

**CREATING A NETWORK OF AFTER-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMS:
A CONCEPT PAPER**

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A New Mission for After-School Education Programs

Views about the importance of after-school education programs as central components of strategies to improve outcomes for youth in high-risk environments are changing.

Recognition of their potential is emerging from a growing consensus, among researchers and practitioners in education and children and youth services, about the nature of youth problems and the need for the community-level strategies to support youth to develop the broad range of competencies needed for successful adult functioning. There is increased recognition that:

- Many young people, especially early adolescents in low income urban neighborhoods, lack the personal supports and developmental opportunities needed for successful transitions to adulthood;
- A critical need exists to increase the range and amount of opportunities young people living in high risk environments have to develop their cognitive skills;
- Community-based youth programs have much to contribute to the development of educational supports beyond the school day; and
- Schools and community-based youth organizations must work together to build communities of support for educational achievement by youth in high-risk environments.

Youth growing up in poor urban neighborhoods face increasingly diminished prospects for successful and productive lives. Unlike the relatively recent past of twenty years ago, there are major missing personal and social linkages for large numbers of young people today.

Significant changes in family composition and new stresses on family life resulting from economic demands, crime, poverty, substance abuse, and homelessness have weakened traditional family support. Religious groups have fewer contacts with youth, and neighborhoods have become less cohesive. Schools are often unable to engage half the youth

population in achieving academic competency. Many youth struggle for positive outcomes in environments offering them very limited resources and opportunities and few supports.

Researchers estimate that one-quarter of all adolescents in the United States in multiple high-risk behaviors (heavy alcohol, tobacco and drug use, unprotected sexual intercourse, delinquency, truancy), which are likely to have seriously negative if not tragic consequences.

In recent years, much has been learned about what is needed to address these youth problems. Summaries of extensive reviews of the literature on the prevention of these behaviors (DryFoos) stress the effectiveness of strategies that combine attention to individual needs with broad community-wide inventions. Effective strategies engage young people in forming relationships with adults, mastering a skill, and contributing to both their own well-being and that of their communities. Research on adolescent development indicates the critical roles of a positive relationship with an adult and development of problem-solving skills in adolescent resiliency in the face of stress and trauma. Unfortunately, traditional junior high schools and most services for adolescents in America are organized in ways that provide little support and few opportunities for young people to develop relationships and practice problem-solving skills.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development recently released a “call to action” for Americans to increase dramatically the supports and opportunities available for young adolescents in their communities to enable them to build their capacities to become productive adults. [A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours](#), the report of the Carnegie Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs, presents a compelling case that new strategies are needed to counter the fragile social support structures, lack of

supervision, and dearth of opportunity for experiences that foster growth and development experienced by adolescents. The report declares:

By any standard, America's young adolescents have a great deal of discretionary time. Much of it is unstructured, unsupervised, and unproductive for the young person. Only 60% of adolescents' waking hours are committed to such essentials as school, homework, eating, chores or paid employment, while fully 40 percent are discretionary (10).

Many young adolescents spend much of that time alone. The 21988 National Education Longitudinal Study, which surveyed a nationally representative sample of some 25,000 eighth graders, found that approximately 27% of the respondents regularly spend two or more hours at home alone after-school. Eighth graders from families in the lowest socio-economic group were more likely to report that they were home alone for more than three hours, while those in the highest income group were least likely to be unsupervised for that amount of time.

Young adolescents do not want to be left to their own devices. In national surveys and focus groups, America's youth have given voice to a serious longing. They want more regular contact with adults who care about them and respect them, more opportunities to contribute to their communities, protection from the hazards of drugs, violence, and gangs, and greater access to constructive and attractive alternatives to the loneliness that so many now experience.

Young adolescents can, in short, be left adrift or they can be involved in community-based programs that are fun and that help them achieve the developmental tasks of youth (10-11).

Dr. James Comer, Co-Chair of the Task Force, argues that this situation is not merely a problem for youth, but rather a crisis for society that requires a broad response across social institutions. Changes in the labor market requiring advanced cognitive skills of more workers combined with diminishing capacity of family, church and neighborhood to support youth must be addressed by building and re-building community structure that provide adult and peer support for youth and provide them with opportunities to develop across broad areas of growth.

