

# after-school enrichment: extending learning time

After-school programs can help show students how academics are relevant to their personal interests, and serve as training grounds for future teachers.

In 1988, when LA's BEST After School Enrichment Program was established by then-Mayor Tom Bradley as a pilot program to provide care for very young students most in need, the far-reaching effects of the program on the instructional day – or on the teaching staff delivering instruction – could not have been anticipated.

The mission of LA's BEST is to provide a safe and supervised after-school education, enrichment and recreation program for children ages 5 to 12 in the City of Los Angeles. Expected results were that children who lived in communities most vulnerable to gangs, crime and drugs, and who had the fewest resources available to them, would feel (and be) safer on campus than off. It was also expected that engagement in a range of learning and play activities would better position those children to succeed in school.

After more than two decades of expansion (from 10 original sites to 180 sites serving 28,000 students) and evaluation (both

internal and independent), we've validated those first expected results. We have also learned over the years that participation in LA's BEST has profound implications for the life choices of not only the students, but also the staff who work with them.

## California leads the nation

State-funded after-school programs serve more than 400,000 students each day at most of California's high-need schools, including nearly 4,000 (80 percent) of the 5,000 elementary and middle schools in low-income communities statewide. In fact, California leads the nation in state-funded after-school services, according to the 2010 report, "California's After-School Commitment: Keeping Kids on Track and Out of Trouble," from the group Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California.

The 20,000 workers who staff these

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*By Carla Sanger*

state-funded programs are mostly young (age 30 or under), and for many of them, the part-time job after school is their first employment experience. The young men and women come into the job with limited background, knowledge and experience outside their community, often the immediate neighborhood of the program site where they will work after school.

LA's BEST has a daily routine that includes three-and-a-half beats: homework support, a cognitive enrichment activity, a recreation-oriented club, plus a half beat for nutrition. Within that basic structure, each staff person has the autonomy to offer activities that correspond to what matters most to students. Because there are no prescribed textbooks or curricula for LA's BEST – or most state-funded after-school programs – staff are tasked with the responsibility of supporting learning for students every day after school.

Energy, enthusiasm, creativity and the ability to relate to children are the greatest assets for staff members. If a program can capitalize on those qualities, the results are profound for adults and children alike.

### **Making connections**

When after-school programs take responsibility for the training, support and supervision of staff, these young people learn how to connect to children living in low-income circumstances, make activities relevant to them, and through students' individual interests and capacities, further connect students to their schools, their families and their communities.

After-school staff are encouraged to make students' interests relevant to what is going on in the classroom – to take what a child already knows and relate it to a subject or lesson covered in the instructional school day. To succeed in making such a connection requires keen observation of individual students; an ability to probe what students think about, wonder about, care about, are afraid of or don't comprehend; and the ability to listen for understanding.

Students benefit because what they already know is valued and what they are expected to learn becomes newly relevant. Young staff members experience a different

revelation: They learn that they matter to children, and that they can help them learn.

According to a survey last year of 2,600 LA's BEST field staff, 33 percent plan to become teachers. Experience working in after-school programs not only confirms a desire to work with children, but affords the freedom to create learning environments tailored to students' needs and interests, and



see the results in children who make more friends, accelerate their acquisition of English, improve their math or reading skills, or find a new talent in painting or soccer. After working in LA's BEST or a similar program, young adults who aren't aware of their own capacity can subsequently see themselves with long-term careers in education.

### **Future teachers and administrators**

Former LA's BEST staff have gone on to become mentor teachers, administrators and principals; many of them cite their experience in LA's BEST as the deciding factor in pursuing teaching or school administration. At a time when a mere 7 percent of the teachers in the United States are Latino, and fewer than 2 percent are male Latino, LA's BEST is a critical means to diversifying the teacher pool.

The national average of men working in after-school programs is one male for every seven females, whereas in LA's BEST it is 1:3, and the majority of staff is Latino. LA's BEST

staff members who become teachers want to be a reliable presence in their neighborhoods, and often ask for assignments close to home, where they choose to stay for years.

Some teacher-recruiting organizations succeed in placing young, motivated teachers in urban areas, but many only stay for one or two years. When they are done with the relatively short-term commitment, they

leave for jobs elsewhere, often to pursue careers outside of teaching.

### **Acknowledging the role of community**

The creativity, autonomy, listening skills and valuing of what students already know, along with the acknowledgment of the central role of family and community in a child's life, are competencies that serve LA's BEST staff well as they become credentialed teachers and begin work in their own classrooms.

Principals and school leaders know that hiring teachers who began with a strong after-school program are uniquely prepared to connect with students in a way that increases students' overall availability to learn. In fact, in 2009 the Associated Administrators of Los Angeles made an end-of-year contribution to LA's BEST on behalf of its members, recognizing it as "the premier after-school program for LAUSD students."

Sophia Mendoza, principal at Lanker-shim Elementary School in the Los Angeles

area, said she looks for teacher assistant candidates who have worked with LA's BEST.

"First, I know that LA's BEST has very high standards for the employees they select, and that teacher assistant candidates with LA's BEST experience have a vested interest in their community. Second, LA's BEST provides leadership skills development for its staff, which translates to strong classroom management skills. Third, former and current LA's BEST staff have a well-rounded understanding of how a school site operates. And finally, they are dedicated to meeting the needs of students."

No matter how prescribed the curriculum, staff with experience in high-quality after-school programs have the assurance that the time they take to get to know what each student knows most and cares most about will serve them well in their lesson plans, and help them get the best out of students. ■

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Carla Sanger is president and CEO of LA's BEST.

## Team approach to using student data

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of teacher collaboration within the PLC.

Jones, Frederic H. (1987). *Positive Classroom Instruction*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Books. This book is out of print but can be ordered online from several used booksellers. Fred Jones also has a website offering newer resources: [www.fredjones.com](http://www.fredjones.com).

Marzano, Robert J. (2006). *Classroom Assessment and Grading That Work*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Riverside County Office of Education, Educational Leadership Services Division. The division uploads tools

such as the annual AYP worksheets to its webpage, located at [www.rcoe.k12.ca.us/edLeadershipServices/index.html](http://www.rcoe.k12.ca.us/edLeadershipServices/index.html).

Wilhelm, Terry. (2009). Video: *The Student-Based Protocol: A Structure for Discussing Common Formative Assessments*. Riverside County Office of Education. This video may be downloaded at no cost from iTunes University. Go to [itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/view iTunesUInstitution?id=389183656](http://itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/view iTunesUInstitution?id=389183656) and click on Riverside County Office of Education, then select Student Based Protocol.

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