

# AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS: WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT AND HOW SHOULD WE MEASURE SUCCESS?

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## **Summary:**

*To ensure that the growing number of afterschool programs successfully contribute to the learning and healthy development of young people, we need to agree on what we can appropriately expect from these programs and on how best to measure their effectiveness. In California, as in many other places, a key measure being used to judge afterschool programs is standardized test scores. It is becoming increasingly clear that test scores are not a useful measurement to assess the effectiveness of afterschool programs. In choosing the wrong outcome, we risk making these programs appear ineffectual, when in fact they provide significant contributions to young people's learning and development. This paper considers what expectations we can hold for these programs and considers the negative consequences of establishing the wrong expectations. It also suggests reliable accountability measures we can use to gauge the effectiveness of afterschool programs, ensuring that we can capture their contributions to young people's school success and broader development.*

## **Introduction**

The number of afterschool programs in this country has grown significantly over the past ten years due to burgeoning demand and strong support from the public as well as policy makers. According to polls, the general public, business leaders, family advocates, educators and law enforcement officers all agree that young people need access to safe havens in the afterschool hours— places that provide the support of caring adults and an enticing menu of productive activities.<sup>1</sup>

To ensure that afterschool programs successfully contribute to young people's learning and healthy development, we need to first agree on what we can appropriately expect from such programs and on how best to measure their effectiveness. Currently a key measure being used to judge afterschool programs in many states is standardized test scores. For example, California's state-funded afterschool grantees are required to submit annual scores from mandatory statewide tests that measure literacy and math skills with the expectation that afterschool participants will improve faster than those who do not participate. Many other programs using public and private funds have followed the state's lead in relying on test scores to gauge the effectiveness of afterschool programs.

It is, however, becoming increasingly clear that relying on school test scores as the primary criterion for assessing afterschool programs is a serious mistake – a mistake that makes these programs appear ineffectual, when in fact they provide significant contributions to young people's learning and development. It also results in program leaders shifting their priorities away from what they do well to priorities that they are not designed or funded to implement.

This paper describes the expectations we should hold for these programs and considers the negative consequences of establishing the wrong expectations. It suggests reliable accountability measures we can use to gauge the effectiveness of afterschool programs, measures that capture contributions to young people's school success along with measures of program quality.

### **Confusing Afterschool and School Accountability**

The rising number of working parents, coupled with voter beliefs that children should have access to safe and productive activities after school, fueled tremendous growth in the funding of afterschool programs across the country. In California, state funding of afterschool programs grew from \$3.6 million in 1997 to \$121 million in 2004. This increased funding for after school programs came at a time when policy makers also sought to boost the performance of public schools by tightening school accountability. In the end, policy makers paired new accountability measures intended for schools with those of afterschool programs, namely the performance of students on standardized test scores.

Afterschool programs, however, are very different from schools and should not share test scores as a common measure of effectiveness. Afterschool programs are not funded at the level of schools, are not staffed by credentialed teachers, and do not offer hourly wages and benefits paid to school personnel. Instead, they rely on part-time workers and volunteers, many without advanced degrees or credentials. Thus, researchers are increasingly advising afterschool programs against using school performance measures, such as test scores, to gauge the effectiveness of afterschool programs.<sup>2</sup>

Another important difference is that, unlike school, attendance in afterschool programs is not compulsory; it is fully voluntary. In order to attract and sustain the participation of young people who have already spent six hours in a traditional classroom setting, afterschool programs must distinguish themselves from school. This is especially true for programs serving older youth. Afterschool programs are well equipped to complement the learning children do in school, but they should not be expected to look like, or be held accountable for, the same outcomes as our public schools.

