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Afterschool: Supporting Career and College Pathways for Middle School Age Youth

The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the fourth in a series of four Issue Briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. These Issue Briefs explore: the multiple benefits of afterschool for middle school youth; science, technology, engineering and math (STEM); pathways to higher education and careers; and health and wellness for preteens and teens. They examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

In February 2009, during an address to Congress, President Obama urged every American to pursue at least one year of postsecondary education, ascertaining that, “In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a prerequisite.”ⁱ Postsecondary opportunities, including college and trade schools, can open up numerous avenues to success for today’s youth. However, many youth are missing out on the chance to accrue additional knowledge, and without it, they may be left struggling to find work in an increasingly competitive job market. In light of recent economic struggles, a postsecondary degree has become more of a necessity for those looking to find a job that pays a sustainable wage. Society has recognized the importance of a college education. A 2010 PDK-Gallup poll found that 75 percent of Americans believe that a college education is an absolute necessity for success in today’s world.ⁱⁱ Americans understand that more education means greater readiness for the future, but thousands of students continue to drop out of school each day while job competition rises. It is therefore imperative that we convey the importance of higher education and career readiness to youth early on, so that they understand the importance of staying on the path to high school graduation and postsecondary success.

Higher Education and Better Job Prospects

There are numerous benefits that come with additional education after high school. Higher education can provide more economic flexibility, better job prospects and improve overall health. Studies have consistently shown that education level is directly proportional to higher salaries and improved quality of life:

- The unemployment rate for individuals with at least a bachelor’s degree is consistently about half the unemployment rate for high school graduates. In 2009, when approximately 10 percent of those with only a high school diploma were unemployed, less than 5 percent of those with at least a bachelor’s degree were without jobs.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In 2007, the median annual earnings of young adults with a bachelor’s degree were \$45,000, while the median earnings for those with an associate’s degree were \$35,000. Comparatively, those with only a high school education received just \$29,000 and those without a high school diploma received \$23,000.^{iv}
- Four year graduates earn approximately a million dollars more over their lifetime compared to those with only a high school diploma.^v

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- Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to be very satisfied with their jobs.^{vi}
- It has been estimated that by 2014, nearly three quarters of the highest growth industries will require some form of postsecondary education.^{vii}
- The higher a person’s level of education, the more likely they are to report being in good health, regardless of income.^{viii}

Participation in higher education is clearly connected to real world gains. It is important to make this connection for middle school students so they understand that the hard work they put in during class and after school can lead to real world rewards in the future.

The Dangers of Straying Off Path

Unfortunately, many students start off on the wrong path, leading to a chain of detrimental choices that put them at a disadvantage once they enter the job market. More than nine in ten parents believe that their child will attend college,^{ix} but there is a strong disconnect between reality and parent’s beliefs. Only 41 percent of 18 to 24 year olds were enrolled in college in 2009,^x and more than 7,000 U.S. students drop out of high school each day.^{xi} It has even been estimated that today’s youth may be the first generation less likely to receive a post-secondary degree than their parents.^{xii} According to the National Center for Public Policy and higher Education, for every 100 ninth graders:

- 68 graduate from high school on time;
- 40 immediately enroll in college; and
- 18 graduate from college on time^{xiii}

“This year has given me the power and knowledge I need to be able to concentrate and be a leader... and being a leader is an expectation I need for the school of my choice.”

Toni Glover, 7th Grade Participant in SquashSmarts

The statistics on poor postsecondary matriculation rates and their effect on student’s future job prospects are not encouraging. Forty-two percent of those with only high school diplomas have been rated as deficient in their overall preparation levels by employers (compared to just 9 percent of 4-year college graduates). Additionally, a strong majority of employers report that high school graduate workforce entrants are deficient in written communications, work ethic and critical thinking, all of which those with college diplomas scored significantly better on.^{xiv} The importance of college and postsecondary training cannot be over stated. It is imperative that middle school youth see their connection to real world success early on so that they stay on track to graduation, higher education and a fruitful life.

