

**Bridging the Gap Between Family and School: After-
School Programs for At-Risk Youth**

Christopher A. Tittle

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Dr. Harlan Beckley

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Growing up in the South Bronx is not easy. Like many urban communities, the South Bronx is plagued by violence, drug use, crime, poor housing and schooling, and an overall lack of opportunities and services for members of the community. However, despite the many temptations and pressures that children from this community face on a daily basis during their non-school hours, there are still many positive influences at work. For Francisco*, now a 20-year-old Hispanic male attending Hunter College in Manhattan, the positive influences of his youth manifested themselves primarily through family. Raised mostly by his mother in a single-parent household, Francisco attributes most of his current success to the love and support of his mother and his brother and two sisters. However, there is another family that has played an equally important role in his academic and personal development – his family at Camp Interactive.

Camp Interactive (CI) is a grassroots non-profit organization that offers summer and after-school programs for inner-city youth in the South Bronx and the surrounding communities. Through the combination of challenging wilderness-based adventure activities and the creative power of technology, CI strives to produce an enriching, positive, and motivational program for potentially at-risk students. Through his extended participation in Camp Interactive's summer programs and technology training courses, Francisco was exposed at an early age to technology and computer graphics, as well as the exciting and inspiring opportunities that New York's natural environments have to offer. These perspective-broadening experiences allowed Francisco to cultivate a greater appreciation for the environment and its place in his community; and the desire to explore

* Name has been altered to protect privacy

and create using the technological skills he learned with CI. Empowered by his new-found abilities in computer programming and graphic design, Francisco was able to parlay his interests into a successful business venture as a freelance graphic artist and website designer. As a sophomore Neuroscience major at Hunter College, Francisco now splits his time between his studies, his graphic design work, and his role as a staff member and peer counselor at Camp Interactive.

Francisco is a unique individual with many special talents and interests, yet he, like all human beings, is a product of his environment. Unfortunately, his environment, and those of millions of other children, has been directly impacted by the effects of poverty. As a result, arguably the two most important institutions in the growth of any child – the family and the school system – are often unable to fulfill the developmental and educational objectives that they were designed to meet, leaving a significant gap in the opportunities available particularly to inner-city youth. Single parents often have to work long hours, leaving them unavailable to look after their children during out-of-school time. Urban schools, already overcrowded and lacking sufficient resources, often do not have the capabilities to implement high-quality after-school activities on their own, leaving many children to care for themselves.

While the deficiencies of the school system and the decline of the family have both been well documented and discussed in recent years, the emergence of a new field of discussion regarding this gap in services available to our youth has only recently received the attention that it merits. Particularly in light of the continued failure of our society to implement far-reaching educational reforms, people have begun to acknowledge that more well-organized and structured programs are needed to actively

engage our youth in positive and enriching activities.¹ The field of after-school programs has hence come to encompass a vast and diverse array of programs and organizations with often very different structures and goals. Yet these programs share a common goal of trying to fill the void of inequity and lack of progress left behind by the cumulative effects of poverty and failing schools. As Francisco put it, he needed something else to provide that “spark” for him, to empower him to take on new challenges along his path to becoming a productive adult.

Although the potential benefits of expanded after-school programming should be offered to all children, the focus of this paper will be exclusively on low-income, minority students – those that face significant structural barriers to success on a constant basis. As a result of such barriers, a substantial achievement gap between low-income and minority students and their more affluent peers has persisted for decades. Encouragingly though, many studies are now finding that students who are the most at-risk for academic failure generally benefit more from structured after-school programs. Programs that provide specific activities that serve an established goal and operate on a consistent timeframe offer the most structure, and often the greatest impact. Additionally, since more studies have documented the potentially positive effects of early childhood programming, this paper will focus on programs available to adolescents in their middle and high school years. Because these are the years when students are the most at-risk of disengaging from academic pursuits and becoming involved in dangerous activities such as crime and drug-use, programs targeted at this age group represent a crucial concern for society.

¹ Quinn, Jane. “Where Need Meets Opportunity.” *The Future of Children* 9.2 (1999), 96-97.

