

School's Out: After-School Programs and Policies that Work

Policy makers and researchers are looking in new ways at how children spend their time before and after school during the school year, out of school during the summer, and in "extended learning" during all of their non-school hours. No longer is the standard for after-school programs merely the safe keeping of children who are neither in school nor under the watchful eyes of their parents. Rather, after-school programs are increasingly expected to ameliorate broad social problems, ranging from low civic engagement to school failure to delinquency and crime. In Illinois, more than \$250 million from state and federal sources is spent on the three largest state-level programs: Teen REACH, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and school-age child-care subsidies. Numerous additional after-school programs are provided in local schools and communities by cities, private contractors, park districts, and community-based organizations.

This *Policy Forum* summarizes the presentations of three national experts and a local planning committee at a 2007 IGPA Family Impact Seminar devoted to after-school programs in Illinois. We begin by comparing Illinois to other states in terms of availability of after-school programming and innovation in design and funding of these programs. We then summarize insights into how successful after-school programs achieve their goals, and how program quality can be assessed for program self-improvement and for accountability. Finally, we sum up some of the promising strategies Illinois might consider as

it continues to expand learning and development opportunities for youth.

Availability and Funding of After-School Programs in Illinois

Illinois state legislators face public pressure for more after-school programs. A 2006 poll found that fully three-fifths of Illinois citizens believed that there are not enough after-school opportunities for youth in their communities.¹ Likewise, studies of the need for, and availability of, programs across the state

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uncover apparent service gaps. The Illinois After-School Partnership recently identified nearly 50 counties in Illinois with no programs funded through the three main federal and state public funding streams.

Considering programs supported by a broader array of funding mechanisms (including federal-, state-, and city-level funding, private sources, and parent fees), the Chapin Hall Center for Children identified only three after-school slots for every 10 youths aged 13 to 17 in the City of Chicago. There also was wide variability in availability across Chicago communities, with some communities having less than one slot for every 10 youths.²

How does funding in Illinois compare to levels in other states? At the Family Impact Seminar, Jennifer Stedron, a program manager in the Education Program at the National Conference of State Legislatures, noted that states vary considerably in their goals and mechanisms for after-school programming. Illinois is one of 22 states with dedicated state

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funding for after-school programs (the Teen REACH program). Fourteen states have no state funding and 13 fund after-school as one of a menu of program options. Among state-dedicated programs, many states use general revenue sources, as does Illinois, making the program susceptible to cuts during fiscal downturns. In Illinois, funding dedicated to Teen REACH fell by about 4 percent between FY05 and FY06. To buffer against such fiscal vulnerability, some states have taken innovative steps toward new revenue sources. In California, Proposition 49 in 2002 allocated a portion of future growth in state revenue to after-school programs. Tennessee uses unclaimed lottery prize money to fund after-school programs, Mississippi uses a special license plate program, and Colorado uses an income tax check-off box.

Dr. Stedron also described the variation across states in program goals, ranging on a continuum from mostly academics to mostly youth-development orientations. This continuum reflects the varied historical roots of after-school programming and its current multiple constituencies. Although policymakers may not always be aware of the implicit goals in their programs, Stedron pointed out predictable differences in systems' governance structures, staffing requirements, and evaluation metrics. For example, Kentucky's more academically oriented program is housed within the Department of Education, focuses on school-based before- and after-school programs, is staffed by certified teachers, and is evaluated through state educational assessment metrics. The Teen REACH program in Illinois falls squarely on the youth-development side, being housed in the Department of Human Services, located

in community-based organizations, and aimed at helping at-risk youth avoid risk-taking behavior and achieve positive growth and development. Tennessee and California blend academic and youth-development goals. In Tennessee's program, grant making occurs through the Department of Education, but programs can be located in community organizations rather than schools and in such cases monitoring occurs through the Department of Human Services. California's program is likewise located in the Department of Education,

