

SUMMARY

Getting the Most From Afterschool:

The Role of Afterschool Programs in a High-Stakes Learning Environment

A Statement of the Cross-Cities Network of Leaders of Citywide Afterschool Initiatives

Increasing Support and Increasing Expectations

Over the past five years, we have witnessed overwhelming public support for afterschool programs, fed by the following:

- Desire to keep children safe and out of trouble
- Need for parents of all income levels to be employed
- Increased understanding of the importance of enrichment activities and programs in promoting healthy development
- Belief that programs can promote academic achievement, especially for low-performing youth

In response, we have seen a dramatic increase in the numbers and types of afterschool programs available to young people. We believe that programs should offer engaging learning opportunities that can attract and sustain the positive participation of all children. In addition, we believe that accountability and evaluation systems designed for afterschool programs should reflect this broad reach by including both assessment of the process features that promote effective programs, as well as youth outcomes that encompass both academic and non-academic domains.

Promoting Success in School and in Life

The research is clear: if young people are to succeed as adults, they must succeed in school. Afterschool programs can increase young people's engagement in school learning through activities directly linked to school goals as well as through the promotion of a broad range of skills that children and adolescents need in order to succeed. They also support classroom learning by providing participants with opportunities to practice skills they have learned in the classroom and apply them in real-life situations, increasing their motivation through experiential learning, and building positive expectations for the future by exposing them to places, people, and ideas beyond their usual experience.

Young people must acquire personal and social assets in multiple domains if they are to succeed in later years. Schools focus their efforts on building skills in the intellectual domain. Afterschool programs have a role to play in supporting these efforts, and also can help children by paying attention to three other areas that are also critical to healthy development—social, emotional and physical domains.

Positioned to Expand Learning

Schools facing the requirements of NCLB often find themselves narrowing their curricula as they increasingly focus on specific content knowledge. Afterschool programs often

have more flexibility to focus on the breadth of developmental needs of young people, including:

- *Numbers:* Afterschool programs have child-to-adult ratios that are lower than most classrooms.
- *Time:* Most programs are set up to serve children over the course of several years. Schedule flexibility allows for longer time periods devoted to projects, field trips, or community service activities, as needed.
- *Topic Areas:* Afterschool programs have the flexibility to pursue topic areas that align with the school day and that young people deem personally interesting and relevant.
- *Place:* Afterschool programs have the flexibility to go beyond the walls of their facilities, transforming the surrounding neighborhood into a classroom.
- *Diverse Teachers and Resources:* Afterschool programs rely on a wide variety of sources of staff, including certified teachers, paraprofessionals, college students, and community members.
- *Parental Access and Involvement:* Because programs extend into the late afternoon or early evening, afterschool staff often can engage the family members of young participants. Afterschool programs can serve as a communications bridge between the school and parents.

Measuring the Effects of Participation

Afterschool programs can and should be held to high expectations. The level of public investments in programs, the amount of time that children spend in afterschool settings, and young people's need for support warrants strong accountability measures. We believe that it is vital that we agree on the appropriate measures to judge program success and provide programs with the necessary resources to build their capacity to achieve these expectations over time.

Accountability systems should pay attention to process indicators (see box at right) as well as youth and family outcomes. Academic progress can be one measure of success, but it should not be the only measure of success for an afterschool program. Outcome measures should be closely aligned with the mission, goals, and activities of the afterschool program. Outcome measures should be closely aligned with the needs and ages of the young people participating in the afterschool program and should be as proximate as possible to the actual curriculum provided. Young people's own perceptions of the program and its effect on them are important indicators of success.

The National Research Council identifies 8 "Features of Positive Developmental Settings:"

1. Physical and emotional safety
2. Appropriate structure
3. Supportive relationships
4. Opportunities to belong
5. Positive social norms
6. Support for efficacy and mattering
7. Opportunities for skill building
8. Integration of family, school, and community efforts

(National Research Council, Community Programs to Promote Youth Development, 2002)

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