

# **What Do We Know About Afterschool Opportunities for Children and Youth from Low-Income Families? Where Should We Go From Here?**

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## Goals of Afterschool Programs

As afterschool programs have proliferated in the past decade through increased government and private funding, pressures for academic accountability have increased accordingly. Halpern (2002) has argued that the absence of a highly specific agenda for out-of-school-time programs historically has benefited children by allowing for flexible programming and responsiveness to the children's needs. However, with the influx of government funds and the increasing use of schools as sites, the agenda for many afterschool programs increasingly has become focused on raising academic achievement. This narrowing of focus can present challenges.

Research on the academic impact of afterschool programs is inconclusive. Children, parents, and communities often have widely varied nonacademic expectations for these programs. Expectations may include recreation, enrichment, safe supervision, reduction in juvenile delinquency and crime, and development of positive social relationships and life skills. Afterschool programs are challenged with balancing these various goals while establishing standards and outcomes that are well-aligned with the sometimes-conflicting needs and agendas of multiple constituencies.

While academic support and extended learning are reasonable goals for afterschool programs, many programs were initiated in response to students' needs for basic care, safety, and healthy development. A fundamental concern in many communities, and one that has motivated constituencies for afterschool programs, is that children and youth spend too many hours unsupervised or engaged in unproductive activities, such as watching television or playing video games. There is evidence that self-care for children younger than 8 or 9 years old is associated with poor school adjustment (Vandell & Shumow, 1999), and that unsupervised play with peers has negative effects for older children as well. The harmful effects of unsupervised time have been found to be greater for children from low-income families. Teens spending less time in afterschool programs or extracurricular activities, such as sports, music, and drama, have been found to have a greater propensity for engaging in risky behaviors, such as drinking, drug use, smoking, and getting into trouble with the police or at school (YMCA in the USA, 2001; Zill, Nord, & Loomis, 1995). Afterschool programs have the potential to provide healthy alternatives and to promote positive development in a variety of domains beyond academic achievement.

In this report, we summarize what we know about the impacts of afterschool programs on children and youth, look at what we know about students' access to these programs, and examine what we know about the quality of the programs based on a review of recent literature. The paper concludes with recommendations for program design and policy.

## Impacts of Afterschool Programs

The past decade's growth in afterschool programs is paralleled by a growing number of evaluation and research activities attempting to assess the effectiveness and impact of afterschool programs. Despite the relatively large quantity of recent evaluations, the collective findings do not reveal any clear patterns on the programs' impacts on their participants. Findings are best described as "mixed." Interpreting some of these studies has been a subject of debate because of the studies' methodological limitations and because of the choice of outcomes on which they focus. Below is a brief discussion of some interesting research findings as well as gaps in the evaluation literature that point to the need for further research.

### Academic Outcomes

Looking at the literature as a whole, one can find statistically significant improvement in a broad range of academic measures (e.g., test scores, grades, school attendance, homework completion) for afterschool program participants; however, the patterns of findings are not consistent across or within studies, even among those studies considered rigorous. Given the wide variation in program curricula, it is also difficult to conclude what really contributes to students' academic success, if success is in evidence.

A host of quasi-experimental studies for programs, such as LA's BEST, San Francisco Beacon Initiative, The After-School Corporation (TASC), and the After-School Achievement Program (ASAP), provide mixed findings on the programs' effects on academic measures (Huang, Gribbons, Kim, Lee, & Baker, 2000; Smith & Zhang, 2001; Walker & Arbretton, 2004). The study for LA's BEST reports improvements in school attendance and mathematics scores for some, but not all, grade cohorts. No measurable improvement in school and academic outcomes are reported for the Beacon Initiative. In the ASAP evaluation, of the 11 academic subjects for which pretests and posttests were conducted, statistically significant improvement was found in just two subjects: science and fine arts.