To meet the range of needs of this diverse population of students, a correspondingly diverse group of after-school programs have developed in recent years. In attempting to explore and analyze this growing field, several fundamental research questions form the basis of this paper:

- 1) How are programs structured differently to achieve varying goals? Specifically, who are they administered by, how are they staffed, and where do their resources come from?*
- 2) What should we expect after-school programs to accomplish?*
- 3) What outcomes have these programs demonstrated and how have they been evaluated?*
- 4) How do these programs interact with other important institutions like schools and families?*
- 5) What can be done to improve quality and increase access to effective programs?*

The bulk of this paper will treat the structural elements of after-school programs and the observable impacts of participating in these programs to determine if they are even capable of producing the types of effects expected by the consumers and designers. As with all public-policy initiatives, high-quality statistical analysis is needed to chart long-term effects of participation in these types of programs. Unfortunately, this field is currently in need of more comprehensive and rigorous studies to determine how effective after-school programming has been in addressing both developmental and academic goals. It is also extremely important to consider the role of after-school programs in its proper context, as a field of organizations and programs working in concert with a host of other

agents. As the discussion of the challenges and limitations of after-school programs shows, this emerging field is not a comprehensive solution to the failings of the public school system and the economy to incorporate the large number of marginalized low-income and minority youth.

The Structure of After-School Programs

As more attention has been focused on how our youth use their out-of-school time, the field of after-school programs now encompasses a considerable variety of programs and activities. This paper focuses on structured programs that take place during out-of-school time (understood as summer, before-school, and after-school time). Additionally, it considers only programs that include an academic proponent alongside of social or developmental aims. Thus, sport, troop, or mentoring organizations such as Little League, Boy and Girl Scouts, YMCA, and Big Brother/Big Sister, despite their valuable services, are not discussed to a great extent.² Similarly, only programs that incorporate some form of group interaction are relevant to this study. While one-on-one tutoring programs have been shown to have large positive effects on academic achievement for at-risk students,³ programs limited to this activity lack the community focus important to this paper. Despite this narrow definition, current after-school programs still vary significantly in their goals, activities, and structures.

²Quinn, 99.

³Lauer, Patricia A. *et al.* "Out-of-School Time Programs: A Meta-Analysis of Effects for At-Risk Students." *Review of Educational Research*. 76.2 (2006), 295.

Providers

The largest administrators of after-school programs are publicly-funded schools and private nonprofit organizations. Examples of these include community centers, religious youth programs, and independent grassroots organizations.⁴ Private nonprofit organizations have an especially wide array of different sized organizations and targeted populations. For instance, smaller grassroots organizations tend to focus specifically on at-risk students and have been found to be particularly successful at addressing the needs of this population. Camp Interactive offers one example of this type of organization. It targets academically at-risk students from the South Bronx community where it is located. These types of organizations, due to their relative size, have been tough to evaluate or study systematically. As a result of their specific focus and flexibility in adapting to local needs, they may be more effective than research has previously indicated. More comprehensive evaluations of these programs are needed to truly know their effects. Community centers and organizations also tend to target low-income students, although these types of programs can be relatively under-funded and staffed. They are often effective partner organizations because they can provide facilities for organizations that do not have a permanent location. Due to their proximity to some low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, community centers are able to be flexible and responsive to the needs of local communities despite inadequate funding and program development.⁵

School-based programs also demonstrate a surprising variety in their approaches and structure. School-administered programs are generally comprised of formal extended-day programs where students remain in the school building after normal hours

⁴ Halpern, Robert. "After-School Programs for Low-Income Children: Promise and Challenges." *The Future of Children*, 9.2, (1999), 83-84.

⁵ Quinn, 100.

to participate in a variety of enriching activities. The new emphasis on educational attainment and positive youth development has increased the after-school opportunities available to students, going beyond traditional extracurricular activities such as sports teams and theatre clubs to include tutoring, home work help, and technology classes.⁶ In addition, school-based programs may be administered jointly by private community-based organizations and the schools. These programs are generally designed and staffed by the private organizations, with the school donating its facilities and some of its academic resources to the program. School staff is sometimes incorporated into the staff and volunteers of such programs, but these types of joint relationships have often led to conflicts, as will be discussed.

