



Issue Brief No. 37

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The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the second in a series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing older youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. The four issue briefs address workforce and career development; recruitment and retention of older youth; dropout prevention; and mentoring. These issue briefs examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle and high school youth, families and communities.

Afterschool: The Challenges of Recruiting and Retaining Older Youth

Afterschool programs across the country provide critically needed services to our nation's children and families, however, many afterschool providers find it difficult to recruit and retain children once they enter middle school and high school. Teens offer afterschool providers a special set of challenges, which they must overcome in order to attract and retain participants. For example, older youth are more autonomous, busier, better able and more likely to articulate specific needs, and less appeased by activities designed for a general audience. While older youth can clearly benefit from participation in afterschool, programs must employ innovative strategies to attract and keep older youth engaged.

Older Youth Need Afterschool

Older children are more likely to spend time unsupervised in the hours afterschool. Nearly 10 million children in grades 6-12 are responsible for taking care of themselves afterschool.ⁱ Without safe, supervised activities, older youth are at particular risk of engaging in a variety of unsafe behaviors during this time. Studies consistently show that the hours between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. are the peak hours for juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and sex.ⁱⁱ

Afterschool programs provide academic benefits to older youth during a period when they may be losing interest or feeling disengaged from school. Studies show that when older youth participate in afterschool programs they demonstrate:^{iii, iv}

- Increased school attendance
- Improved homework completion
- Increased standardized test scores
- Increased socialization and problem solving skills
- Improved study habits and motivation
- Lowered risk of dropping out of school

Furthermore, older youth who regularly participate in afterschool programs report feeling more optimistic about their future and have higher expectations for themselves, including an increased interest in attending college and exploring possible career paths.^v

Older Youth Face Distinct Barriers to Participation in Afterschool

Typically, young children participate in afterschool programs for the enrichment opportunities as well as to satisfy their family's child care needs while parents are at work. However, as children enter adolescence, the immediate need for child care is diminished, and there can be the perception that afterschool programs are no longer needed or appropriate. Although older students still need mentoring, enrichment and guidance in a positive social environment, participation in afterschool programs declines when children transition from elementary school to middle school.^{vi}

Financial constraints play a role in afterschool options for older youth. Despite the need, no federal program specifically targets afterschool for the older youth population. And, due to limited funding, local communities have been forced to make difficult choices about how to use afterschool resources. Understandably, communities often make their youngest students the first priority, but this leaves older youth with few afterschool options. In some cases federal resources, by law, can not be used for older youth, in others it's a lack of sufficient resources or targeting that makes it difficult to direct the funding towards programs for older youth.^{vii}

- The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC): 36 percent of centers serve middle school students, but only 20 percent of these centers exclusively target this population; 15 percent of centers serve high school students, with only five percent of centers exclusively targeting high school students.
- The Child Care Development Fund: Child care vouchers can be used to support afterschool programs, but may only be used for children ages 5-12.
- Supplemental Educational Services (SES): SES vouchers support after school tutoring for children targeted under Title I, which is similarly focused on the lower grades.

Afterschool and youth development programs look and feel different for older youth than for elementary school age kids. Teenagers are looking for programs that foster personal growth, provide skill-based learning, mentorship from adults and service learning opportunities.
– **School's Out Washington, 2008 Annual Report**

While additional funding is badly needed, other barriers exist. Many older youth face external pressures such as the need for paid employment, caring for family or other outside responsibilities, making it difficult to justify participating in enrichment activities after school. Older youth may be hesitant to participate in a program that they see as either an extension of the school day or as a place for younger children and considered “uncool” by their peers.^{viii} Often, older youth want free, unstructured time with their friends, and believe that afterschool programs don't relate to their needs.^{ix} Further, some afterschool programs face difficulty retaining the older youth who do join. Whether

stemming from biases, disinterest in the program, or alternative options for spending their time, many afterschool participants abandon their programs during the middle and high school years.

In summary, barriers to afterschool participation by older youth include:

- *Employment*: Approximately 40 percent of 16 and 17 year olds work during the school year, and one-quarter of these work 20 or more hours a week.^x
- *Disinterest/ Boredom*: Twenty-five percent of older youth afterschool participants drop out of their programs within two months citing disinterest in the activities.^{xi}
- *The “Relax” Factor*: Sixty-five percent of afterschool nonparticipants say that they prefer to simply hang out afterschool rather than extend their learning day.^{xii}
- *Family Responsibilities*: Twenty percent of youth not currently participating in an afterschool program report that family responsibilities prevent them from attending afterschool programs.^{xiii}
- *Transportation*: Many youth face difficulties in finding transportation to and from afterschool facilities. Forty-nine percent of parents of afterschool nonparticipants say that transportation is the main reason their child does not participate in afterschool programs.^{xiv}
- *Financial Constraints*: The resources for afterschool programs for older youth simply do not exist in many communities.^{xv}

Afterschool Programs Employ Innovative Strategies to Keep Older Youth Engaged

Successful afterschool programs have developed innovative strategies to attract and keep older youth engaged. Techniques such as promoting leadership and real world experience, providing opportunities to socialize and do what is of most interest, offering flexible attendance policies and accessible locations and acting as a bridge between school and community are among those employed by programs.