The national random-assignment evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs) (Dynarski, James-Burdumy, Moore, Rosenberg, Deke, & Mansfield, 2004; James-Burdumy, Dynarski, Moore, Deke, Mansfield, & Pistorino, 2005) studied programs specifically designed to improve academic performance as their primary goal. The study employs a rigorous random-assignment research design to evaluate total of 2,300 elementary school students who are divided roughly in half to program and control groups. It also included a quasi-experimental analysis for about 1,782 middle school students from a nationally representative sample of 21st CCLC programs, matched with 2,482 comparison students. The study collected the follow-up data through participant surveys. It also collected information from teacher and parent surveys, site visits, focus groups, school records, and SAT9 tests.

At the two-year follow-up, the random-assignment study of elementary school students under this study found no impact on test scores, homework participation, homework completion, or classroom attitude. This study has been the subject of criticism for having insufficient sample size to measure realistic test-score gains and for failing to thoroughly measure students' supervision status (Kane, 2004). Other experimental studies reviewed also reported no

significant impacts on academic measures for afterschool programs that strictly targeted at-risk youth (Lauver, 2002; Maxfield, Schirm, & Rodriguez-Planas, 2003).

## **Developmental Outcomes**

Research findings on nonacademic outcome measures are similar to those for academic measures. While studies taken together find improvement in a wide range of prevention and behavioral measures, findings are not always consistent within or across studies. The types of outcomes measures assessed by evaluations are varied. They included perceived safety, drug and alcohol use, delinquent behavior, sexual behavior, social and emotional indicators, self-esteem, interpersonal skills, leadership, and career aspirations. Most studies relied on self-reports of these measures rather than using assessment tools.

The 21st CCLC evaluation reported that, for the experimental study of elementary school students, the program reduced the percent of students feeling unsafe, but it did not decrease self-care time. The program also was found to have negative impacts on behavioral and developmental measures. Two other experimental studies found largely insignificant effects of the program on youth development measures, but found some evidence that students in the program were more likely to be involved in other activities and to have higher aspirations for future education (Lauver, 2002; Maxfield, Schirm, & Rodriguez-Planas, 2003). Other quasi-experimental and nonexperimental studies provide more optimistic findings (some studies showing a decrease in negative behaviors and an increase in self-esteem), but they are far from conclusive.

## **Outcomes for Children and Youth From Low-Income Families**

Most studies do not explicitly evaluate the program impacts for disadvantaged youth and children. Since almost all the programs under study are designed to target disadvantaged youth and children, it is usually implicit that the outcomes reported apply to those populations. Several correlational studies do examine the differential utilization and effects of afterschool programs by family income. For example, Posner and Vandell (1994) report that, based on a sample of 219 children recruited from schools in low-income neighborhoods, children attending afterschool programs had better grades, better conduct in school, better peer relations, and better emotional adjustment than those in informal care or self-care. The authors contrasted this finding with others from earlier studies that focused on children attending schools in middle-class neighborhoods. Another study by Zill, Nord, and Loomis (1995), based on national longitudinal data sets, finds that youth from low-income families are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities, which are in turn associated with lesser engagement in risky behaviors.

These studies provide support for the idea that afterschool programs for youth from low-income families serve to compensate for their participants' limited access to other extracurricular and enrichment activities, which may be too expensive or less available through the school day. Low-income children living in unsafe neighborhoods are also likely to realize additional benefits from programs providing safe spaces and adult supervision. A potential gain in academic achievement is only one among a variety of possible benefits to be realized from programs that provide healthy alternatives to long hours of self-care or unsupervised activity. More well-designed research linking specific program attributes to outcomes is needed to promote a better understanding of these benefits.