Activities

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In addition to traditional recreational activities, most after-school programs strive to provide academically and developmentally enriching activities. These activities must interest and engage adolescents while providing sufficient freedom and choice to maintain their involvement. The most prevalent activity reported by most after-school programs is homework help. Tutoring sessions, small group lessons, and extended work with teachers are characteristic of such activities. When such emphasis is combined with experiential and adventure learning, or service and project-based learning, teenagers are more likely to respond positively and participate more consistently.⁷ For instance, Camp Interactive has been successful at maintaining student involvement throughout the school

⁶ Dryfoos, Joy G. "The Role of the School in Children's Out-of-School Time." *The Future of Children*, 9.2, (1999), 121.

⁷ Miller, Beth M. "Critical Hours: After-School Programs and Educational Success. Executive Summary." Nellie Mae Education Foundation (2003), 13.

year by offering weekly math tutoring as a complement to their adventure-based summer programs.

The activities offered by a program depend on its main focus and goals. Those that seek to enhance academic achievement will offer more structured curriculums and opportunities to work with tutors and teachers. Others primarily serve as a safe haven in dangerous neighborhoods and an alternative to unsupervised peer interactions. Programs designed to prevent negative, dangerous behavior and emphasize personal and social development rely on group-based activities and service projects to positively engage students with peers, adults, and community members. Students Sharing Coalition, a nonprofit organization in Baltimore, MD, organizes service learning activities for high school students on weekends, involving students from over 20 area schools in community action and civic engagement activities. Such organizations rely heavily on spreading awareness of community issues to students and encouraging them to participate consistently. Offering “voice and choice”– the opportunity to influence what activities are available and which activities they wish to participate in – is essential to designing activities for middle and high school students.⁸ Indeed, one meta-analysis of after-school evaluations found that of those programs that offered more than one activity, providing participants with a choice was crucial to their consistent participation.⁹

Staff

Due to the very nature of most after-school programs, staff, outside of program directors, work only part-time. As most after-school programs operate on limited budgets, salaries

⁸ Quinn, 105.

⁹ Scott-Little, Catherine *et al.* “Evaluations of After-School Programs:A Meta-Evaluation of Methodologies and Narrative Synthesis of Findings” *American Journal of Evalutaion*. 23.4 (2002).

are generally quite low and thus do not necessarily attract the most qualified applicants. In one particular study of programs in several cities, front-line workers were paid between \$5-\$9 an hour while directors and coordinators received only slightly more.¹⁰ Given the higher wages of similar jobs in competing fields, many programs rely heavily on volunteers and individual leaders. Low wages and short hours often result in high staff turnover, reaching as high as 40% per year in some organizations.¹¹ Those programs based in schools also have a hard time attracting school staff and teachers to participate as teachers operate on much higher wage scales and do not always have additional time to devote to after-school programs following the school day.¹²

Staff quality is another significant issue. Due to the lack of adequate compensation and opportunities to advance, front-line staff generally do not have high levels of education or the relevant training. Staffers tend to be young and only committed to one particular job for a couple years at most, so there is little incentive to focus one's education in such a field. While organizations need additional training and staff development programs, the wide range of program goals and activities make it nearly impossible to develop a universal after-school staff training regimen. Thus, comprehensive efforts need to be undertaken to address the low wages, high turnover rates, and lack of professional development and training programs that characterize the after-school field.

¹⁰ Halpern, 88.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Lerner, Mary B., Lorraine Zippiroli, and Richard E. Behrman. "When School Is Out: Analysis and Recommendations." *The Future of Children*, 9.2 (Autumn, 1999), 14.

