ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME EVALUATION
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AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Their Potential and What It Takes to Achieve It

Executive Summary

The country is now engaged in public discussions about how to best expand time and opportunities for children and youth during and after school in order to actively and effectively support their learning and development across the day, throughout the year, and from kindergarten through high school. While debates continue about the range of academic, social, and other knowledge and skills that children and youth will need to succeed as workers, as citizens, and as family and community members in a global society, most would agree that the list includes the kinds of outcomes that, research suggests, *sustained participation in well-structured and well-implemented after school programs and activities* can achieve.

There is much to be harvested from a decade of learning what works in after school, and this knowledge can inform discussions about rethinking time, learning, and after school in the 21st century. Harvard Family Research Project's review of seminal research and evaluation studies, summarized below, addresses two primary questions: (1) Does participation in after school programs make a difference, and, if so, (2) what conditions appear to be necessary to achieve positive results?

Does Participation in After School Programs Make a Difference?

Yes! A decade of research and evaluation studies, as well as large-scale, rigorously conducted syntheses of many research and evaluation studies, confirms that children and youth who participate in after school programs can reap a host of positive academic, social, prevention, and health benefits:

- ***After school programs can improve academic achievement.*** Participation in after school programs is associated with better attitudes toward school and higher educational aspirations, higher school attendance and less tardiness, less disciplinary action (e.g., suspension), lower drop-out rates, better performance in school (as measured by achievement test scores and grades), greater on-time promotion, improved homework completion, and engagement in learning. The common thread in all these studies is that balancing academic support with engaging, fun, and structured extracurricular or cocurricular activities, which promote youth development in a variety of real-world contexts, appears to support and improve academic performance.
- ***After school programs can improve youth social and developmental outcomes.*** Looking beyond academics, participation in after school programs is associated with decreased behavioral problems; improved social and communication skills and/or relationships with others (peers, parents, teachers, etc.); increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy; lower levels

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

The research brief summarized here looks at 10 years of research on after school programs and finds implications for the future of the after school field. It is part of Harvard Family Research Project's (HFRP) *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation* series, which highlights current research and evaluation work in the out-of-school time field. The briefs in this series draw on HFRP's research work in out-of-school time to provide practitioners, funders, evaluators, and policymakers with information to help them in their work.

For a full copy of this research brief, visit: www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief10

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of depression and anxiety; development of initiative; and improved feelings and attitudes toward self and school.

- ***Participation in after school programs can have a positive impact on a range of prevention outcomes,*** including avoidance of drug and alcohol use, decreases in delinquency and violent behavior, increased knowledge of safe sex, avoidance of sexual activity, and reduction in juvenile crime.
- ***Participation in after school programs can contribute to healthy lifestyles and increased knowledge of nutrition and exercise.*** After school programs are one of many places that can tackle the growing problem of obesity among our nation's children and youth. Health and wellness outcomes associated with participation in after school programs include better food choices, increased physical activity, increased knowledge of nutrition and health practices, reduction in BMI, improved blood pressure, and improved body image.

Critical Factors to Achieve Successful Outcomes

While it is true that after school programs have the *potential* to impact a range of positive learning and developmental outcomes, the reality is that some are not maximizing this potential. Research and evaluation point to three primary and interrelated factors that are critical for creating positive settings that can achieve positive youth outcomes:

- ***Access to and sustained participation in programs.*** Many studies and research syntheses conclude that youth experience greater gains across a wide variety of outcomes if they participate in after school programs with greater frequency and in a more sustained manner. Sustained participation can be cultivated in a number of ways, such as by tailoring programs to youth interests, needs, and schedules, as well as providing a wide variety of enriching opportunities for youth to be exposed to new ideas, new challenges, and new people.
- ***Quality programming.*** Emerging research on after school program quality and its relationship to outcomes indicates that, in addition to ensuring adequate physical and psychological safety and effective management practices, quality after school programs also share the following features: appropriate supervision and structure; well-prepared staff; intentional programming with opportunities for autonomy and choice; and strong partnerships among the various settings in which program participants spend their day—that is, schools, after school programs, and families.
- ***Strong partnerships.*** Programs are more likely to exhibit high quality when they effectively develop, utilize, and leverage partnerships with a variety of stakeholders, especially families, schools, and communities. However, strong partnerships are more than a component of program quality; they are becoming a nonnegotiable element of supporting learning and development across all the contexts in which children learn and grow.

Supporting Student Success Through After School

A decade of research and evaluation studies provides powerful evidence that after school programs *do* work when the key factors described above are addressed. They also demonstrate how complex a task it is to provide high-quality, effective supports for youth and their families. Clearly, there is a research warrant for continued public and private support for after school investments. There is also an ever-louder national cry to rethink time and learning. As national conversations turn toward a reframing of the traditional school day and school year, there remain many valuable lessons and much guidance to be harvested from after school research and evaluation about what works to support student learning and success.

ABOUT HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT

Since 1983, we have helped stakeholders develop and evaluate strategies to promote the well being of children, youth, families, and communities. Our work focuses primarily on three areas that support children's learning and development—early childhood education, out-of-school time programming, and family and community support in education. Building on our knowledge that schools cannot do it alone, we also focus national attention on complementary learning. Complementary learning is the idea that a systemic approach, which integrates school and nonschool supports, can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed. Underpinning all our work is our commitment to evaluation for strategic decision making, learning, and accountability.



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