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After-School Programs

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The Growing Popularity of and Investment in After-School Programs Heightens the Need for Better Information and Closer Study

Opportunities for children and youth to engage in activities during out-of-school hours come in various shapes, sizes and flavors.

At one end of the spectrum are highly structured, five-day-a-week, school-based programs focused broadly on encouraging and supporting academic and social development. At the other end are assorted activities and services available on a less regular basis and/or designed around specific needs, interests and priorities – ranging from providing tutoring and homework help for struggling students to reducing delinquency, substance abuse and other problem behaviors.

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in the number of after-school options available to students, with public schools taking the lead role in developing such programs – typically in collaboration with community youth-service agencies.

The federal government has gotten into the business of supporting after-school programs, too, especially in low-income communities. Funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, an after-school program established by the Clinton administration, has increased dramatically over the years, from \$1 million in 1997 to nearly \$1 billion last year.

Clearly, well-structured and comprehensive after-school programming is increasingly viewed as a unique and essential component of efforts to promote learning and social development for children of all backgrounds.

But despite its rapid growth, enormous appeal and clear potential, the after-school movement so far lacks a solid basis for decisionmaking in areas ranging from program design to funding to the nature and extent of demand for programs and services.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* summarizes three recent reports that provide useful insights into what is known – and what isn't – about the role, value and impact of after-school programs.



Critical Hours: Afterschool Programs and Educational Success

(Nellie Mae Education Foundation, May 2003, <http://www.nmefdn.org/CriticalHours.htm>)

After-school programs can be a powerful vehicle for promoting academic, social and emotional development, particularly for youngsters between the ages of 10 and 14.

That's the conclusion of this report by Beth M. Miller, senior research advisor to the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, based on an extensive review of research findings, program evaluations, and current knowledge and theories in education, child development, psychology and other fields. Her analysis found that:

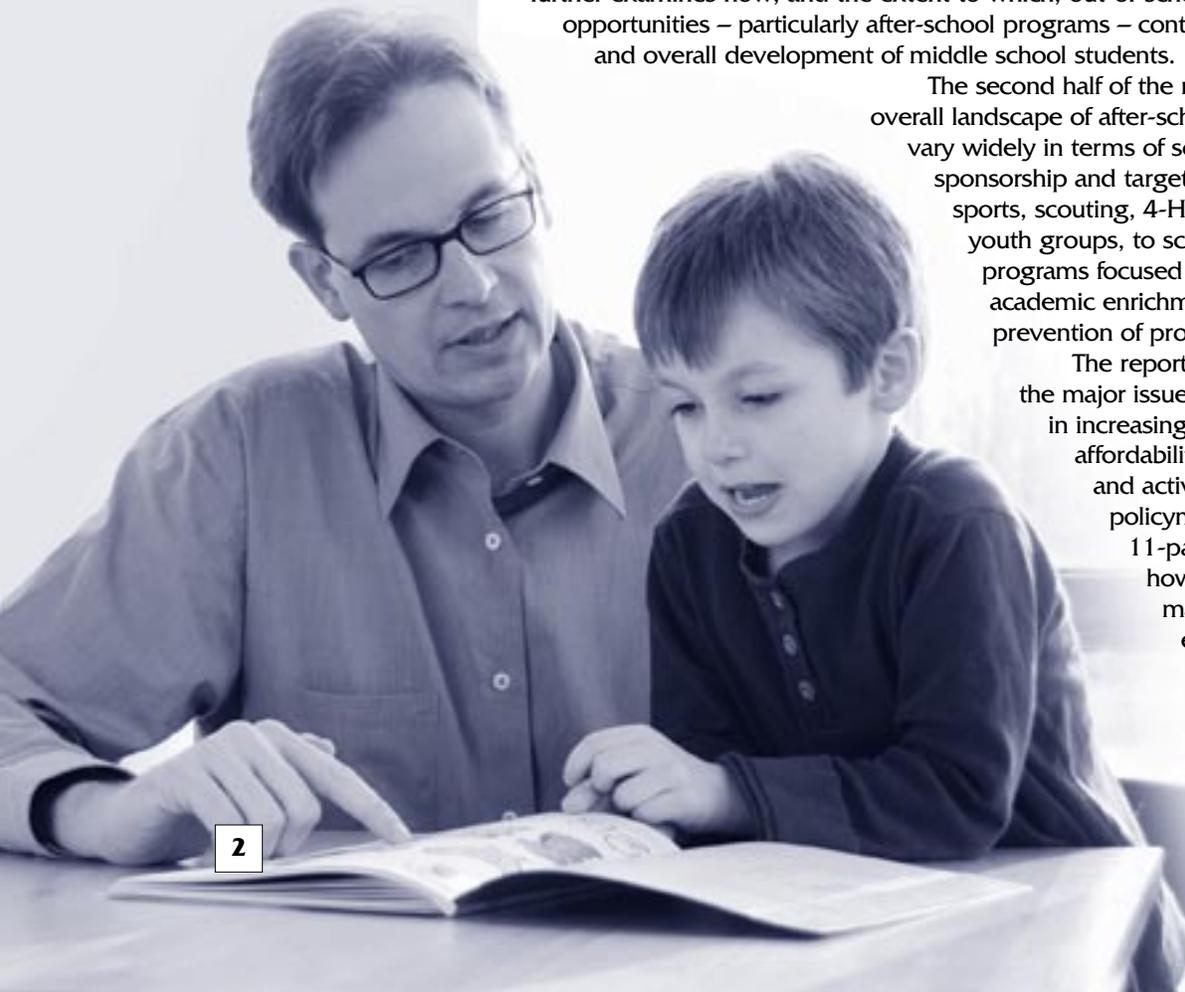
- Well-run, high-quality after-school programs can markedly increase engagement in learning by providing students with opportunities and experiences that are typically not available during the regular school day: personal attention from adults; a peer group with positive aspirations; and hands-on activities that allow them to explore their interests, solve problems, assume leadership roles, and develop skills, confidence and a sense of competence.
- Students who are engaged in learning behave better in school, have better work habits, higher educational aspirations, improved attitudes toward school, a greater sense of belonging in the community and better relationships with parents.
- Young people are not the only ones to benefit from after-school programs. Positive effects extend to families, employers and communities, and are likely to far outweigh the costs of creating and supporting such programs.