It’s great when you can teach the older generations about this history and they get excited. I never thought I could teach other people and they would listen. But they do and it feels good. – Christina Tilghman, Youth Guide, MYTOWN

Promoting leadership and real world experience: Afterschool programs can attract older youth by providing opportunities for generating income and assuming leadership roles. Through paid internships and/or access to real world experiences, afterschool programs can address the desires for increased responsibility and leadership.

- **MYTOWN (Multicultural Youth Tour of What's Now)** is a youth employment and development program in Boston, Massachusetts. The program educates low and moderate-income teens about the history of their families, neighborhoods and the city and then trains the

youth to lead walking tours and workshops for over 2,000 Boston residents and visitors each year. By providing youth with paid work experience, a strong sense of community involvement and a sense of worth, MYTOWN effectively engages older youth’s desires for employment and responsibility and has positive effects on both the program participants and the community at large.

- **The ICAN Peer Leadership Program** in Chandler, Arizona works with students ages 13-18 from an economically disadvantaged area. ICAN's Peer Leadership Program works closely with the Chandler Police Department Gang Unit to challenge a group of teens to develop and apply leadership skills in self-run community service projects. Since 2006, the participants have been tackling underage drinking by establishing a community awareness and prevention campaign throughout Chandler. The ICAN program, which also provides daily homework help, transportation and educational field trips, maintains a high retention rate by addressing the desire for responsibility and leadership opportunities among its teen participants.

We think it's great what they're doing. Alcohol is one of the biggest problems we have in this community and this helps keep it out of the parties.

– **Detective R. Kelley, Chandler Arizona Police on the ICAN Peer Leadership Program.**

Studies show that older youth will remain in afterschool programs if they attend with their friends and the programs center around their interests.^{xvi} Successful afterschool programs offer older youth the chance to participate in a wide variety of activities with their peers, while getting the supports and supervision they need, such as help with homework and engaging in a variety of learning experiences.^{xvii}

- **Harlem RBI** is a youth development program in East Harlem, New York City that utilizes a combination of sports, academics and a team environment to teach and inspire youth to recognize their potential. In Harlem RBI's Team Enrichment Program, each teen plays on a baseball or softball team from January to August and can also choose to play baseball or softball in the fall. This provides a year round engagement in the program, ensuring that teens will remain involved in the program and receive both the physical and social benefits of playing on a team. The Team Enrichment Program also takes into account the growth of participants by increasing opportunities and responsibility as youth rise through the program. This innovative, sports-infused program ensures that its participants' needs are addressed and has a participant retention rate of over 90 percent.

Offering flexible attendance policies and accessible locations: Flexibility is a key component in afterschool programming for older youth, both in attendance requirements and activities. Older youth who have other obligations such as work or family are more likely participate in afterschool programs that don't have rigid attendance policies. Programs that can provide transportation, are easily accessible or organize buddy systems so that teens can walk or ride with friends are also more likely to enroll and retain older youth.^{xviii}

- **The Ann Arbor Teen Center Neutral Zone** in Ann Arbor, Michigan offers older youth opportunities to engage creatively and socially in their community. The Neutral Zone is a drop-in program open to all teens in the Ann Arbor community where members can come in when they have time to participate. The activities are mostly self-run, offering responsibility and flexibility to participants

resulting in high recruitment and retention rates. Adolescents involved in the Neutral Zone can choose from more than 21 programs including community

Experience has shown that teens become interested and remain invested in programs if they are given the opportunity to serve in authentic leadership roles and initiate new ideas.

– **John Weiss,**
Executive Director of
the Ann Arbor Teen
Center Neutral Zone

leadership, education, literary arts, music performance, visual arts and technology. For example, in the Youth Owned Records program, teens create and produce their own music and participants in the Volume Literary Arts Program write and perform slam poetry.

Acting as a bridge between school and community: By building a strong network that includes youth, parents, schools, and the community, afterschool programs can ensure that more youth are willing and able to participate. Successful afterschool programs partner with community based organizations to provide engaging programming and offer teens support and mentoring outside of the school day. By promoting strong relationships among youth, schools, families and the community, afterschool can recruit

participants and provide compelling programs that will keep older youth in attendance. Further, afterschool staff who show that they enjoy being a part of activities and reflect the genders and ethnicities of participants tend to be the best at engaging students and ensuring their retention.^{xix}

- **The Brooklyn College Community Partnership (BCCP)** is a network of afterschool programs that provide youth from several Brooklyn area schools with exposure to college, giving them increased opportunities in the fields of art and technology. The program connects the youth to college students and faculty who serve as mentors and help the students explore future careers and develop academic skills. The BCCP's Arts Network provides youth with hands-on experience in various art forms and its Project Peace program involves youth in community service activities that help youth develop art and writing skills. The BCCP also offers participants academic tutoring and assistance with the college application process. Here, positive role models with previous academic success provide youth with an environment that is beneficial both to their current academic situation and their future prospects in college and beyond.

Conclusion

Although the benefits of afterschool programs for older youth are abundant, and awareness of the need for afterschool is growing, many programs still struggle to recruit and retain older students. Programs know that in order to be successful they need to balance the interests and wants of older youth with the need to provide a safe and enriching environment. Fortunately, afterschool providers across the country are developing strategies and techniques that build on the interests of adolescents and minimize barriers to participation, so that kids stay engaged in afterschool throughout their middle and high school years. These successful programs are stimulating the minds of our nation's teens and preparing them for the future, while helping ensure that more teens will have access to afterschool programs that are adept at fulfilling their interests while also meeting their needs.

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