### **What Advantages Do Afterschool Programs Offer?**

A distinguishing advantage of afterschool programs is their ability to provide valuable learning experiences that appeal to children with a wide range of abilities and interests. Because afterschool programs are not subject to the same demands as schools, they can offer children opportunities to learn new things and in new ways—ways not always offered in school. These programs are able to re-engage and motivate young learners who are struggling in the traditional classroom setting. Below are some of the benefits and advantages that are unique to afterschool programs:

- *Topics of Interest:* Afterschool programs have the flexibility to pursue topic areas that young people find personally interesting and relevant. These topics include the sciences, visual and performing arts, civic engagement and community service, and physical activity—all of which can easily be aligned with school standards. In many communities, the ability of schools to offer these subjects is adversely effected by budget shortfalls and the need to shore up student performance in language arts and mathematics. Afterschool programs ensure that children who cannot afford fee-based enrichment programs have access to these important learning opportunities.
- *Learning in Small Groups:* Afterschool programs have child-to-adult ratios that are lower than most classrooms. Small group settings enable adults to focus on the individual needs of

young people, form personal supportive relationships, and engage young people in hands-on, experiential learning.

- *Time to Learn:* Some kinds of learning require more time than can be allowed in a classroom setting, especially in middle school, where youth move from class to class. This learning involves projects that require extra time to plan, to work within a larger team, to analyze problems and persevere until solutions are found. Some learning requires reflection on important lessons that were gained and the opportunity to share and be recognized for one's accomplishments. This sharing may come in the form of a presentation, a play or a recital, an art exhibition or service project, which may allow children to be acknowledged in ways they never experienced during the school day. Afterschool programs have flexible schedules that can allow young people to immerse themselves in a single program activity for the entire afternoon, if needed. In other cases, young people can participate in projects that build over several weeks or more. These kinds of projects promote important skills such as goal setting, project planning, teamwork, time management, and self-assessment.
- *Beyond Place:* Afterschool programs have the flexibility to go outside, beyond the walls of their facilities, using the surrounding neighborhood as a classroom. They are also able to bring the community into the school, by enlisting the talents and resources of individuals and surrounding businesses. Connecting to the local community broadens the variety of activities and experiences available to young people, honors the value of their own communities, provides young people with opportunities to contribute to others, and allows community members to see the learning and positive development of their children in action.
- *Active Learning:* The learning environment in afterschool is less formal than in school. Children are allowed to learn by doing and learn as part of a larger team. This approach is very attractive and motivating to young people who may be struggling in the traditional classroom setting.
- *Parental Access and Involvement:* Because programs extend into the late afternoon and early evening, afterschool staff can often engage the family members in ways most schools find difficult. Afterschool programs can serve as a communications bridge between the school and parents, thereby promoting a stronger partnership between them, especially when the afterschool staff live in the same community and share the language and culture of the parents and guardians. Afterschool workers are in a position to use parents as resources to better understand the experiences and needs of participants and to provide input on programming.
- *Diverse Teachers and Resources:* Afterschool programs rely on a wide variety of workers, including certified teachers, paraprofessionals, youth workers, college students, and community members. This flexibility allows afterschool programs to engage a diverse pool of workers that reflects the cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds of the young people in the program. These workers often present ideas, activities and resources that make education and learning feel relevant and compelling to young people, and thus inspire greater interest and motivation during the school day.

### **What Should We Expect of Afterschool Programs and What Can We Use to Measure Their Quality and Effectiveness?**

As public investments in afterschool programs have surged, children across the country are spending an increasing number of their discretionary (non-school) hours in these programs and they are returning to them year after year. As a result, these programs are becoming the third most important developmental influence in young peoples' lives, after home and school.<sup>3</sup> It is

important that we hold high expectations for afterschool programs – expectations that are clear, realistic and achievable. It is equally important that we select the right measures to assess their success.

Our expectations of afterschool programs should align with our knowledge of what young people need in order to succeed and on what these programs are best designed to deliver. Thus, afterschool programs should be expected to support young people’s success in school, promote their broader, healthy development, and offer enriching learning opportunities not found in school.

