

drops off (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004; Sipe, Ma, & Gambone, 1998). To attract older youth, programs need to offer experiences for teens that look and feel different from those designed for elementary school children. This article, drawing on data collected in a larger study of practices that engage older youth in OST programs over time (Deschenes et al., 2010), shares insights about programs that successfully engage older youth and the strategies they use to maintain high participation rates.

Developmentally, older youth are becoming “not children.” Adolescents’ pathways are characterized by a set of developmental tasks that prepare them for adulthood: They are learning to make decisions independently from their parents, exploring new roles and identities, forming deeper bonds with peers, and preparing themselves for careers (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). Given the potential benefits of OST participation, and recognizing the challenges of participation for older youth, researchers and practitioners share a keen interest in identifying ways to engage adolescents in structured activities outside of school that can provide them with important developmental opportunities.

OST programs that are successful in engaging older youth—in our study and in others—are geared toward supporting these developmental tasks, providing the personal and social assets that help youth successfully navigate through adolescence and into early adulthood (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). However, older youth also need programming that will change with them and support them in new developmental stages (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). OST program providers, therefore, need to recognize that adolescence entails several distinct stages and calibrate their programming accordingly.

In our study, attention to developmental differences emerged as central to the strategies that kept middle and high school youth engaged in OST programs over time. This article sheds light on how a set of school- and community-based programs with high rates of participation addressed these changing needs. We first present an overview of the larger study and a description of the characteristics of the program sample. We

then detail some of the findings that indicate the importance of addressing developmental differences as a participation strategy.

Study Overview

While many studies have broadly addressed issues of OST participation for older youth or have focused on either middle school youth or high school youth, our recent study of OST participation (Deschenes et al., 2010) compared high-participation programs for both middle school and high school youth to identify which strategies and features are associated with each age group and how programs change their strategies to support these adolescents over time.

The study used a mixed methods design, combining OST participation data on middle and high school youth and program survey data with interview data from site visits in six cities: Chicago; Cincinnati; New York City; Providence, RI; San Francisco; and Washington, DC. These cities were chosen because each has a citywide initiative focused on supporting access to and participation in OST.

We obtained survey data from 198 programs and interview data from 28 programs;¹ this article is based on the latter sample.

The primary focus of our research was to identify the program- and city-level strategies and features that keep youth coming to programs over time, specifically for 12 or more months. In the larger sample of 198 programs, we found, through regression analysis of survey data, that a set of program characteristics do seem particularly important in retaining youth for this long, distinguishing programs with higher retention from those with lower retention:²

- Being a community-based rather than a school-based program
- Serving 100 or more youth per year
- Offering many opportunities for youth involvement and leadership
- Having staff stay informed about youths’ lives inside and outside the program
- Having regular staff meetings to discuss program-related issues

Analyses of the survey data revealed that these key characteristics distinguishing high- versus low-retention

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Table 1. Program Characteristics

School-based	46%
Serving 100 or more youth	52%
Age of participants	
Elementary school and older students	42%
Middle school students only	31%
Middle school and high school students	12%
High school students only	12%
High school and post high school students	4%
Number of years in operation	
1–2	32%
3–4	12%
5+	56%
Operating school year only	42%
Open 5+ days a week	69%
Only program in its area with its particular focus	23%

Study Sample

The programs we report on here were selected to include geographic distribution across the city, a mix of program activities and goals, and service primarily to low-income youth as defined by percentage of free or reduced-price lunch participants. Because we wanted to interview providers of programs with high participation rates, the minimum participation rate among this interview sample was 60 percent, compared to a minimum of 44 percent for the larger survey sample.³ For both middle school and high school programs, the average participation rate was 79 percent, compared to an average of 65 percent across all programs in our larger sample.

Among the 28 programs in our interview sample, as shown in Table 1, 18 were school-based and 10 were community-based programs; 14 focused on middle-school-aged youth, 8 on high-school-aged youth, and 6 on a combination of the two. Just over half were larger programs serving 100 or more youth. Most served older youth exclusively without elementary school participants. Over half had been in existence for five or more years; almost a quarter (23 percent) were the only programs in their area with their particular focus.

programs were the same for middle school programs and high school programs. However, the qualitative data from our subset of high-participation programs allowed us to explore programs’ approaches to retaining middle school youth compared to high school youth at a deeper level of detail, while also providing additional insights that we could not gather from the survey or databases about how programs approached working with middle school and high school youth.