Middle School Pitfalls

Although high school dropout rates have declined since 1998, eight percent of 16- through 24-year-olds nationally dropped out of school in 2009, with an even greater proportion of African-American and Hispanic students failing to attain a high school diploma.^{xv} Even more alarming though is the fact that some students have been shown to fall off the track toward high school graduation and postsecondary opportunities as early as sixth grade. **Sixth graders who failed math or English/reading, attended school less than 80 percent of the time, or received an unsatisfactory behavior grade in a core course had only a 10% to 20% chance of graduating high school on time.**^{xvi} In a study of middle schoolers, less than 1 out of every 4 students with at least one of these “off-track indicators” graduated high school in five years or less.^{xvii} Although these numbers are disheartening, they display an

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opportunity to intervene early and keep students on the path to graduation and careers. However, students need more rigorous instruction and support than schools alone can provide. Afterschool programs can provide the additional support to schools to ensure that middle schoolers improve achievement and become more productive students.

Afterschool: The Link to Higher Education and Career Readiness

Afterschool and summer learning programs have a proven track record of helping children avoid the pitfalls of poor academic achievement, poverty, truancy and insubordination, which can derail their futures before they begin:

- Students can realize their full potential with outside support.
 - Alumni of Citizen Schools’ 8th Grade Academy graduate on time from high school and enroll in 2- and 4-year colleges at approximately double the rate of their peers.^{xviii}
 - The Promising Afterschool Programs Study found that regular participation in high-quality afterschool programs is linked to significant gains in standardized test scores and work habits for middle school students.^{xix}
- Attendance is critical to keeping children on track.^{xx}
 - Ninth grade students who, while in middle school, participated in The After-School Corporation (TASC) funded afterschool programs had higher daily attendance and credit accumulation than matched nonparticipants.^{xxi}
- Afterschool programs can keep children engaged in learning and out of trouble.
 - Youth attending 23-40 or more days of Maryland’s After School Opportunity Fund Program showed positive gains on such measures as commitment to education and academic performance, and a reduction in delinquency and contact with the police.^{xxii}
 - One meta-analysis of afterschool programs found that they succeeded in improving youths’ feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem, school bonding and positive social behaviors, while also reducing problem behaviors, such as aggression, noncompliance and conduct problems.^{xxiii}
- Closing the achievement gap can boost graduation rates and postsecondary success.^{xxiv}
 - Researchers at Johns Hopkins University concluded that two-thirds of the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income youth results from unequal access to summer learning opportunities.^{xxv}
 - Citizen Schools reported significant improvements in achievement among high-risk students, including English learners and those with initially low standardized test scores.^{xxvi}

“To ensure that every child is a graduate, we need multiple pathways to connect rigorous academic standards to real-world learning experiences. Some of those pathways need to reach students when school is not in session. High quality programs after school, before school and during the summer make a real impact on a student’s ability to achieve.”

Tony Evers, Ph.D., Indiana State

Afterschool programs across the country are ensuring that middle school youth avoid the pitfalls on their way to high school graduation, so that they can maintain the vision of going onto higher education and eventually succeeding in a fulfilling career.

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Middle School, Afterschool and the Skills to Succeed

In addition to postsecondary degrees, employers covet a new set of skills for the 21st Century worker, such as problem-solving, work/ internship experience and the ability to use technology. Afterschool can play a key role in supplying children with preparation for many different types of careers requiring these new skills. Programs that teach practical, real world knowledge can spur creativity and greater engagement in learning and exploration. When children make the connection between additional education and enjoyment, they will set goals and realize their potential as successful career-minded adults.

- The **Junior ACE Program** in Sacramento, CA teaches middle school students about green design and introduces them to careers in the architectural design and construction industries. Students take part in a variety of architecture and engineering classes after school on topics including alternative energy, green plumbing and green land use and design. The goal of Junior Ace is to engage children in the middle school years so that they can go on to participate in the ACE Mentoring high school program and later be prepared for careers in architecture, construction and engineering.

“Recently, a young man who had won a \$1,000 ACE scholarship told me he would never have gone to college if the scholarship hadn’t shown that ACE believed in him... It really demonstrated what a significant impact this program can have on young people’s lives.”