*Support School Success:* In order to be fully prepared for adulthood, it is essential that young people succeed in school. Research has shown that afterschool programs can support young people’s educational success in a number of ways, and there are reliable school-related measures outside of test scores to capture the contributions of these programs.<sup>4</sup> One area is homework completion. Many afterschool programs provide homework assistance, and their success can be measured by tracking the successful completion of homework.

When children participate in a positive afterschool learning environment, we can expect to see increases in young people’s attendance in the classroom, especially among those with the highest rates of absenteeism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, school attendance can serve as an important measure to gauge the impact of afterschool programs. Another good measure is the program’s influence on young people’s positive attachment to school itself. This can be reliably captured through youth surveys. Any teacher and school principal will agree that increases in homework completion, school attendance and positive attachment to school are critical contributors to improved academic performance.

While the above contributions are significant, they alone cannot improve young people’s performance on standardized test scores. Schools must effectively leverage the increased homework completion, school attendance and school attachment through their classroom activities.

*Offer Quality Developmental Learning Experiences:* We know from research that programs that successfully contribute to young people’s learning and healthy development offer a critical set of supports and opportunities.<sup>6</sup> These supports and opportunities include:

- a physically and emotionally safe environment;
- caring relationships with adults and peers who can provide guidance and support;
- learning activities that are new and challenging;
- responsible decision-making and leadership; and
- increased understanding of, and positive involvement in, their own communities.

In many communities, program leaders are claiming these supports and opportunities as “essential elements of quality programs” and putting them at the center of efforts to improve program quality. They are using them to develop program standards and identify best practices. They make sense to afterschool practitioners because they align with the strengths and resources that providers can bring to this work. They also match with what young people say they want from afterschool programs.<sup>7</sup>

There are now practical observation and survey tools to help program leaders measure the presence of these qualities within their programs. These tools offer relevant, real-time data to inform program improvement efforts in a way that is much more useful than year-end test scores.<sup>8</sup>

### *Offer Opportunities Not Found in School:*

As school budgets have tightened and the requirements of No Child Left Behind have increased pressure to improve test scores, learning opportunities that come with involvement in the arts, music, drama, community services, media technology and other areas have decreased dramatically. Low-income families that cannot afford fee-based enrichment activities will miss out on opportunities that research has shown to be important contributors to learning and healthy development. Afterschool programs have traditionally filled this gap with innovative programming in all of these areas. Their effectiveness in providing young people with these expanded learning opportunities not found in school can easily be measured.

### *Promote Physical Health and Fitness:*

Afterschool programs can also play an important role in promoting the physical activity that young people need and raising awareness about fitness. Again, school budgets and emphasis on test scores have sidelined recess and physical education during the school day. Afterschool programs often provide the only opportunities for young people to be active. This is particularly true in low-income, urban communities where children live in cramped housing quarters and being outdoors raises safety issues. The importance of these programs and activities is doubly underscored when we consider the rising rates of childhood obesity.

### *Provide Safe Havens and Fun Activities:*

Voters overwhelmingly support the funding of afterschool programs because they offer children safe havens in the afterschool hours when parents are working and unavailable to provide adult supervision. Many would agree that afterschool programs are successful if they are able to attract large numbers of young people, engage them in fun, productive activities, and ensure their safety in the afterschool hours. As described above, however, afterschool programs can do much more.

### **When Afterschool Programs Are Held Accountable for the Wrong Things**

There are a number of problems that arise when afterschool programs are held accountable for outcomes that do not match their strengths and capacity. Following the truism, “what gets measured gets done,” programs shift their priorities away from what they do well to priorities that are difficult to implement successfully. When academic test scores are used to judge these programs, program leaders are compelled to narrowly design their activities to mimic the activities of trained teachers. Aiming at the “test score target” does not encourage programs to offer rich learning opportunities not found during the school day – the very activities that voters and young people expect. Most people agree that these activities should include homework help, tutoring and other supports for school success. However, programs should also be expected to provide real world learning experiences, exposure to the arts, technology, the sciences, and more.

