



Family Matters

Update on Out-of-School Time

UW
Extension

A Family Impact Seminar Newsletter for Wisconsin Policymakers

Making the Most of Out-of-School Time: Promising Programs Can Enhance Achievement for At-Risk Kids

Out-of-school-time programs have captured the attention of state policymakers. At the federal level, the 21st Century Community Learning Center Programs provided almost \$1 billion in 2003 for block grants to the states; states award this money to local organizations that provide students in low-performing schools with services and programs to help meet the academic standards set by No Child Left Behind. At the state level, Californians voted for a six-fold increase in funding for after-school programs in a 2002 ballot initiative. Thus, it is no surprise that policymakers and the public alike want to know whether out-of-school-time programs are effective and what distinguishes successful programs from the rest.

What Are Out-of-School-Time Programs?

Out-of-school-time activities run the gamut from organized, publicly- or privately-subsidized programs to informal arrangements for lessons or sports. Some parents turn to groups like 4-H or the Boys and Girls Clubs, and others rely on enrichment programs operating in cooperation with schools. Formal programs can include both academic and social skill-building projects, ranging from homework assistance to activities geared toward fitness, arts, and computers. With the new accountability standards put in place by No Child Left Behind, school officials are increasingly interested in collaborations designed to use children's time outside the classroom to enhance academic performance.

Do Out-of-School-Time Programs Work? For Whom?

Studies suggest that education is one of the best means of moving children out of poverty. Yet researchers point out that educational opportunities for disadvantaged children can—and should—extend beyond the classroom door if they are to equip young people with the social, academic, and personal skills to overcome economic disadvantage.¹ For example, both advantaged and disadvantaged kids learn at the same rate during the school year. However, during the summer months, the test scores of advantaged kids improve, while disadvantaged kids tread water. At the end of primary school, the widening of the achievement gap between low-income kids and their middle-class peers can be entirely explained by these summer learning losses. For poor children to keep up requires extra enrichment experiences like those that middle-class parents routinely provide.²

The research linking out-of-school-time programs with improved behavior and achievement provides conflicting evidence: in some cases, programs have improved students' grades or attendance, and in others students showed little or no change. Thus, some programs work, but not all.^{1,3,4} This has led researchers to conclude that characteristics of the program play an essential role in program effectiveness.

What Are the Characteristics of Successful Programs?

Research shows that five characteristics make for more or less effective efforts: quality activities, quality staff, quality time with peers, the capacity to deliver services, and linkages with families.^{5,6}

Quality activities: In a recent study, UW-Madison researcher Deborah Vandell and her colleagues⁴ found that promising after-school programs were structured-time efforts that focused neither solely on recreation nor homework assistance alone. Vandell emphasized that quality programs were not just more school; by the end of the school day, kids were ready to try something different. Successful out-of-school programs are creative in teaching concepts like math in ways that build on students' interest in non-academic subjects such as music and cooking. Also, a program in Michigan had students learn computer skills by designing web-pages for local businesses. The key is to build on students' interests in sports, music, or drama, and to provide hands-on activities in small group settings.

The best outcomes for students came from programs where participants had access to a variety of spaces and materials. Successful programs made use of classrooms, auditoriums, playgrounds, and specialized areas like gyms, art rooms, libraries, and computer labs.

Quality staff: Highly-skilled, trained staff are paramount in the effectiveness of out-of-school-time programs. In successful programs, Vandell and her colleagues⁴ found that staff took a hands-on approach to their instruction, established nurturing relationships with their students, and showed an interest in the children's lives outside of the program. Research shows that strong student/staff relationships also help to sustain students' involvement over time.²

With regard to staff background, the majority of both successful middle school program directors (80%) and elementary school directors (69%) had at least a college degree. At both levels, approximately half of the activity leaders had at least a college degree, while nearly a third of middle school program instructors and almost a fifth of elementary school program instructors were certified teachers. Lastly, the vast majority of successful programs recognized the importance of in-service training for staff.

Quality time with peers: One of the key elements to program success is providing opportunities for students to have positive relationships with one another. Additionally, quality programs encourage students who might otherwise be isolated to develop a peer support network.