Comer states:

...even if we were to greatly improve our country's schools, we must also rebuild the developmental infrastructure for children and adolescents at the neighborhood level. We must make dramatic increases in the scope and availability of developmentally appropriate, community-based services for our young people, particularly those living in high-risk environments. We must attend to all aspects of their development makes adequate education possible, which in turn facilitates participation in the mainstream economy and the ability to fill family, community and citizenship roles (19)

This analysis suggests that contributions by many institutions and individuals will be needed to build supportive communities for youth. In identifying the existing resources in communities, after-school education programs stand out. They not only occupy the hours when many youth are alone and unproductive. The combination of their sponsorship or strong links with community-based organizations and their focus on education offer the potential that these programs may have unique contributions to make in strengthening and cognitive development of youth in high risk neighborhoods.

Research on cognitive development has demonstrated the importance of context to learning (Stith) and ethnographic studies of community youth programs (Heath, McLaughlin) have identified the critical relationship between context, culture, and motivation to learn. Developmental psychologists have added the availability of choice and decision making opportunities to the list of variables that affect young people's cognitive growth. (Coleman, Connell, Csikszentmihalyi). After-school education programs, operated by community-based organizations are a major source of such informal educational opportunities for young people (Larsen, Klieber, Pittman). In a survey of programs across the country, Karen Pittman of the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, found:

The programs and activities offered span all competency areas and include activities such as sports and recreation programs, life skills courses, community service, homework monitoring, problem prevention, and experiential science and math education.

Equally important, the practices and strategies used in delivering these services reflect a clear understanding of the importance of meeting young people's basic physical and social needs. Most compelling is the strong emphases on providing each adolescent with manageable challenges that encourage and reward progress and the development of a personal sense of achievement.

Their unique histories including the need to compete for students (participants) and the backgrounds of many founders in social group work, have led many programs to develop effective strategies for engagement. Pittman describes these as the "use of small groups, flexible grouping practices, symbols of membership (e.g. uniforms, t-shirts), and clear structures (e.g. regular meetings, codes of conduct) that recognize the importance of structure, belonging, and group membership to adolescents." Sponsorship by community-based organizations also gives some programs characteristics that are closer to home cultures of their participants than schools have, offering a climate for educational motivation.

This growing recognition of their importance places after-school education programs at a critical juncture. Programs have the potential of not only growing in number, but also of contributing new insights into the role of informal education in the cognitive development of disadvantaged youth. They have the potential to play significant direct roles and/or contribute to new pedagogical approaches that will be needed as schools consider extended days and year-round schooling. At their best, informal education programs serve as both motivators for learners and as learning environments themselves.

However, there are many serious impediments, rooted in the historical development and current operational status of after-school education programs, to their fulfilling a larger mission as central components of strategies to build comprehensive community-based learning environments. After-school education programs, traditionally funded as childcare for working parents or remedial supplements for underachieving students, generally have marginal status

and limited organizational capacity. Strategies would be needed to engage practitioners on after-school education programs in the dialogue of educational reform and youth development.

Impediments to the Emerging Mission

There are many problems characterizing after-school education programs, some of which characterize youth programs as a whole. As a field, youth programs tend to be isolated, lacking in a theoretical base, and unclear about what outcomes they should strive to achieve. This results in great unevenness of practice among programs and organizations, lack of clarity about effectiveness with varying groups of young people, lack of mechanisms for accountability, and little communication across and within the field about effective and ineffective program practices. Programs also typically have insufficient and unstable funding resulting in low salaries and a high degree of turnover in staff. These problems tend to be widespread among after-school education programs can make as core components of effective comprehensive supports for youth.

This paper recognizes the important potential of after-school education programs and serious limitations of their status and examines a proposal for forming a network of such programs to strengthen the field. It offers a rationale for such a network including a series of goals and potential roles, and it provides a framework for considering the feasibility of a network succeeding in meeting its identified goals. The inspiration to consider a network as a vehicle for strengthening the field comes from the experience of the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Center for Collaborative Education which have developed theoretically based associations of schools that have articulated best practices and provided mutual support for implementation.

Rationale for a Network

After-school programs are increasing in urban areas and are enrolling large numbers of youth who have low levels of academic achievement. National organizations such as Boys and Girl Clubs, which serves over 1 million low-income youth annually, have developed policies and supported programs to emphasize the importance of educational enrichment as a core activity recommended for each center. In New York City, over 500 community agencies offer some type of after-school educational enrichment, and their numbers are growing. These agencies are diverse and include settlement houses, churches, independent community-based organizations (which may or may not have a primary focus on education), affiliates of national youth organizations, and traditionally sports-oriented organizations such as the Police Athletic League which have recently begun offering tutoring and homework help at their centers.