## Reach of Afterschool Programs

Research suggests that quality afterschool enrichment opportunities are not equally available to all. The data available from the last decade support concerns that children and youth from low-income and minority families have insufficient access to a safe environment and enriching activities during their afterschool hours. An analysis of national data in the early 1990s (Zill, Nord, & Loomis, 1995) found that teens who are from families with low levels of education or income, on welfare, or do not speak English at home generally spent less time in extracurricular activities than teens from families without such barriers. For younger children, income-related differential participation in enrichment activities also was noted in local studies (Posner & Vandell, 1994). The most recent comprehensive national data on school-aged children's program participation were collected by the 1996 *Survey of Income and Program Participation*, conducted in spring of 1997 (Smith, 2002). These data indicate that participation in enrichment activities (e.g., sports, lessons, clubs) and in afterschool programs had a positive association with family income. Overall, 26 percent of children whose family income was 200 percent or more above the poverty level participated in some type of enrichment activity. By comparison, only 9 percent of children whose family income was below poverty level participated in any sort of enrichment activity. Halpern (1999) analyzed the supply of programs available in three major cities and reported that about one third of schools in low-income neighborhoods offered afterschool programs.

The most current national survey data on participation in afterschool programs and extracurricular activities were collected by Public Agenda (Duffett, Johnson, Farkas, Kung, & Ott, 2004) and the After School Alliance (2004). The surveys used differing approaches to sample and word questions about program participation. The Public Agenda survey—the sample of which more heavily represented suburban youth—focused on the full range of out-of-school-activity participation among middle and high school students. It found that 57 percent of these students do participate in an organized activity at least once per week while 37 percent participate at least twice per week. The After School Alliance survey, focusing more narrowly on participation in afterschool programs, found that only 11 percent of children and youth in Grades K–12 participated in these programs. These contrasting findings suggest a need for greater consistency in specifying the terms used for out-of-school activities when researching patterns of utilization and need. Parents and youth in both surveys reported that more afterschool programs and more “interesting things to do” after school were needed, and many nonparticipants report that they would participate in afterschool programs if these were available. In addition, larger percentages of minority families (44 percent to 53 percent) reported that they would be likely to participate.

## **Defining Quality in Afterschool Programs**

The quality and the accessibility (in terms of cost, convenience, and location) of afterschool program opportunities available to low-income families are overarching concerns that affect participation and outcomes. Low-income and minority families are less satisfied than higher income and white families with the availability, convenience, affordability, and age-appropriateness of the options available to their children (Duffett, Johnson, Farkas, Kung, & Ott, 2004). A national study by California Tomorrow (2003) reported that a majority of programs were not well designed to accommodate diversity or to promote equitable access among diverse groups of youth. Halpern (1999) found that many afterschool programs in major urban areas were of poor or mediocre quality. Afterschool program staff were paid and trained poorly, and staff turnover was typically high.

Quality standards in afterschool programming can be difficult to establish given the multiple goals and mandates of these programs and the lack of research linking specific program elements to outcomes. However, new research is emerging that will provide guidance on the design and implementation of quality programs. Preliminary research on quality measures for elementary school programs was developed by Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) based on theories of developmentally appropriate practice, with quality measures validated through participant satisfaction surveys and program observations. High-quality staff-to-child interactions were found to correlate with staff education levels, low adult-to-child ratios, and flexible approaches to programming that offer students autonomy and choice. For older youth, program quality also has been associated with staff skills and ability to develop relationships with youth (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005). More recent research by Dadisman and Vandell (2005) provides new evidence that elementary and middle school students with high levels of participation in quality programs experience a variety of positive academic and behavioral outcomes when compared to students spending unsupervised afterschool time. Quality programs were identified based on structure (e.g., staff qualifications, ratios, materials) and on process (e.g., high-quality interactions, sustained activities).

## **Challenges of Recruitment and Retention in Afterschool Programs**

Sustaining consistent participation is a major challenge facing afterschool programs. Reasons may include weak outreach, weak program design or quality, high cost, or lack of accessibility. The evaluation of the 21st CCLCs, for example, found that average attendance among elementary school students who had access to the program was only 32 days during the second year of the study (about 1.1 days a week) with about 60 percent of them never attending the program. Among those who actually participated, attendance was higher: about 81 days a year during the second year of the study (about 2.7 days per week) (James-Burdumy et al., 2005). Among middle school students, attendance was lower. For the middle school students who had access to the program, the average days attended during the second year of the study was only nine, with 70 percent having never showed up for the program. Of those who attended the program during the second year of the study for at least one day, the average attendance was 30 days per year (or about one day per week). (Dynarski et al., 2004).