But good outcomes, the report notes, require good programming, "which is not easily achieved in a field as undeveloped and under-resourced as after-school programs currently are."

The report begins with a brief overview of early adolescent development. It further examines how, and the extent to which, out-of-school activities and learning opportunities – particularly after-school programs – contribute to the academic success and overall development of middle school students.

The second half of the report takes a look at the overall landscape of after-school programs, which vary widely in terms of scope, format, emphasis, sponsorship and target audience: from intramural sports, scouting, 4-H clubs and church-sponsored youth groups, to school- or community-based programs focused to varying degrees on academic enrichment, remediation and/or the prevention of problem behaviors.

The report concludes with a review of the major issues and challenges involved in increasing the quality, availability and affordability of after-school programs and activities. Of particular value to policymakers and educators is an 11-page appendix that focuses on how to improve the design, and make better use, of program evaluations.



All Work and No Play? Listening to What Kids and Parents Really Want from Out-of-School Time

(Public Agenda, November 2004, http://www.publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=2)

While much of the policy debate on after-school programs revolves around whether they improve academic achievement, the vast majority of parents have a decidedly different view of the role and value of organized activities and programs during non-school hours.

According to this report, a joint project of Public Agenda and The Wallace Foundation, a focus on academics is low on the list of things parents want and expect from their children's out-of-school activities. More important, parents say, are the opportunities they offer kids to develop their interests and hobbies, to keep busy and out of trouble, and to have fun.

Most parents also want programs that reinforce good values and behavior. When asked which three types of programs would be the best match for their child, almost half the parents surveyed for this report picked "teaching the value of hard work and commitment," 33% chose a focus on "helping other people" and 17% a program that reinforces religious faith.

As for students, only three in 10 of those surveyed expressed a preference for after-school programs that offer homework help or focus primarily on academics.

Interestingly, the survey found that learning-focused activities and programs were considerably more important and appealing to low-income and minority students as well as parents. At the same time, low-income and minority families were significantly more likely than higher-income and white parents to say they have trouble finding high-quality, convenient and affordable after-school programs and activities for their children.

Parents and students, the report notes, are two important constituencies "rarely heard from in the policy debate surrounding out-of-school time." Since their participation in out-of-school activities is purely by choice, "knowing what drives these consumers is essential for implementing effective policies and creating constructive programs."

Other Resources

Using NCLB Funds to Support Extended Learning Time: Opportunities for Afterschool Programs

<http://www.ccsso.org/content/PDFs/UsingNCLBFunds.pdf>

This policy brief from the Finance Project and the Council of Chief State School Officers offers strategies and tips for accessing six major funding streams included in the No Child Left Behind Act that can be used to support after-school programs and other extended-learning opportunities.

The Harvard Family Research Project Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html>

This database provides summaries of and links to evaluations of dozens of out-of-school time programs across the country in 19 categories, ranging from programs offering academic enrichment, mentoring and tutoring; to activities focused on the arts, career exploration, recreation, community service and leadership development; to programs aimed at preventing substance abuse, delinquency and other problem behaviors.

The Promising Practices in Afterschool (PPAS) System

<http://www.afterschool.org>

The PPAS Web site features a searchable database of promising practices collected from after-school programs around the country, as well as hundreds of links to after-school program activities, research, funding information and other resources.



Making Out-of-School Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda

(RAND Corp., June 2005, <http://www.rand.org/publications/RB/RB9108/>)

In this report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, RAND researchers assess the evidence for different sides in the debate over how to improve support for before- and after-school programming, and conclude there is a clear and growing need for more systematic analysis and documentation of:

- The kinds of programs and services that are needed
- The extent to which supply exceeds demand
- The effectiveness of such programs in enhancing academic achievement, reducing behavioral problems and/or providing safe, healthy environments for participating students.

“Policymakers and program implementers should remain skeptical of claims about unmet demand for programs,” the report says. In fact, the available evidence suggests “improving the quality of existing programs should take precedence over rapid growth in supply.”

The report recommends greater attention, at the local level, to identifying needs, establishing priorities and using resources strategically. Community surveys, public forums and other mechanisms should be used to “clarify demand for specific services by specific classes of clients, and the level and quality of existing providers.”

At the same time, greater emphasis should be placed on assessing the impact and cost-effectiveness of out-of-school time programs, the report says. The studies and program evaluations reviewed by the RAND team provided “some evidence that programs have had, at best, modest positive effects” in terms of academic achievement and the prevention or reduction of substance abuse, delinquency and other problem behaviors.

All but a handful of the studies and evaluations, however, were flawed by problems ranging from poor measures of student outcomes, to inadequate (or, in many cases, no) control groups of students not enrolled in programs, to a failure to test if effects were statistically significant. Nor does the available research shed much light, the report notes, on issues such as which program features are associated with improved outcomes, or how to improve and build capacity both of individual programs and across local, regional and national markets.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations for (1) improving the design, implementation and evaluation of before- and after-school programming and (2) expanding the knowledge base to support better policymaking.

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