Three major state and federal funding mechanisms in Illinois

Teen REACH

- Established in 1997 by the State of Illinois, the Teen Responsibility, Education, Achievement, Caring and Hope (Teen REACH) program assists families and communities that are significantly affected by reforms to the welfare system that have caused a larger percentage of single mothers to obtain work or attend school (and, thus, not be at home with their children after school). (<http://www.dhs.state.il.us/chp/op/CYP/teenReach.asp>)

21st Century Community Learning Centers

- Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, community learning centers provide academic enrichment opportunities for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs; and offers literacy and other educational services to the families of participating children. (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stcccl/index.html>)

School-age Child Care Assistance Program

- The Illinois Department of Human Services' Child Care Program provides low-income, working families with assistance in paying for child care. Families are required to cost-share on a sliding scale based on family size, income and number of children in care. Children under the age of 13 who are enrolled in elementary school or kindergarten are eligible for before- and after-school care. (<http://www.dhs.state.il.us/ts/ChildCareDevelopment/CCD/>)

but grants can be made to non-school entities, in which cases linkages must be made with the local educational agency. As noted below, such linkages can increase program effectiveness.

This cross-state analysis suggests that states can raise the money for after-school programs and target a range of

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programmatic goals. Our final two speakers discussed what goals are achievable in after-school programming, how programs can reach those outcomes, and ways in which policymakers can hold programs accountable.

What works in after-school programs? Achieving educational, prevention and youth development goals

Answering the question “What works in after-school programs?” is complicated by the fact that programs have such varied outcome goals and by the fact that program evaluations have not always used rigorous designs. One large-scale experimental study of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers produced little consistent evidence of improvements in academic achievement, although its results are controversial.

Priscilla Little, Associate Director of the Harvard Family Research Project, and her colleagues are leaders in synthesizing research to better understand the programs, policies and principles that determine the “active ingredients” of effective after-school programs. They have identified four major factors that appear to determine after-school outcomes: access to programs; participation in programs; quality of programs; and linkages to families, schools and communities. With these factors present, they find that it is possible for programs to improve a broad array of outcomes – from safety to health to civic engagement to academic achievement.

Clearly, children cannot benefit from programs that they cannot access. Unfortunately, Little noted, students and families with the greatest need for after-school programs, including those with few economic resources or ethnic minority backgrounds, often do not participate in after-school programs for a variety of reasons, including crime in the neighborhood, lack of transportation, and lack of awareness. A recent survey of Chicago public high-school students conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children found that the majority of youth reported no safe places in their neighborhood. And, whereas just one-quarter of youth participated in structured after-school activities, an additional three out of 20 said they were not participating but would like to do so.³

Once children access programs, they must regularly participate if they are to realize benefits. Little and her colleagues have found that in effective programs participation is characterized by greater

intensity (number of hours per week), duration (length of time), and breadth (number and variety of activities).

Programs can best achieve good participation if children want to attend, which often relates to the quality and value perceived by the children and their families. The characteristics that Little and colleagues find to be positively associated with quality outcomes include supervision and structure, positive staff-child and peer-to-peer interactions, opportunities for choice, evidence-based approaches, and continuity. Little highlighted research by Reed Larson at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign which demonstrates that structured voluntary activities often foster positive engagement in youth better than other contexts do. Whereas they found that, on average, youth were challenged but not motivated in school, and motivated but not challenged by peers, they were both challenged and motivated in structured voluntary activities.

Lastly, Little described the importance of after-school program linkages to families, schools and communities. Linkages to the family can support child participation and continuity. Linkages to schools and teachers can provide after-school programs a renewable source of new children, as well as an understanding for state standards alignment, curriculum enhancements, reinforcement of skills sets, and preparation for future educational challenges. Little discussed studies of two programs which found that sponsoring organization support and strong relationships with the schools improved student attendance and outcomes. Such linkages are fostered through shared space, shared staff, supportive leadership, curriculum alignment, and shared vision between the school and after-school contexts. Community linkages can also support community ownership of after-school programs, supporting local investments to supplement state and federal funds.

These programmatic features are critical for attaining positive results for children, and indeed, poor quality programs can actually have negative effects on participants. For example, children who spend more unsupervised time with peers demonstrate more problem behaviors. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, there is also evidence that participation in unstructured youth recreation centers is related to more juvenile and adult offenses. This suggests that funding organizations and project managers must pay attention to quality



issues. Simply making facilities available for youth is inadequate. Ignoring other quality factors, especially staffing, can actually create trouble.