Denise Ramsey, ACE Mentor

Many afterschool programs have direct links with nearby colleges or universities which can be used as a resource to inspire youth by connecting them with role models and mentors already enrolled in college. Middle school students can grow from their relationships with young adult mentors who are already on their way to success, and can begin planning for postsecondary achievement.

- The **Lincoln Intermediate Unit Migrant Education Program** in Chambersburg, PA maintains a strong partnership with nearby Messiah College, where children from migrant farm working families, many of whom are English Language Learners with an interrupted education, are afforded the chance to connect with college mentors who have shared similar experiences. Students learn the importance of early postsecondary planning through overnights and afterschool activities at Messiah College. Mentors and students also discuss the enriching aspects of their culture and ethnicity and are given time to express themselves through art and other media platforms. Finally, the program emphasizes helping students cope with the transition from elementary school to middle school and the future transition from middle school to high school, all while continuing to prepare the students for postsecondary success.

Afterschool programs can also get middle schoolers interested in public interest issues and science. By developing a passion for promoting social justice, students understand the work and additional knowledge necessary to support issues they believe in.

- **Project PORTS** connects middle school children in Cumberland County, NJ with the local oyster population in the nearby Delaware Bay. Rutgers University created the community-based oyster habitat restoration and education program in order to expand educational opportunities and create a sustainable stewardship program, while also improving the oyster habitat. Project PORTS (Promoting Oyster Restoration Through Schools) promotes important scientific concepts,

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environmental consciousness and stewardship values through hands-on inquiry-based lessons that integrate science learning with historical and social perspectives.

The afterschool space provides the opportunity to engage children in learning that they would have otherwise not have come into contact with during the regular school day. This freedom allows children to find success in an area other than the core curriculum subjects, instilling confidence that will carry on through school, postsecondary opportunities and into their future careers.

- **SquashSmarts** in Philadelphia, PA combines the sport of squash with academic tutoring and mentoring for underserved, urban youth in order to develop self-esteem through academic, athletic and personal achievement. In a community that offers little opportunity for youth to participate in extracurricular activities, SquashSmarts fills that gap by providing academic tutoring and squash instruction three days a week. Additionally, the program supports learning by recruiting volunteers for activities and one-on-one mentoring and working with schools and parents to tailor instruction to youth's specific needs. The innovative program seeks to form a team-like atmosphere where participants grow athletically, academically and personally, so that they develop into productive citizens and see the possibilities for future success.

Afterschool can also serve as a resource that youth can fall back on to guide them through the often-precarious adolescent years, so that they can become happy and healthy adults. Whether a middle school student needs help in a math class, wants to make friends or is looking to stay out of trouble, afterschool programs can help them blaze a path to higher education and career readiness, leaving distractions behind.

- **ClubGEN** in Austin, TX educates, inspires and mentors young girls to navigate through the ups and downs of adolescence and focus on a healthy track to adulthood. The afterschool program equips girls with the skills they need to confront the dangers of adolescence, such as eating disorders and juvenile crime, and utilizes mentors to increase critical thinking skills and academic performance to prepare middle school girls for college and careers. Girls are able to relate to high school volunteers, who have navigated similar experiences that they are now facing now, and understand that despite the obstacles on the way to adulthood, success can be attained.

"GENaustin's peer-lead model for their clubGEN program is two-fold. Both the middle school and high school girls can gain invaluable experience and skills that they may use to build a stronger future."

Christy Decker, clubGEN Program and Development Assistant

Conclusion

In order to ensure that middle school youth are on a path toward higher education and careers, an early introduction to the importance of continuing education past high school is necessary. The middle school years are a vital time to teach the importance of college and career readiness and the linkages to success in life. Afterschool programs offer a key opportunity to expose middle school students to higher education options and career paths and to teach them skills that can unlock doors to future career prospects. The afterschool hours offer time for apprenticeships, guest speakers and project-based activities that are not always available during a school day focused on a core curriculum. Middle school is a critical time to ensure that youth are on a clear path to a productive future, and afterschool is an essential support to help middle schoolers move ahead to success in higher education and careers.

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