This emphasis on the importance of a broad response to the educational needs of youth presents an important opportunity for the after-school youth programs to offer meaningful education that can both motivate youth towards learning, and engage them in the actuality of learning reading and writing, practicing decision-making and problem-solving skills. Yet, this is an enormous challenge. The need for programs has been widely recognized without a corresponding recognition of what constitutes effective program practice. Many programs, which have made outstanding contributions to the academic achievement of young people, remain unknown. There has been little documentation of how they achieved positive outcomes, and their staffs receive little or no recognition of their contributions. The lack of visibility of existing exemplary practice in these programs limits its spread across programs and its contribution to strategies for educational improvement. The current state of the field suggests

that the potential of the field to lead in providing meaningful learning experiences for youth is likely to be lost if serious attention is not paid to the following:

- strengthening its conceptual framework:
- articulating goals and standards of practice; and
- building the capacity of programs to offer meaningful learning opportunities.

Too many programs operate in isolation. Too many respond to the lack of academic achievement of their participants with remediation stressing drill and practice, ignoring their central strength as opportunity center for informal, conceptualized learning. The goal of network of after-school education programs would be to move the field through four strategies:

1. **Strengthening Identity and Visibility**

A network could raise public consciousness and change perceptions about the field of after-school education programs by “naming it”, identifying the human and societal needs the field meets or problems it solves, and defining the unique strengths of the field such as the methodologies of informal education.

The network being considered would aim to legitimize education in community program settings as a vital link in an overall education system for children and youth. After-school education programs need to be understood as more than sets of helpful but expendable activities. A network would have to explore and articulate what role these programs play in fostering cognitive development among young people, and especially, young people who have not been academic achievers. Most importantly, it would have to identify any unique contributions these programs can, or are, making and define and document the effect methodologies employed.

2. Articulating a Philosophical and Conceptual Base

A network could move the field of after-school education programs by identifying its theoretical underpinnings and articulating principles to guide programming and standards of practice.

After-school education programs will not be widely viewed as more than marginal until their work is rooted in and supported by theory and until the field can articulate standards of practice or “what is a good program and what is not a good program”. The theoretical basis for informal education has not been well articulated, but it clearly includes youth development, group work and contextual learning theories. Its principles then include both principles that promote cognitive development through contextual learning. Standards of Practice would follow from this and would have to address issues of educational philosophy and methodology (whole language approach to reading, multiculturalism, process writing) and program practices that would be consistent with child and adolescent development needs and tasks.

3. Building Capacity

A network could strengthen the field of After-school education programs by undertaking activities to build organizational capacity and improve practice.

A network could undertake practical projects and activities to build capacity in the field. Such capacity building supports would include:

- a) tools for decision-making about what is “best practice” – a network could inform the field by providing easy access to knowledge from research, including information on theory, exemplary practice and innovative experiments through newsletters, program, materials and resources, seminar, conferences, videos, and discussion groups.
- b) Staff and board development, parent involvement – a network could raise money for joint staff development and provide opportunities for board members and parents to attend seminars and discussions about the educational approach. The network could produce easy to use program assessment and other tools to assist

staff in evaluating their practices. A network could facilitate program exchange among groups so that, for example, parents could discuss educational issues across programs.

- c) Leadership to effect change – a network could identify weaknesses in practice in the field, acknowledge that both inertia and conflicts are typical and that programs need to confront them and struggle through to find resolution; a network could sponsor workshops, publications and dialogues that present dilemmas in educational practice and push a dialogue that explores alternative resolutions.
- d) access to models of successful programs and elements of programs – a network could identify and publicize models of exemplary practice and provide opportunities for programs to understand the process involved in achieving effectiveness. Program elements that have demonstrated effectiveness with particular groups of young people could also be identified and publicized.
- e) Affirmation and mutual support – a network could sponsor and encourage activities for mutual support such as program inter-visitation, workshops, staff exchanges, and conferences.
- f) Accountability through assessment – a network could promote accountability in the field by providing information and promoting dialogues about assessment.

4. Advocacy

A network could strengthen the field through advocacy for increased resources and support.

A network could advocate for greater understanding of the need for comprehensive community-based supports for youth; build a base of support for after-school education programs; address endemic problems (such as staff attrition due to low salaries) on a policy level, and advocate with government for policy changes to strengthen the field. A network could identify support for addressing a range of problems in the field as well as for documenting and strengthening practice that defines its unique contribution to education.