Assuring Quality in After School Programs

How can programs achieve the factors that Little and her colleagues have found to be important? Our final speaker discussed a tool for assessing program quality, including youth engagement.⁴ The tool not only helps policymakers hold programs accountable, but also helps programs monitor themselves for self-improvement.

Consider the following scenario: Imagine that you work directly with children in an after-school program in Illinois. Suppose your program director informs you that the program has not met its goal of reducing teen pregnancy during the past year. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does knowing this result help you identify areas of weakness and strength in your own performance over the last year?
- Does knowing this result suggest specific actions you could take in the next year to become more effective in your job?

Most of us would probably answer ‘no’ to both questions. Dr. Charles Smith, director of the Youth Development Group at High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, argued at the Illinois Family Impact Seminar that in order to reach the loftier goals assigned to after-school programs, such as reductions in criminal activity, truancy, sexual activity, or improvements in homework completion or cognitive skills, quality evaluation must occur at the ‘point of service’— the face-to-face interactions between the worker and the child. The aim of High/Scope’s Youth Program Quality Assessment project is to create a tool that inexpensively provides specific information immediately applicable to improving the everyday performance of staff in after-school programs. The Youth Program Quality Assessment has been adopted by a range of state and local governments, including the Michigan Department of Education, and is currently undergoing a rigorous, large-scale evaluation.

Smith outlines four domains of quality. These can be visualized as a pyramid, building from easier- to more difficult-to-achieve standards as one ascends from base to peak. The base of the pyramid is an environment of both physical and psychological safety. The second level is a ‘supportive environment’; one that is welcoming, where

conflicts are resolved, and where children’s contributions are encouraged. The third level is interaction: do children feel that they belong? Are they presented with opportunities both to lead and to be mentored? The top level of the pyramid is ‘engagement.’ In successful engagement, children achieve a degree of efficacy in their learning; children participate in planning, are included in decision-making, and have opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness or success of the chosen activities.

The Youth Program Quality Assessment tool is based on this pyramidal structure. Ideally, scores are assigned by an independent observer, but self-scoring and peer-scoring are possible also. Because they can be achieved with less teacher effort and skill, points in the ‘safe environment’ domain are relatively easy to accumulate. As one climbs the pyramid of attributes, the level and continuity of effort and skill required of teachers increases rapidly, and it becomes more difficult to accumulate points. Attributes at the top of the pyramid, ‘interaction’ and ‘engagement,’ are most difficult to establish and maintain, but may have the greatest impact on students’ motivation to participate and their “higher order” skills.

Applications of this scoring system expose influential but unproductive myths about ‘quality’ teachers and programs. For instance, High/Scope’s studies find no correlation between teacher effectiveness, as measured by this scoring system, and educational credentials. The

implication for after-school programs is that requiring advanced credentials is not in itself a quality-assurance mechanism. With the exception of organized sports, they also find no correlation between the subject matter and program quality. This suggests that there is no one ‘right’ curriculum (or fixed set of curricula) for after-school programs that will guarantee a high-

quality experience for participants. Finally, they find that there is no such thing as a quality program. Within the same school, teachers’ effectiveness, as measured by scores in the ‘engagement’ and ‘interaction’ domains, varies as much as it does among teachers who work in different schools. These findings all serve to reinforce the notion that quality at the ‘point of service’ – where teachers and students come face-to-face — determines whether a program will have an enriching socializing impact on its children. While there are important minimal standards that can be assured without much teacher involvement (e.g., physical plant, healthy snacks), there are no easy shortcuts that can be dictated from the top down to guarantee a quality after-school program experience.