For our analysis of program interviews, based on a grounded theory approach (see Strauss & Corbin, 2007), we focused on the major themes that emerged across programs related to the successes and challenges of achieving high participation and retention rates and what program practices or features were linked to these efforts; we also analyzed program data to understand how programs participate in citywide OST initiatives. We coded interviews using codes developed from a literature review and our early findings, using an iterative process to identify and refine themes and patterns in the data. At the same time, we compared the qualitative findings to our survey analysis to create a fuller picture of which practices help retain adolescents.

Table 2. Youth Served

Eligible for free lunch	87%
Race or ethnicity	
African American	57%
Latino/a or Hispanic	21%
Asian	10%
White	6%
Mixed race	4%
Native American	0.1%
Other	1%
Girls	51%
Attending other OST activities	24%
With siblings in program	32%

A vast majority (87 percent) of youth in these programs were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Over 90 percent of the youth served were non-White; program participants were balanced about evenly between boys (49 percent) and girls (51 percent). Programs reported that less than one-quarter of their youth attended other OST activities and that about one-third had siblings in the same program. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the youth served by the programs we studied.

Older Youth, OST, and Developmental Pathways

Providers we interviewed recognized that they need to be prepared for developmental changes as youth move from elementary school to middle school to high school, and that, if they don't anticipate what these changes mean for their programs, they will lose participants' interest. But they also emphasized that each young person is on an individual path. As a director of a Washington, DC, program noted, "In order to reach a kid, you've got to meet them where they are. And if you can meet them where they are, then you can take them somewhere else." As intensive as this individual attention may be, providers noted that it is critical to participants' development, at times compensating for lack of attention at school or at home. Program providers reported using many strategies for this individualized approach to working with youth: Their staff members developed individual relationships with youth, they often allowed for flexibility in scheduling and expectations, and they provided a variety of opportunities to allow youth to excel.

In addition to their understanding of the developmental continuum of adolescence, the providers we interviewed emphasized different program strategies, discussed below, for working with middle and high school youth, based on their respective developmental stages.

Middle School and OST: Peer Relationships, Curiosity, and Structure

Middle-school-aged youth are gaining independence, beginning to make their own decisions about what to do with their time outside of school, forming stronger iden-

ties, and creating tighter bonds with peers (Frederick & Eccles, 2008; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). During these years, developing close relationships with adults beyond their families also becomes important (Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

To support the growing independence and curiosity of early adolescence, developmental research suggests that learning contexts for middle schoolers should provide autonomy and challenge—emphasizing activities that support growth in reasoning; opportunities for mentoring, leadership, and meaningful input; exposure to a wide range of career possibilities; and the social and communication skills to make good choices (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). Programs can also support this developmental stage by providing what one researcher calls “avenues for short-term success” (Balfanz, 2009)—activities such as debate, drama, robotics, or chess for students who are strong in these areas and can excel in ways they might not be able to in other activities.

Program providers in our sample observed, however, that middle school students are particularly difficult to recruit. Because these youth are in the process of developing autonomy, they are less inclined to participate in adult-supervised activities during nonschool time—they might want to play basketball at a local court, but not in an afterschool program. They are also less inclined to break from their peer groups to participate in program activities. Other providers noted that middle school is a time when students begin to disengage from school and that detachment from OST activities often accompanies this process. Staff told us that participation was particularly tricky for students who were over-age for their class in school or otherwise lagging behind their peers.

Interestingly, providers noted that even within the middle school years, there were two distinct developmental groups: sixth- and seventh- graders and eighth-graders. Providers recognized that eighth-grade participants needed something “older,” specifically geared toward their transition into high school, or they would not continue in the program.

The following are some strategies that programs in this study used to engage middle school students.

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Time with Friends

Program providers emphasized in interviews that time for socializing is developmentally important and appropriate for middle school youth. Students who may have no recess during the school day or have to sit through a silent lunch need structured time for peer interactions after school.

Programs in our sample structured their middle school activities to ensure that youth had time to do homework with friends, connect with friends before joining activities, or work with friends in small-group activities. Some providers did so primarily by giving youth time to talk. Others described creating team-building exercises for participants, because participation in OST programs is an opportunity to meet new friends and connect with youth who have similar interests. Such opportunities to develop peer relationships in safe, structured environments can help youth create positive peer influences and develop positive social skills.

As one theater program director noted, although adult-structured learning is important, peer-to-peer education is also a powerful tool with this age group, especially when developing important life skills such as communicating effectively and giving and receiving constructive feedback. Staff in this program helped youth “to be a little bit more formal” with each other and gave them the skills to communicate about performances so they could “make each other better” and get an adult’s help only when absolutely necessary.