Feasibility Issues

A. Evidence

What's the evidence that a network can perform any of the above functions? Networks and coalitions exist in a variety of fields to support innovative practices based on either theory alone or a combination of theory and values. In some well-established fields, such as early childhood education and social work, these networks have evolved over time into professional associations, and new networks have arisen to support innovative practice. The growing network of family preservation /family support programs is current example. All of these networks have had some degree of effectiveness in strengthening their fields. A key question for these networks is whether they emphasize breadth or depth. The family preservation/family support network seems to stress breadth, looking to incorporate a range of approaches to family preservation. The Coalition of Essential Schools stresses depth. While looking to influence the field of education as a whole, it does not seek wide membership. Rather, it seeks to have fewer members but ones that can exemplify its theory in practice. An early task of a new network would be to explore the experiences of networks with regard to breadth and depth and come to a decision on what type of effectiveness is promoted by each and is most appropriate to achieving the goals of this network.

B. Support

What conditions are necessary to have a reasonable chance for a network of educational development programs to succeed? What has been the experience of other field?

The issue of what is needed to make change is of great concern to everyone from corporate leaders of political organizers. The investment of time and resources needed to build the network under consideration requires some attention to what experience has shown to be key factors contributing to success of such endeavors. Atelia Melaville and Martin Blank have written extensively about collaborations to support innovation. They identify the following five factors as critical to success: climate, people, resources, policies, and documented results. Blank has also articulated these factors as six: a climate for change, leaderships, and documented results. These areas provide a useful framework for considering a feasibility of a network of after-school education programs.

Climate

Blank suggests four conditions that support change through coordination or collaboration:

- The realization that a problem exists with some vision for solving it;
- Prior experience with coordinating services;
- A renewed stimulus for change; and
- Funding to get started.

Applying these criteria in New York City suggests a somewhat positive climate.

Discussions among directors of after-school education programs involved in several initiatives in New York over the past year have indicated a growing recognition that these programs have significant potential to contribute to improving educational achievement. By disadvantaged youth, but also recognition that there are serious deficiencies in many of these programs. It also appears to be true that an educational vision exists among a core group of programs who have participated in technical assistance from the Robert Bowne Foundation about how to strengthen the educational components of these programs. At

least twenty other programs in New York City participate in other types of collaborations programs may have gained knowledge about what works and doesn't work. While hundreds of programs remain isolated, there appears to be some evidence of receptivity to reaching out.

Several stimuli exist for program change, but is not clear yet how powerful these are. The Bowne foundation is acting as stimulus for change by providing incentives for after-school program to assess and change their educational approaches. Another stimulus is the prospect of significant funding in the future for informal, extended-day educational programs. There is still a question, however, of how much funding will be limited to schools or targeted at community agency/school partnerships. The growth of such partnership, however, funded by a variety of sponsors beyond education (Departments of Labor, Human Services, Youth Services) and corporate and foundation sources leads to an assumption that there may be potential.

People/Leadership

Leadership is often described as the spark of social change. It is certainly required for both starting processes of change and sustaining them. Leadership depends on people, and a clear task of the planning period is to identify people who could and would be interested in leading such a network. Based on the experience of other networks it seems that the strongest networks involve strong participation from practitioners and those more involved with policy and theory. All suggest the importance of strong leadership from those engaged directly in teaching or operating programs. During the planning period for this network, an ad hoc advisory committee has been formed which has indicated interest and leadership capability both through its members and by identifying others. The actual development process for a

network would need to expand this group, and determine if a leadership base exists and what its current strengths and limitations are. The planning process would also want to identify a range of other factors such as whether these likely leaders are in agreement on key issues such as the theoretical base, and whether they are fully representative of the field.

Resources

The planning process needs to identify what resources might exist to support a network. Are there sources of foundation and/or government support for the functions of such a network? The planning process would have to identify how other networks are funded as well.

Policies

Since the field is diffuse and programs are isolated it is not clear what policies govern after-school education programs. The planning process would need to identify whether there are currently policies that either support or thwart membership or participation in a network.

Action Steps

In addition to the above analysis a network planning process should meet two objectives:

1. reach a final decision on the value and feasibility of establishing a network, and
2. if affirmative, form an initial structure.

This concept paper was prepared by the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York to stimulate discussions among practitioners about the usefulness and feasibility of a network. After a series of focus groups are held, the Youth Development Institute will prepare a final report. If there is sufficient interest in pursuing development of a network, the report will contain recommendation for steps towards implementation.

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