportionately support younger children. The largest federal funding stream, the Child Care Development Block Grant, covers only low-income children ages twelve and younger.⁹ Proposition 49 in California will infuse over \$500 million into elementary and middle school programming. While Department of Education 21st CCLC funds can be used to support programs at elementary, middle, and high schools, only 6 percent of currently funded centers serve high school students.¹⁰

While this disparity likely stems in part from local programs deciding how to target limited resources, it may also be explained by a legislative requirement that at least 40 percent of students in participating schools be eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Because of their size and broader geographical reach, far fewer high schools meet this threshold than elementary or middle schools. While states can apply for a waiver or set priorities for serving certain populations, this requirement is likely part of the reason that so few high schools receive these funds. Despite regulatory and other challenges, the following examples show how public and private agencies are finding creative ways to secure funding for high school after-school programming.

California put in place a formal legislative set-aside in 2002 to ensure funding would be available for high school programs. As a result, the legislation funded sixteen after-school programs beginning in 2003 using federal 21st CLCC dollars. In addition to setting aside funds for this age group, the legislation called for a commitment to capacity-building support so that this effort would be sure to yield important lessons about the unique programming needs of high school students.¹¹

Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) is a workforce development intermediary that contracts federal Workforce Investment Act dollars out to twenty-six different youth organizations around the city that serve over four thousand youth annually through after-school and summer career development programs. The logistical challenges of applying for WIA funds and complying with federal regulations mean that intermediaries like PYN (and TASC, discussed earlier) can play an important role in helping individual after-school programs access and successfully use these dollars.

A commitment to funding high school afterschool could help bridge gaps among multiple funding streams. Unlike most funding for youth programs, created in response to specific problems (for example, gang diversion, pregnancy prevention, or employment training), after-school funding is framed around a specific period of time. By approaching young people's lives by time of day rather than depth of problem, mandates for high school afterschool could be used to tap both after-school and other sources like the WIA.

Principles for effective youth policies

While focused efforts to increase the quality and quantity of out-of-school-time opportunities for older youth are important, it is equally important that out-of-school time not be considered an isolated policy issue.¹² The fundamental goal behind this and other important yet often disconnected conversations is to better prepare young people for productive futures by ensuring they make the transition to adulthood ready to meet the demands. Effective youth policies reflect an overarching vision that is about changing lives: a vision that addresses a range of risk and protective factors, simultaneously supports discrete programs and builds coherent pathways to success, and recognizes that children and youth grow up in families and communities.¹³ The following principles and examples illustrate how states and communities are working to make supports for children and youth more effective, accessible, and connected to families and communities.

Focus on youth's strengths and assets, not just discrete problems

Traditionally, public officials have approached youth policy by tackling one problem at a time: youth violence one year, juvenile delinquency another, substance abuse the next. While we have become quite sophisticated at measuring and in some cases preventing the behaviors we want youth to avoid, most states and localities are not in the habit of measuring and promoting behaviors we know will help them prepare for successful futures. There are, however, some exceptions worth noting.

Louisiana, Maine, and some other states are setting positive developmental results or goals for young people that cut across academic, social, and physical well-being. Many states are also finding ways to track positive development, allowing policymakers and the public to base decisions on what it is they want to see, as opposed to what they want to avoid. In Vermont, state agencies are part of a public-private partnership to develop, disseminate, and use data on positive indicators; their framework includes outcomes of well-being, positive social indicators, measurement tools, legislation, and community-based data collection strategies.¹⁴

Build comprehensive, coordinated efforts that cross traditional lines

A survey of state legislators found that building a coherent message on children's policy is challenging "because there is no clearly discernible legislative agenda for children and families; rather, a multitude of individuals and organizations with different agendas are sending mixed messages about what is best for children."¹⁵ With legislatures organized into committees and executive branches into departments, each responsible for different policies and programs, policymakers are forced to make decisions that may not reflect a clear understanding of the nature of the problem or a complete view of relevant initiatives already under way. This challenge is compounded by fragmentation within the advocacy community, which tends to be organized around specific issues and policies. Weaving the existing tangle of services into a seamless web of supports requires working across issues as well as departmental, committee, and sometimes partisan lines.

In response to this challenge, many states are building children's cabinets, joint legislative committees, or other structures to improve coordination and communication, and many are using tools like youth budgets and report cards to illustrate their investments and progress across a range of programs and outcome areas. The Louisiana Children's Cabinet, for example, was created by the legislature in 1998 and includes secretaries from several relevant departments (including education, social services, and public safety), a senator, a representative, and members of the state's supreme court and board of education. The group produces a children's budget each year and works across its membership to improve and coordinate services. Maryland's Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families is charged with recommending new laws, regulations, and budget priorities to improve children's well-being. It also searches out and makes recommendations to remedy interdepartmental gaps, inconsistencies, or inefficiencies in children and youth services and informs the legislature and public on relevant issues.¹⁶

Bring youth perspectives to the table

“If you had a problem in the black community, and you brought together a group of white people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. In fact there’d probably be a public outcry. But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us.”¹⁷ This seventeen year old articulates a critical challenge facing policymakers charged with making decisions that affect the lives of a largely non-voting constituency. While it is relatively easy to bring in a single young person to consult on a policy decision, involving large numbers of youth is difficult. Training and support are needed so that young people are well versed on the issues and the policymaking process and so that the adults are prepared to fully engage and work in partnership with the young people.

In addition to investing in civic education to encourage lifelong civic involvement and create avenues for youth to share their perspectives, many states and localities have created youth councils or other advisory bodies designed to create meaningful roles for youth in shaping policies that affect them. Youth members of Maine’s Legislative Youth Advisory Council, for example, conduct public hearings, draft bills, and make recommendations on proposals that are under consideration by the legislature. In 2003, New Mexico’s legislature created the New Mexico Youth Alliance, which consists of 112 youth from across the state, to advise the governor, lieutenant governor, and legislature on youth policy issues. Recruiting young people who reflect the diversity of the state or community in question is an important consideration, as is providing the resources and infrastructure necessary for these kinds of groups to be more than symbolic.

New public ideas

While being intentional about all of these principles and building a holistic policy approach to supporting older youth may seem

unrealistic and challenging to take to scale, entertaining alternative public ideas about what is possible is a hallmark of an effective democracy. According to Moore, the core responsibility of those who deal in public policy “is not simply to discover as objectively as possible what people want for themselves and then to determine and implement the best means of satisfying those wants. It is also to provide the public with alternative visions of what is desirable and possible, to stimulate deliberation about them, provoke a reexamination of premises and values, and thus to broaden the range of potential responses and deepen society’s understanding of itself.”¹⁸

It is only when we effectively engage the full range of stakeholders committed to supporting children and youth that we will develop ideas that will go beyond the status quo. Preparing young people for the future requires more than improving high schools or expanding out-of-school-time opportunities; it requires the full engagement of all community institutions, small and large, public and private, in supporting learning and development.

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