Halpern (1999) has noted that cost is a barrier to participation for low-income families. Although parents and teens have reported in surveys (Duffett, Johnson, Farkas, Kung, & Ott, 2004; YMCA in the USA, 2001) that they would make greater use of afterschool programs if they were available, many existing programs have difficulty retaining participants (Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004). Of particular concern is that attrition has been found to be highest for at-risk students (Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001).

Recruiting and retaining participants presents the greatest challenges for programs serving middle and high school youth. Surveys and interviews or focus groups (Duffett, Johnson, Farkas, Kung, & Ott, 2004; National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005; Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004; Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005) have found that, while many youths report a desire for more programs in their communities, attracting and sustaining their interest can be difficult. Youths may choose not to participate because they find programs uninteresting, do not like the other youths who attend, want more free time, lack a means of safe transportation, or have other responsibilities at home or work. Older youths also have concerns that afterschool programs are not age-appropriate. Youths and their parents may be reluctant to enroll in programs unless they are recruited directly by trusted community members, schools, or peers.

## **Recommendations**

### **Research Recommendations**

As discussed earlier, the literature on afterschool programs' impacts on children's academic, developmental, and other outcome measures is not conclusive. Furthermore, few existing studies have been designed to examine how particular, generalizable program practices lead to specific outcomes. Most studies are focused on the effects of a program in its entirety, and it is usually not possible to infer which element, if any, of the studied program is affecting participant outcomes. While examining the impact of a program as a whole has its merits, the inability to assess the effects of particular program elements limit the practical application of synthesized findings from these studies. Additional theory-based research is needed. In addition to expanding our understanding of an afterschool program's overall effectiveness in meeting its stated goals, we also need to learn the outcomes that can be expected by the implementation of specific program designs, activities, and strategies. Further research examining the relationship between specific program features and relevant child and youth outcomes (such as Dadisman and Vandell's [2005] current investigation of quality programs) could particularly benefit the development of quality standards for afterschool programs.

Further research efforts also should focus on the effect that the level of participation has on outcomes. Some studies, such as the quasi-experimental evaluation of the Extended-Service Schools Initiatives, report that the level of participation is correlated positively with outcome measures (Grossman, Price, Fellerath, Jucovy, Kotloff, & Raley et al., 2002). This indicates that the impact of the program may be best understood by examining the intensity of student involvement. Since many programs do experience inconsistent attendance in terms of both intensity and duration, it is particularly useful to understand what level of participation would be expected to impact key outcome measures.

### **Program Design Recommendations**

A low and inconsistent level of participation is often the reality for many afterschool programs. A variety of strategies for recruiting, retaining, and engaging youth have been explored (Lauver, Little, Weiss, 2004; National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005). Among the recommendations are that programs should allow flexible opportunities for participation, including drop-in, evening, and weekend hours; and they should offer age-appropriate independence and a variety of activity options from which to choose. Ensuring safe modes of transportation is critical. Programs serving older youths should consider leadership-development opportunities and paid-apprenticeship or work-experience programs. Older youths also should be involved in program decision making and design. If academics are included as an essential program component, strategies for engagement need to be considered carefully so youths are willing to persist in these activities beyond the school day. Some programs have experimented successfully with project- and field-based learning experiences.

The importance of program staffing in ensuring high-quality afterschool programs is well-supported by a variety of research strands in the children and youth development fields as well as by the emerging research on quality afterschool programming. Staff experience, staff training

and professional development, and the ratio of adults to children are key elements in effective implementation and engagement of children and youth as well as producing positive results for children and youth development in any domain.