The capacity to deliver such services: In evaluations, one of the most consistent findings is that programs must improve attendance to achieve their goals. No program can make a difference in the lives of young people if youth don't show up.⁶ Parents play a big role, but so do program staff. Attendance is better when the activities are age-appropriate and when staff deliberately try to track down participants.

Vandell and her colleagues⁴ found that successful programs forged strong linkages with other organizations in the community. For example, over half of program directors conferred with school principals two or three times per month, and more than one out of three met with the principal weekly. Activity leaders and program directors alike consulted with school staff on curriculum concepts, homework assignments, individual students, and use of classroom space. Organizations outside the program sometimes contributed a staff person to lead a special workshop, or allowed students to use specialized materials or space.

Linkages with families: Perhaps most importantly, successful programs established linkages with the families of





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Interested in Promising Out-of-School-Time Programs?

Check Out This Website

The Harvard Family Research Project
<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/after-school/evaldatabase.html>

The Harvard Family Research Project Out-of-School Time (OST) Program Evaluation Database provides accessible evaluation information for both large and small out-of-school time programs. Each profile contains an overview of the out-of-school time program, as well as detailed information about each program evaluation. The database also provides electronic links to actual evaluation reports when available, as well as contacts for program directors and evaluators. The profiles are searchable on several key criteria. New profiles are added and existing profiles are updated quarterly.



participating students. Many had course offerings catering to parents, including classes to develop parenting, employment, and English language skills. Program staff also met with parents in person and spoke on the phone, held events for parents, or sent information home to them. These efforts strengthened adults' connection to the program, and thereby enhanced the likelihood of students' continued involvement.

Why Are Policymakers Interested?

Participation in out-of-school time programs is one way that low-income kids are disadvantaged. Fewer than one in ten children whose families earned between \$15,000 and \$25,000 took some kind of formal lessons, compared to one out of five children in families with incomes over \$50,000.³ According to the Carnegie Corporation,¹ quality after-school programs for at-risk youth can contribute to their positive development and potential for future economic security.

As local schools cut their budgets, access to out-of-school-time programs has become a bigger issue. Some schools have eliminated many of the clubs and extracurricular activities that middle and high school students particularly enjoy. Other schools have instituted fees that may prohibit the participation of limited-resource youth, who may be most apt to profit from their participation.

Many out-of-school-time programs are grass-roots efforts, often run in large part by volunteers. These community programs often operate in isolation and might benefit from what other programs have learned about how to use young people's time outside the schoolhouse to better effect. A state technical assistance center could provide access to the growing body of knowledge regarding out-of-school time—model programs, best practices, student recruitment and retention, evaluation strategies, and funding sources.

Resources

¹ Carnegie Corporation Taskforce on Youth Development and Community Programs (1992). "A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours." Washington DC: Author.

² Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Olson, L. S. (2001). Schools, achievement and inequality: A seasonal perspective. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23, 171-191.

³ Vandell, D. L., & Shumow, L. (1999). After-school child-care programs. *The Future of Children: When School is Out*, 9(2), 64-80.

⁴ Vandell, D. L., Reisner, E. R., Brown, B. B., Pierce, K. M., Dadisman, K., & Pechman, E. M. (2004). The study of promising after-school programs: Descriptive report of the promising programs.

⁵ Vandell, D. L. & Pierce, K. M. (2002). After-school programs and structured activities that support children's development. In R. Garner (Ed.), *Hanging out: Community based after school programs for children* (pp. 167-178). Westport CT: Greenwood.

⁶ Granger, R. C., & Kane, T. (2004). Improving the Quality of After-School Programs. *Education Week*, 23, 76-77.

Single copies of these references are available from the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars at (608) 262-0369.

Connecting with the Experts

Questions on after-school time? Contact:

Professor Deborah Vandell
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Professor Deborah Vandell holds joint appointments in the Departments of Educational Psychology, Human Development and Family Studies, and Psychology. She has over 20 years' experience in early childhood care, children's development, and out-of-school-time activities. Dr. Vandell is the principal investigator for several large multi-site studies, including the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, a national collaborative study examining child care, school, and family issues regarding children's development. She also directs the After-School Experiences Study, which focuses on the after-school, evening, and weekend experiences of middle-school youth, and is part of the national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. You can contact her at (608) 263-3883 or dvandell@wisc.edu