Funding

A lack of adequate funding is one of the primary challenges affecting both the quality and accessibility of all after-school programs, particularly those serving low-income families. According to the 1993 National Study of Before- and After-School Programs, parental fees comprise the majority of funding for most after-school programs, although this percentage is significantly lower for programs targeting low-income students.¹³ On average, parental fees covered close to 63% of costs for such programs, leaving a significant gap in financial resources for programs serving families that lack the ability to pay. Indeed, cost is a significant barrier for parents who cannot afford to send their child to a high-quality but costly after-school program.¹⁴ To cover this gap, programs targeting low-income families receive a higher percentage of government funding. While government funds are available to certain programs, they often come with requirements that restrict the type of activities and goals that programs are able to implement. Since government funds limit programming, many after-school programs rely on private funding as a significant source of financing. While many programs utilize a combination of parental fees, government funding, and private donations, organization like Camp Interactive prefer to be entirely privately funded in order to control program development and implementation.

Unfortunately, like many other aspects of after-school programming, there is still a relative lack of information regarding the extent and efficiency of public funding.¹⁵ Particularly for programs located in low-income communities, finding a stable source of

¹³ Seppanen, Patricia S. *et al. National Study of Before- and After-School Programs*. Washington, DC: Office of Policy and Planning, US Department of Education, 1993, 99.

¹⁴ Larner *et al*, 8.

¹⁵ Larner *et al*, 13.

funding can be the difference between establishing a readily accessible, high-quality program that serves a large number of students and relying on volunteers and donated facilities to serve only a handful of students. Without more comprehensive measures of success, it will remain difficult for public sources to establish a systematic method of evaluating which programs to fund. Therefore, alternative sources need to be found that can help supplement parental fees and provide an adequate source of funding to programs that often need financial help, namely those working in low-income communities with at-risk students.

Expectations for After-School Programs

Historically, the public school system and the family have been the two fundamental vehicles for preparing children to enter society as productive citizens. However, these two institutions have shown that they are not fully capable of fulfilling this goal in low-income communities. Thus, parents and policy-makers have begun to look at after-school programs as another link that can provide academically and developmentally enriching activities for students of all ages. Adolescents and teenagers in particular are beginning to exercise their personal freedom, but are still vulnerable to negative peer and environmental influences. After-school programs can be a positive source of development that supplements learning done in the classroom and on their own time. Furthermore, as low-income students are generally concentrated in unsafe neighborhoods, after-school programs also provide a safe haven from the detrimental effects of crime, violence, and drugs. Thus, after-school programs can serve a variety of important functions including socially engaging students with peers and adults,

preventing high-risk behavior and providing a safe haven, enhancing academic achievement, and enriching social development.¹⁶

Students expect to use their out-of-school time to enjoy themselves in recreation and to hang out with peers. Thus programs must incorporate fun and challenging activities to maintain student interest, particularly with older students that have more options for what to do with their free time.¹⁷ Simultaneously, programs must provide ample time to interact with both peers and adults, as this can help develop important communication skills with a range of people. For students, “decision-making, autonomy, and social relationships” are the key components to an engaging after-school program.¹⁸ For participants such as Francisco, it was the opportunity to hang out with friends while participating in something new and exciting that kept him involved with Camp Interactive. Programs that introduce new skills, such as technology, or previously unavailable and unknown activities, such as rock climbing and canoeing, can be highly effective at engaging students and providing stimulating experiences.

Parents, on the other hand, expect after-school programs to provide a safe haven from dangerous neighborhoods and unsupervised out-of-school time. Due to inflexible work schedules, many low-income parents are not available to personally supervise their children after school or during some of the summer months. Especially for families living in communities with high rates of crime and violence, parents are very concerned with the safety of their children. For instance, Camp Interactive is located in a neighborhood with high levels of gang activity. Thus, it offers a safe alternative to unsupervised and potentially dangerous interactions on the street. Even for those not explicitly worried

¹⁶ Dryfoos, 122.

¹⁷ Quinn, 105.

¹⁸ Larner *et al*, 8.

about gangs, studies have shown that the majority of children's free time is now spent watching television.¹⁹ While this may be considerably safer than wandering the street with friends, watching television for several hours a day does not represent a productive or enriching after-school activity. Thus, after-school programs operate as a safe haven and a place to get structured supervision.