In addition, younger adolescents often make choices about which program to attend based on their increasingly important friendships. According to one provider, “If a friend is doing it, they’ll all want to do it.” Middle school programs in particular reported that cliques can be a powerful mechanism for keeping youth involved in the program: “If you can offer those cliques what they need in order for them to have a good time, then you have a better chance of them coming, enrolling, and staying.” On the other hand, cliques can sometimes be a deterrent. A respondent in Washington, DC, noted that friends often move from program to program together and can create situations that discourage other youth from joining.

New Activities to Try

Youth in the middle school years need not only to socialize but also to explore and test and be curious, using

constructive outlets. One provider described the middle school period as “a tipping point” in which youth are still willing to try new things under the right circumstances. Middle school youth need to feel supported and emotionally safe. With some youth beginning to disengage from school, OST providers pointed out, “it’s the last chance to engage them.” Providers also used the peer group to facilitate participants’ willingness to try new activities. One provider in Providence described how youth helped their peers build skills:

[If] someone is interested, but that skill for them isn’t that strong, we can group them in an activity—maybe it’s costuming. “Well, I know how to sew, and I can do this activity, and I can put this together.” “I’m a really good graphic artist, but Suzy’s kind of ‘eh’ about drawing, I can teach her how to do this.” “I’m really good at reading and memorizing my lines. Maybe I can teach you how to memorize your lines.”

Middle school is also a time to try out different identities. Through activities such as acting, youth can play out characteristics or personality traits toward which they would not normally gravitate. Many young teens find a voice and a receptive audience in afterschool programs when they otherwise feel silenced and invisible at home or in school. These features of supportive afterschool communities can foster youths’ desire to keep returning to programs.

Access to afterschool programs alone is insufficient; quality counts in ensuring that youth have access to supportive, effective afterschool programming.

Exploration within Structure and Routine

Providers conveyed that the peer relationships and exploration that take place in early adolescence need to happen in certain ways in order to be developmentally beneficial. One provider described creating a “tight container” around participants’ behavior. Another noted that middle schoolers are “consistently inconsistent.” Middle school youth are always changing, so staff members working with them must have the ability to adapt as needed. However, in part because of this inconsistency, middle school youth, according to providers, need structure and routine to help them feel safe and to support their developmental needs.

Routines—for everything from the sign-up process to program activities to transportation—provide an example of creating consistency in programs to support younger teenagers. Providers in our study created many

redundancies for enrollment, for example, to ensure that youth remembered to sign up at the end of the day for a program they found out about at lunchtime. Program staff distributed flyers, hung posters at schools, reminded students if they saw them at school, and even phoned youth who had signed up to remind them to come.

In Providence, one provider noted that they get “one chance” to hook middle school students. If things go wrong on the first day, students are much less likely to return. For instance, if students expect to get on a bus to go home at the end of the day, “and then the bus isn’t there to take [them] back when the time comes, they’re out, that’s it. You lost them.” Without the routine to show them that they are safe and supported, younger adolescents will not want to return.

High School and OST: Content Knowledge, Greater Responsibility, and Future Planning

As youth move into high school, they face a new set of challenges that OST programs need to recognize as they work to engage these youth. By high school, youth are much more independent, making their own decisions about how to spend their time and exercising their increasing freedom. They are starting to think about what will come next; many have developed particular interests and goals they want to pursue. These students can benefit from support that helps them plan and set goals for the future, enhances their ability to cope with their new roles and responsibilities, and gives them a greater understanding of their identity, strengths, and weaknesses (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Although our analysis of the larger program sample revealed that the efforts to retain youth were similar in middle school and high school programs (Deschenes et al., 2010), our interview data from the smaller sample indicated a qualitative difference between the strategies for high school versus middle school programs. For example, as one provider acknowledged, “I think the high school programs are easy to run.... I think once you get to the high school level, most of the participants really are motivated to be there, and they’re doing it because they *want* to—not because they *have* to.” In addition, high school youth have more opportunities and greater demands on their time than do middle school youth; for example, they often have more family, school, and work responsibilities. Thus, although high school youth are

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motivated to be there, providers cannot expect them to attend OST programs every day. Instead, successful high school programs look for “sustained but not daily attendance” (Friedman & Bleiberg, 2007).

Our study revealed that the following strategies, all of which touch on older youths’ goal orientation, are important to the high-participation programs for high school youth.