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Assuring quality in after-school programs is daunting, all the more so since after-school programs are now often expected to provide developmental experiences for children that are *superior* to regular school-day programs. Yet the quality evaluation of after-school programs, Smith argues, is typically not focused on the activities that might actually cause these extremely difficult goals to be achieved. For example, when Smith aligns the Illinois Teen REACH program's own performance benchmarks to the Youth Program Quality Assessment pyramid, not a single one of Teen REACH's 38 performance benchmarks belongs at the top of the pyramid in the 'engagement' or 'interaction' spheres. This disjuncture arises largely because the Teen REACH benchmarks do not focus on point-of-service quality, the aspect of the experience which affects children most directly. The same point can be made about benchmark tools in most other states. In those instances where the Teen REACH benchmarks do align with the pyramid, they address only the most basic aspects (safe and supportive environment) that are most easily achieved independent of teacher performance.

Smith argues that, in addition to within-program improvements, there are other advantages to imposing a uniform quality metric that is focused on point-of-service quality. First, policymakers and taxpayers rightly expect accountability from programs funded by government. Application of an inexpensive evaluation tool which permits on-the-spot feedback and quick adjustments of teacher activities is a concrete way to impose accountability for effective service on the grantee. Second, after-school programs are disparate in nature. They have diverse funding streams, providers, and settings. Smith argues that using a single quality system promotes much-needed continuity across programs, by defining a set of common standards and encouraging consistent values about quality interactions with children across individuals with disparate backgrounds.

Conclusions

What can we conclude from these presentations? Illinois might follow the example of other states with creative new funding sources for after-school programming. Dedicated grants can provide a stable funding source to support program quality. If legislators opt to pursue this approach, they should first examine their explicit and implicit goals for after-school programs, and strive to obtain the factors which Little and others have identified as needed in order to meet those goals. One important factor, for example, might be assuring that Teen REACH sites have strong linkages with local schools. Given the importance of access, it also will be important to reduce gaps in availability, and to monitor

An extended report on After School in Illinois and the speakers' presentations (video and Powerpoint), along with a list of experts on after-school research in Illinois, are available at www.igpa.uillinois.edu/fis. The Illinois Family Impact Seminars benefit from the good advice of the members of the Policy Network for Family Impact Seminars, directed by Karen Bogenschneider at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the members of our advisory committee, listed on our web site. The Family Impact Seminars are designed to provide state policymakers with objective, solution-oriented research on current family policy issues. We are grateful for generous funding from the William T. Grant Foundation and the excellent support of the IGPA staff and student volunteers from the University of Illinois at Springfield, Amy Ballinger-Cole, Yolanda Beamon, and Amanda Flesch.

participation. Unfortunately, budget cuts eliminated planned evaluations of Teen REACH. Illinois' after-school programs, and the children they serve, would benefit from revisiting assessment tools, including the Teen REACH benchmarks. When it has been used in other states, High/Scope's Youth Program Quality Assessment is often first aligned with existing benchmarks (like Teen REACH's) and then implemented incrementally from lower-cost, lower-stakes (program self-assessment) to higher-cost, higher-stake (program accountability) ways. In either context, children can benefit from improvements in program quality.

Over the past two decades, after-school programs for America's children have rapidly accrued great expectations for addressing many of our social and educational problems. Some after-school programs have demonstrated positive impacts on academic, social, and health-related behaviors, but it is clear that not all programs succeed. To that end, parents, funding organizations, and policymakers must be certain that the programs they send children to, the programs they sponsor, and the programs they promote meet a level of quality delineated by research, professional organizations, and common sense.

¹ The question was asked of Illinois adult residents as part of the autumn Cooperative Congressional Election study, conducted by Polimetrix for IGPA.

² See R.M. Goerge et al. 2007. *Chicago Children and Youth 1990-2010: Changing Population Trends and their Implications for Services*. (<http://www.chapinhall.org>.)

³ R.M. Goerge, R. Chaskin, and S. Guiltinan. 2006. *What High School Students in the Chicago Public Schools Do in their Out-of-School Time: 2003-2005*. (<http://www.chapinhall.org>.)

⁴ For a recent review of this and other similar tools, see N. Yohalem, & A. Wilson-Ahlstrom. (2007). *Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools*. (http://www.forumfyi.org/Files/Measuring_Youth_Program_Quality.pdf)

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