Students' use of after-school time can have broad academic implications as well. The links between economic productivity and academic achievement have been well documented and accepted.²⁰ Concurrent with the expectations of both parents and students, enhancing academic achievement for low-income and at-risk students represents a broader social concern. Programs that help to raise academic achievement among minority and low-income students have the potential to narrow the achievement gap that has existed for decades. Through exposure to previously unavailable academic resources such as school supplies and a quiet environment to do homework, academically enriching programs can foster larger academic gains throughout the school year and help low-income students perform better on standardized tests. The opportunity to receive more personalized attention from tutors, teachers, and mentors is an added advantage that after-school programs can offer to supplement learning done in school.

Policy-makers, parents, and students are all concerned with promoting socially and emotionally healthy individuals. Positive youth development, distinct from mere problem prevention, can have a range of effects on individuals, groups of peers,

¹⁹Posner, Jill K. and Deborah Lowe Vandell. "Low-Income Children's After-School Care: Are There Beneficial Effects of After-School Programs?" *Child Development*, 65.2 (1994), 447.

²⁰Becker, Gary S. 2002. "The Age of Human Capital." Ed. Edward P. Lazear. *Education in the Twenty-First Century*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press. Pp. 3-8.

communities, and society at large.²¹ Programs with a behavioral or developmental focus can foster social, emotional, and moral competence as well as a range of other socioemotional factors through positive interaction with peers and adults, learning constructive ways to deal with problems, and being exposed to positive and diverse groups of people. The Aspen Youth Experience, a nonprofit organization based out of Aspen, CO that runs summer and winter programs for inner-city youth across the country, stresses positive emotional and social development through experiential learning as well as large group discussions. Physical activities designed to push participants beyond their comfort zone are complemented by “rap sessions” where participants share their personal struggles and receive positive feedback from the entire group. This establishes lasting support systems and helps each individual face their problems in a more constructive manner. Similarly, many minority families recognize the barriers to success that their children face on a daily basis and are insistent that their children focus on their educational and personal development.²² While familial interaction is the best way to instill these types of values, some after-school programs can supplement and replace parental supervision to prevent high-risk behavior and instill positive qualities and values in youth. Indeed, engagement in positive and enriching activities can have a substantial impact on reducing juvenile crime, drug-use, and other high-risk anti-social behavior.²³

After-school programs play many essential roles during the critical hours between school and family supervision. From the standpoint of several important actors,

²¹Catalano, Richard F. *et al.* “Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs.” *The Annals of the American Academy*. 591 (2004), 100-101

²²Hrabowski III, Freeman A. *Beating the odds: raising academically successful African American males*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1998, 64.

²³ Catalano *et al.*, 117.

including students, parents, and policy-makers, these programs offer the potential to fulfill previously unmet needs. Effective programs need to be designed with these expectations in mind, although this may appear to be a daunting task. The most comprehensive programs, as we shall see, incorporate some element of all of the major expectations in a holistic manner, providing the safety, fun, and academic and social development necessary to help overcome the disadvantages of poverty.

Empirical Outcomes of Program Participation

Despite the increasing literature on after-school programming, there seems to have been little attempt at a rigorous, systematic analyses of the effects of participating in such programs. Due to the plethora of variables, isolating the effects of program participation without experimental or quasi-experimental studies is impossible. Studies must control for such variables as self-selection and other personal characteristics, income, race, peer effects and teacher quality among others. This is especially true for middle and high school students because this age group is prone to academic disengagement and self-destructive behavior. Nonetheless, several analyses have been attempted, both on a national scale involving multiple studies and on a more limited scale involving a handful of different programs.

Among the most statistically rigorous analyses, after-school programs have been found to have a significantly positive effect on academic achievement as measured by reading and math scores. The extent of the effect varies across the different studies, with some indicating relatively small positive outcomes and some indicating more dramatic results. According to a meta-analysis of 30 independent studies of programs serving at-

risk students of all age groups, Lauer *et al.* find that after-school program participation was associated with statistically significant positive gains on reading and math test scores. Interestingly, they find that programs serving high school students had the largest effect on both reading and math scores and the most successful programs targeting this demographic included some college preparation.²⁴ Specifically, the combination of a basic academic focus with college instruction and career training demonstrated larger positive gains than other studies of similar students.