A misplaced focus on test score improvement can also effect who gets served. Some afterschool leaders are reporting that the focus on test scores results in pressure to give priority to students who are most likely to show test score gains or change in their individual quartile placement over those who require more time and academic attention.

Finally, when afterschool programs are assessed using the wrong outcomes, the results are likely to make them appear ineffectual, raising the possibility of funding cuts, while the positive benefits these programs provide to families and their children go unmeasured and undervalued.

### **The Expectations of the Voting Public**

While not all families have the same needs for afterschool programs, the vast majority believes that all families and youth should have access to them. What should these programs look like? If afterschool programs fail to raise test scores, will their funding be threatened? This idea seems to contradict the reason the voting public overwhelmingly supports spending on afterschool programs.

According to the 2003 National Voters Poll, the public believes that afterschool programs should maintain a focus on young people's broader development by offering "*hands-on learning opportunities, recreation, community service, and creative activities that inspire them to learn and grow.*" While most agree that afterschool programs should offer help with schoolwork, the majority believes that help with school is only one way in which programs should contribute to young people's growth and progress.<sup>9</sup>

In reference to the use of school accountability measures being applied to afterschool programs, the 2003 National Voters Poll report wrote: "*Voters do not want to see afterschool programs become an extension of the school day and do not believe that improving test scores should be the primary goal of the afterschool programs.*"<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Afterschool programs are a unique institution. They provide young people with the kinds of learning experiences and opportunities that may not be offered to children in their homes or classrooms. They offer young people opportunities to learn new things and develop important skills that are crucial to success in school and in life. They can engage all children, across ages and abilities, regardless of their learning styles and past history of success in the classroom. And they do all of this in the hours "between the school bell and the dinner bell", transforming a time that parents, educators and law enforcement describe as "high risk" into one of learning and opportunity for young people.

Our expectations of afterschool programs, and the outcomes and measures we use to assess their contribution to young people's lives should reflect the unique learning opportunities they can offer. Further, they should be realistic, taking into account the amount of time, the resources and the kinds of workers involved in afterschool programs. In order to make the most of the public and private investments in afterschool programs, let's agree on what we expect of these programs and the measures we will use to gauge their success.

Notes:

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- 1 *2003 Poll on Voters' Attitudes on Afterschool*; After School Alliance;  
<[http://afterschoolalliance.org/poll\\_reports.cfm](http://afterschoolalliance.org/poll_reports.cfm)>
- 2 *The Impact of After School Programs: Interpreting the Results of Four Recent Evaluations (a working paper of the WT Grant Foundation)*; Thomas Kane; 2004  
*Improving the Quality of After-School Programs* (commentary submitted to Education Week); Robert Granger and Thomas Kane; 2004
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 *A Decade of Results: The Impact of LA's BEST Enrichment Program on Subsequent Student Achievement and Performance*; UCLA Center for Study of Evaluation; June 2000  
< <http://www.lasbest.org/resourcecenter/ucla.php>>
- 5 Ibid
- 6 *Community Programs To Promote Youth Development: Executive Summary*. Board on Children, Youth and Families Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine National Academy Press. (2002)  
<[www.nap.edu/execsumm/0309072751.html](http://www.nap.edu/execsumm/0309072751.html)>
- 7 *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*; Michelle Alberti Gambone, Adena Clem and James Connell. (2002)
- 8 Resources for quality measurement tools for afterschool programs:  
High Scope Educational Research Foundation at  
<http://www.highscope.org/EducationalPrograms/Adolescent/YPQA.htm>  
The After-School Corporation at <http://www.tascorp.org>  
Foundations, Inc. at  
<http://www.foundationsinc.org/AfterschoolEducationFolder/afterschoolEducation.asp>
- 9 *2003 Poll on Voters' Attitudes on Afterschool*; After School Alliance;  
<[http://afterschoolalliance.org/poll\\_reports.cfm](http://afterschoolalliance.org/poll_reports.cfm)>
- 10 Ibid