Emphasis on Content

Providers of the high-participation programs in our sample reported that they met their participants’ goal-oriented interests by offering strong content and exposing youth to new ideas (see also Chaskin & Baker, 2006; Friedman & Bleiberg, 2007). Older teens know what they want to learn in their out-of-school time. As a result, high school programs tended to have a narrower, more content-based emphasis than the middle school programs, concentrating on, for example, law or technology or music.

While some providers noted the difficulty of recruiting high school students because they have so many more options and responsibilities than middle schoolers, many of the high school programs with high rates of participation appeared to be more targeted in their approach to programming for older teens. As a result of this focus, high school programs, more than middle school programs, tended to have staff who had deep content knowledge (Grossman, Lind, Hayes, McMaken, & Gersick, 2009; Russell et al., 2008). Programs that meet high school youths’ desire for more specific activities and training may therefore be more likely to effectively hold youths’ attention.

Responsibility and Leadership Opportunities

OST programs for high school youth often turn over to the teens significantly more of the responsibility for programs’ operations, through, for example, paid jobs in the program or youth councils. To prepare youth for the responsibilities they would face in the workplace, for instance, Chicago’s After School Matters provided participants with a series of jobs in an apprenticeship ladder and required professional behavior in those jobs.

Several other providers mentioned the importance of having high expectations for youth, and some tied these expectations to their retention rates. One program

assigned all its students the middle name “No Excuses.” In another program, students were always expected to come to their college prep classes with the proper notebook, having done their work, and with a good attitude. Consequences for not being prepared were clearly communicated and enforced. The director noted, “I think this year we haven’t lost one person because of [our expectations]. . . . Kids say, ‘Wow. They *are* serious about it.’” These expectations convey to youth that staff care and are committed to their success.

Additionally, programs give high school participants more responsibility through mentoring so that they have the opportunity to work with peers or younger participants. With this additional responsibility and accountability, youth may develop stronger bonds with the programs and feel more compelled to continue their participation.

The Path after Graduation

High school teens, according to one observer, are beginning to ask, “What about jobs? What about when I leave school? What’s out there for me?” Programs reported addressing these concerns about youths’ goals in a variety of ways, including formal and informal college preparation. While one high school program in our study was geared to college access and enrollment, another supported college goals as an embedded part of the programming. In the latter program, college students shepherded high school students through college research and applications, although this was not a formal activity. Through conversations about expectations, high school youth came to understand the importance of higher education to achieving their goals. Older participants, as a “give back” to the program, showed high school students how to fill out college applications, get scholarships, and decide on schools to attend. Similarly, apprenticeships and other job-related programs help older teens build the skills they will need to succeed in a range of occupations after high school; these include job-specific skills, knowledge of appropriate workplace behavior and appearance, and problem-solving skills. These ideas about a future payoff give youth a reason to return to programs.

Staying in Sync with Older Youths’ Needs

As many of the program providers in this study understood, adolescence is a time of rapid transformation. A

sixth-grader, an eighth-grader, a high school sophomore, or a high school senior each has a particular set of needs and desires. Programs that are successful at attracting and retaining older youth pay attention to the developmental “fit” between their target participants and their program activities, characteristics, and practices. Some programs choose to target youth at a particular stage, such as older high school students; others serve a broader age range but change the experiences and environment of their participants as they age. As our study suggests, the dimensions that programs tailor to fit developmental stages include the activity selection and choices, the structure of the program, levels of responsibility expected, and the future payoff of programming.

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Regardless of their approach, programs that successfully attract and engage older youth attend to the changing nature of adolescents by recognizing and honoring each individual’s pathway but also by using different program features for youth of different ages and stages in their education. Middle school programs respond to youths’ need for peer interaction and desire to try new things while maintaining routines and structure. High school programs support youths’ interest in specific content, their desire for

more responsibility, and their need to plan for their post-secondary future. Both provide youth with a community of adults to support them through their adolescent journey. The degree to which programs are in sync with their participants affects their ability to attract and retain older youth—and ultimately the degree to which they can help youth benefit from developmentally important opportunities outside of school.

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Notes

¹ Most programs' participation rates were calculated based on data gathered from citywide OST databases; a few programs were chosen for the study based on reputation.

² Please see the full report for details on our quantitative analysis.

³ Participation rates were calculated based on the management information system (MIS) daily attendance data provided to us by each city's OST initiative. In general, we calculated average program participation rates as the proportion of program sessions youth attended, averaged across all youth attending the program. For example, a youth who comes to half the sessions offered would have a participation rate of 50 percent; if a second youth has a 100 percent participation rate (attending all the sessions offered), the program's average participation rate across both youth participants would be 75 percent. The average participation rate is based on four of the six cities in the study.