Another study by Scott-Little *et al.* found similar results on math and reading scores, although their study went through middle school programs only. Of the programs studied, middle school students had relatively lower, though still positive, gains on both math and reading standardized tests compared to elementary-age students. Furthermore, Scott-Little *et al.* found that the most at-risk students, as defined by lower test scores, demonstrated the largest test score gains as a result of participation in a formal after-school program.²⁵ In a third study, participants in LA's BEST, a program serving 18,000 at-risk students in California, were found to regularly score better on math and reading tests. 83% of participants also indicated a higher degree of academic involvement as a result of their participation in this program.²⁶ Academically enriching summer programs have also been shown to limit summer learning loss, which is particularly high among elementary-aged low-income and minority students.^{27,28}

²⁴ Lauer *et al.*, 296-300.

²⁵ Scott-Little *et al.* 405-407.

²⁶ Miller, 7.

²⁷ Lauer *et al.*, 297.

²⁸ Fifer, Molly E. and Alan B. Krueger. "Summer Opportunity Scholarships: A Proposal to Narrow the Skills Gap." The Brookings Institution, 2006, 5-8.

Beyond academic achievement, all of the evaluations demonstrated even larger gains in social and emotional development. Miller found that participation in after-school programs significantly increased academic engagement for middle school students, a significant finding considering that she also asserts that middle-school students are the most likely to lose academic motivation and fall behind during these years of social development.²⁹ Scott-Little *et al.* find that results associated with socioemotional development are more conclusive than academic enrichment. Participation in several different programs was linked to increases in participants' self-esteem, cultural sensitivity, effective communication with others, ability to control one's actions, positive decision making and decreases in likelihood of drug use, aggression, and other violent behaviors.³⁰ Findings by Posner and Vandell suggest similar results although for a younger demographic.³¹ Overall, participation in after-school programs has been shown to increase positive interactions with peers and adults, improve school behavior and attendance,³² foster cultural and community awareness, and prevent high-risk behavior such as drug-use, crime, and violence.

Regardless of effect size, almost all of these studies have demonstrated that after-school programs have the potential to significantly diminish the achievement gap between low-income, minority students and their higher-income, white peers. Lower achieving students have been shown to exhibit the largest academic gains and many developmental goals specifically address skills that low-income and minority students do not always learn at home. Ultimately, the exposure to different skills and activities not

²⁹ Miller, 7.

³⁰ Scott-Little *et al.*, 409.

³¹ Posner and Vandell, 454.

³² Miller, 4.

available in low-income schools and homes creates the opportunity for disadvantaged and at-risk students to broaden their perspectives and challenge themselves in ways not otherwise available.

Interaction with Schools and Families

After-school programs represent a growing effort to provide effective academic and developmental services. As such, they are sharing the fundamental duties of both the family and the school system in attempting to prepare productive, conscious adults. As a supplement to these two vital institutions, the relationship between them is extremely important, if not sometimes strained. Some studies purport that a strong academic curriculum intimately tied to that of the schools' adds to an effective after-school program.³³ Others, however, claim that it is especially important for minority students to be exposed to alternative learning approaches and material because of the often confrontational relationship that these students have with their school.³⁴

Thus far, the empirical evidence is unclear. However, it is clear that efforts to coordinate community-based after-school programs with school facilities and staff have often led to conflict. Community-based organizations that use public school facilities and occasionally employ public school teachers have faced challenges including conflicting program goals, maintenance concerns, and the overextension of school facilities and staff.³⁵ When such organizations bring in their own staff and program approaches, school teachers may be unwilling to help or do not have the free time to devote to a daily program. Similarly, maintenance concerns stemming from the mess that after-school

³³ US Department of Education and US Department of Justice

³⁴ Miller, 5.