Program planners should carefully assess the needs and interests of the target groups they intend to serve. Particularly in aiming to serve at-risk youth, program developers should consider the following:

- ∞ What out-of-school resources are already available in the community? Is the most effective strategy to develop new services or to enhance the capacity of existing services in community-based organizations?
- ∞ What are the differences in families' needs and interests by ethnic and language group, parents' employment status, and children's gender and age? Which groups are underserved, and why?
- ∞ How can program recruitment and outreach, services, staffing, and staff training incorporate attention to cultural, socioeconomic, and learning differences?
- ∞ What barriers to participation might exist, including transportation and safety concerns and competing interests or demands on youths' time? What peer relationships and effects need to be considered in designing the program and recruiting youth?

Parent involvement has been identified as a particularly important element in recruiting youths and ensuring regular attendance. The evaluation of the Extended-Services School Initiative (Grossman et al., 2002) found that parents' expectations correlated with children's attendance patterns. Programs that work effectively with parents have greater success in retaining youth. Program staff should involve parents in the discussion of program goals and potential benefits; they also should clearly communicate program attendance policies and make immediate contact with parents when children fail to attend. In one national survey (Duffett, Johnson, Farkas, Kung, & Ott, 2004) minority parents expressed a preference for programs with an academic emphasis, so programs may need to offer high-quality academic support but also consider educating parents about the value of nonacademic youth development activities. The following are other parental considerations programs need to make:

- ∞ Assess parents' needs and preferences when designing or modifying a program.
- ∞ Involve parents in discussion of program expectations and goals.
- ∞ Develop enrollment contracts and ongoing communication with parents to follow through on their children's attendance.

Program planners may need guidance in designing attendance policies and balancing some flexibility with the need to sustain sufficient intensity of participation for attendees to realize the desired benefits. Some afterschool program evaluations have found that attendance intensity correlates with positive outcomes. This implies that programs that maintain stronger participation levels can expect to have stronger impacts. However, more still needs to be understood about the contributions of various dimensions of participation, including intensity, duration, breadth, and engagement (Fiester, Simpkins, & Bouffard, 2005). Many afterschool programs offer multiple activities and choices, and child development theory and research supports the notion that this

availability of choice promotes healthy development and contributes to sustaining participants' interest. But little is known about the differences in outcomes that may result from participation in different mixes and schedules of activities or what duration and intensity of participation are optimal for producing positive outcomes.

## **Policy Recommendations**

A variety of rationales can support the expansion of well-designed, carefully targeted out-of-school-time programs. Policymakers should encourage the design of afterschool programs that are responsive to community needs, reflect community-supported program goals, and incorporate accepted standards of developmentally appropriate practice. These programs can increase access to enrichment activities for children and youths from low-income families, provide adult supervision and safe spaces for play when these are lacking at home, and potentially benefit children's growth and development in a number of domains. National surveys indicate that many low-income and minority families would like to see greater availability of high-quality, affordable afterschool program options in their neighborhoods. One of the best approaches to identifying and addressing afterschool-program shortages is for communities to conduct needs assessments that identify underserved locations, ages, and cultural groups and to solicit community input on how best to serve these groups.

Given the tendency toward multiple and sometimes conflicting agendas for afterschool programs, program sponsors should encourage well-designed and carefully targeted programs that align program features with specific goals. Ultimately, programs are most likely to have an impact if they are based on carefully considered relationships between program activities and desired outcomes. Desired goals and expected outcomes should be agreed upon through a community-based needs assessment and goal-setting process. Parents' commitment to the programs is an important factor in determining programs' success. Policy and program design should consider whether parents' and older youths' goals for the programs match those of the programs' sponsors and staff and should incorporate age-appropriate strategies for recruiting, engaging, and retaining participants.

More research is needed to fully understand the relationship between program design and specific outcomes, but the current state of knowledge about effective program practices is sufficient to guide program quality in critical areas, such as staffing and staff professional development. Policy should support and encourage the development of programs that hire, train, and retain well-qualified staff as well as adhere to other principles of effective practice as research on these principles continues to emerge.

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