³⁵ Dryfoos, 126-128.

programs can leave behind cause many schools to deny access to their facilities. More importantly, though, is the theoretical debate over the role of schools in after-school time and the relationship that schools have with low-income and minority students. Some advocates of after-school programming feel that students need a slightly less structured after-school program so as to benefit from a varied schedule. Exposure to a variety of learning approaches in addition to the one offered by the school system can appeal to a wider range of student needs. Similarly, many students, particularly older ones, may not wish to attend a program in the school building where they spend the majority of their time.³⁶

The relationship between after-school programs and public schools does not need to be an adverse one. More effective communication between local program directors and school officials would allow programs to incorporate aspects of the school curriculum into their program while still implementing activities in a varied and innovative manner. Furthermore, for those programs that do strive to increase academic achievement, it may be necessary to communicate with schools to gain a better understanding of what students need to be learning in order to achieve at a higher level. After-school programs should thus attempt to develop their own program activities and goals that work alongside the curriculum taught in the schools. Programs need to find innovative ways to incorporate the academic material found in school curricula, but present it in alternative ways. Students will then remain interested and engaged while also being exposed to new and refreshing ways to learn.

The success of after-school programs are tied to parental involvement in a much more significant way than they are to schools. After-school programs for low-income

³⁶ *Ibid*, 128.

students supplement what the students get at home if parents need to work. Thus, programs need to reflect the values and goals of parents as well as students in order for them to fulfill parental needs and complement learning throughout a student's development. Some of the most effective after-school programs incorporate parents in developing the program to ensure that the goals of the program match the goals and values of the parents.³⁷ Furthermore, programs need to be affordable for the targeted population of families and sensitive to the work and commute schedules of parents. These aspects are extremely important because transportation fees can act as a huge barrier for students' attendance and participation.

Recommendations

I. Increased Communication

Ultimately, the successful development of our youth depends on the functioning of all the major institutions with which they interact. As the field of after-school programs continues to expand and play a larger role in the development of our youth, communication between parents, schools, and after-school programs needs to be improved. While all three actors may not always be in total agreement on certain issues, it is important that they not contradict each others' goals. In order to facilitate the growth of after-school programs and the continued partnership between communities, families, and schools, communication needs to be greatly expanded.

Parents need to actively voice their concerns to schools directly. There is a critical shortage of parental participation among the worst performing schools and this lack of information may be contributing to students' poor achievement. By communicating their

³⁷ US Department of Education and US Department of Justice

expectations more explicitly, parents will have a better understanding of what schools can and cannot offer. After-school programs can thus fill in that gap more effectively if parents and schools commonly understand what role each has to play. This can translate into a stronger relationship between schools and after-school programs as they establish common goals and the proper venues for attaining these goals. Ultimately, after-school programs should build upon what is taught in school by incorporating innovative approaches to learning and offering an expanded curriculum.

II. More Comprehensive Measures of Effectiveness

More rigorous and systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of after-school programs need to be developed. Consistent measures of success need to be established within the field so that common ways of evaluating quality can be disseminated. Effective evaluation standards are imperative so that policy-makers and program developers can learn from what other programs are doing successfully and unsuccessfully. Without a common language of success, however, it will remain impossible to apply any universal standard of quality to such programs. To achieve a deeper understanding of what makes a program effective, substantial steps need to be taken to strengthen the reliability of evaluations, including the implementation of experimental or quasi-experimental research designs to isolate the effects of program participation. Since this may represent an unattainable goal for small organizations to develop on their own, basic evaluations need to be designed for use by smaller organization that administer objective evaluations of their own success.

Development of more comprehensive standards of evaluation needs to be done in a way that does not limit the diversity of program offerings and goals. This means that

experimental designs need to evaluate a wide array of social and academic measures. This should include standard academic measures such as test scores, dropout rates, graduation rates, and college attendance rates. It should also include social measures such as behavioral competence, ability to interact with peers and adults, social identity, and self-determination. While some of these qualities are hard to quantify, there are certainly reliable ways to measure changes in social development over time. Hopefully, a comprehensive evaluation of all of these measures will provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of a program.

III. Increased Access through Better Funding and Staffing Practices

Access to after-school programming needs to be greatly expanded so that all low-income students have the opportunity to attend an affordable program if they so choose. To do this, alternative and stable sources of funding need to be developed that can easily be obtained by programs demonstrating a certain standard of quality and structure. With more universal measures of quality and success, public sources of funding can more efficiently evaluate specific programs in order to distribute funds effectively. Again, this needs to be carried out in a manner that does not significantly restrict the diversity of activities and learning approaches allowed as long as a program can demonstrate a sufficient level of planning and structure. I do not propose a national after-school program for this very reason; small, grassroots organizations have been shown to be quite effective at responding to the needs and values of their local communities. A federal program cannot offer the flexibility necessary for such a diverse population of potential participants.

High-quality internship programs represent one way to provide competent, though short-term, staff to after-school programs. Acknowledging that most staff tend to be short-term already, university internship programs offer the unique opportunity for students to work in an important and emerging field while providing organizations with talented and dedicated team members. Programs such as the Shepherd Alliance and the Elrod Fellowship at Washington and Lee University are perfect examples of this. Programs demonstrating an effective approach establish relationships with the internship program and then have the opportunity to receive dedicated interns on an annual basis. With a more stable and potentially more qualified pool of staff members, programs will be free to operate more effectively and provide services to a larger group of students.

IV. Diverse and Comprehensive Program Offerings

Finally, after-school programs must continue developing in unique ways. The field of after-school programming benefits greatly from the diverse array of providers, structures, learning approaches, and activities that are available. Greater amounts of enriching activities and goals will only strengthen the field and interest more students, perhaps inspiring some to kindle interests they never knew they had. The most comprehensive programs should include social, academic, and recreational elements to foster well-rounded personal growth and provide the inspiration to continue challenging oneself. As program developers continue to explore innovative approaches to youth development, we will arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of what our youth need to succeed.

Conclusion

Although effective after-school programs tend to have varying goals, structure, and approaches, there are some common characteristics that can be gleaned from the above study. The most effective after-school programs establish clear goals and have structured activities designed to achieve these goals.³⁸ They generally have consistent schedules and meet on a regular basis, although the exact duration and meeting schedule have not conclusively been shown to have significant effects.³⁹ Furthermore, effective programs have quality staff and directors, although this has also been hard to evaluate as demonstrated by the transience of front-line staff. In terms of activity organization, effective programs incorporate group activities as well as individual work with teachers, tutors, or mentors. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the best programs combine academically enriching activities with developmental goals using innovative and engaging approaches to learning. Experiential and service-based learning approaches, as exemplified by Camp Interactive and Students Sharing Coalition, are just two examples of innovative approaches that effective programs have implemented to increase student engagement and participation. Ultimately, effective programs must meet the needs of both the students and the parents to have the largest possible impact. If students do not enjoy what they are doing and participate on a consistent basis, positive effects decline substantially.

The growth of after-school programming has the potential to make a substantial impact on educational equality, specifically those designed to meet the needs of low-income and minority students. In light of the repeated failure of the public school system

³⁸ US Department of Education and US Department of Justice. *Safe and Smart: Making After-School Hours Work for Kids*. Washington, DC, 1998. <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/SafeandSmart/title.html>.

³⁹ Lauer *et al*, 295.

and the decline of the traditional family in low-income communities, after-school programs have an increasing role to play in the academic and social development of our youth. Despite the significant variance in structure, goals, and activities, or perhaps even because of it, after-school programs continue to improve and offer much needed services to the youth that need it most. However, after-school programs offer only one aspect of a comprehensive solution needed to fix the inequity and injustice that many times characterizes the services available to disadvantaged youth. After-school programs will surely not close the achievement gap on their own and they will never fully replace the role of the family in producing a healthy, productive, and engaged generation of youth. However, their continued expansion and development offers the greatest chance for disadvantaged youth to overcome the structural barriers placed in their path and reach their true potential.

Washington and Lee University