

background

Report # 80

After-School Programs

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Do After-School Programs Deliver?

Benefits beyond offering a safe haven depend on certain characteristics

Are after-school programs good choices for children? The answer depends on what parents are looking for. A neighborhood after-school program will likely provide a safe haven for their child. But if parents are looking for a program to do more – improve their children’s academic performance, for example – the answer isn’t as clear.

While several studies have suggested after-school programs are at least partly responsible for academic improvements, better social skills, and other benefits, a recent national study warns that such benefits may be less than what parents expect.

The mixed findings remind parents to remain skeptical of claims that portray these programs as a panacea for the problems besetting today’s children.

At the same time, new research offers fresh insight into characteristics to look for when trying to decide whether a program will realize its potential and help children improve their academic and social skills while feeling secure during after-school hours.

Addressing A Growing Need

After- and before-school programs have been gaining considerable attention over the past several years as parents, educators, and policymakers search for ways to improve children’s academic and social outcomes and offer them a safe environment during off-school hours, when an increasing number of parents are at work.

Significant public dollars, in turn, have been spent on after-school enrichment and recreational activities in pub-

lic schools. For example, after the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program was refocused to provide such after-school activities in 1998, funding increased from \$40 million to \$1 billion a year.

In Allegheny County, a 1999 University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development survey estimated that 14% of nearly 111,000 public and parochial school students were enrolled in structured nonschool-hour programs, but as many as 73,000 school-aged children needed nonschool-hour care.

Debate Over Benefits

Several studies have reported a link between children attending after-school programs and improved academic performance, social skills, self-esteem, and other benefits. One of the most recent is a 2004 report by The After-School Corporation (TASC), that involved 52,000 pre-kindergarten-to-high school students who attend 96 New

Understanding adolescence is critical to public policy. For example, when is an adolescent fully responsible for his or her behavior? The answer is central to issues ranging from the drinking age to the debate over applying the death penalty to adolescent offenders.

York City after-school programs and 91,000 students who were not enrolled.

Elementary and middle school students in the after-school programs made more progress in math than students who were not enrolled. Those who stayed in after-school programs for the full two years of the study realized the greatest gains. No differences were reported in English and reading measures.

Academic outcomes reported in the TASC study suggest the after-school programs were particularly beneficial to low-income students, African-American, Hispanic, and students with special needs. African-American and Hispanic students showed the greatest academic gains over nonparticipants.

Students in pre-kindergarten through the eighth grade who were enrolled in after-school programs also attended school more frequently than nonparticipants. High school students in the pro-

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grams generally performed better in Regents tests than nonparticipants and they earned more credits toward graduation. School officials said they felt the after-school programs also improved student attitudes toward school.

An evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers found far fewer benefits. The study by New Jersey-based Mathematica Policy Research involved 3,000 elementary and middle school students in 87 after-school programs nationwide and more than 3,500 students not enrolled in the programs.

After-school programs had no impact on reading test scores or grades, the study reported. Elementary school students in the programs who had low grades at the beginning of the two-year study showed a small improvement in English grades – about two percentage points on a 100-scale. The study also found the programs had no impact on students receiving homework help or on the number of students who completed their homework. In addition, most outcomes related to personal and social development showed no difference.

Poor behavior was more likely among students in the after-school programs, according to the Mathematica study. For example, school districts had to contact parents of 28% of the program students for behavior issues, compared to 23% of those not in the program. About 12% of program students were suspended, compared to 8% of students in the control group.

The study did, however, report that middle school students in the programs had lower rates of absenteeism. And students in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers clearly felt more secure in the programs. Most elementary students, for example, reported that they felt “very safe,” the highest of three categories.

Program Traits Are Influential

Recent studies do, however, contribute to a growing body of evidence that is helping to identify important traits among successful after-school programs.

One of the important differences among the students in the TASC and Mathematica studies was program attendance. In the TASC study, 71% of pre-kindergarten and elementary students attended after-school programs at least 60 days per school year and an average of three days per week. In the Mathematica study, elementary school students attended after-school programs an average 49 days per school year in the first year of the study and 32 in the second.

Other important characteristics include high expectations, appropriate content relative to the children’s needs, and well-trained staff.

“This is my bias, but I think it is very important to have people who are developmentally-oriented, who really understand how to have good, exciting, developmentally-appropriate programs for kids,” said Carl Johnson, Ph.D., Chairman of the University of Pittsburgh Department of Psychology in Education.

In the 21st Century programs, homework help was passive, more like a study hall than a tutoring session. Academic activities were poorly linked to school curriculum and few regular school teachers were on the staff.

In the TASC study, 86% of the after-school program managers held a bachelor’s degree, 40% had a master’s degree, and nearly half of front-line staff had at least a two-year college degree. And 86% of school principals said after-school programs were well coordinated with school curriculum and that programs sought input from the schools on gaps in students’ skills that might be addressed in after-school activities.

Successful programs also offered age- and developmentally-appropriate activities in a relaxed environment and provided more than entertainment.

In the TASC study, more than three-quarters of the after-school projects offered group activities, discussion, problem-solving and research. Nearly all activities resulted in a final performance, such as a speech, a play, or some other artistic event.

“I would look for a program that really gets kids engaged and provides opportunities for individual differences,” Dr. Johnson said. “It’s very important not to present the program as something for losers or something kids attend because they are not doing well in school. In the programs I’ve seen that work, the students really want to be there because it is an exciting place to be and an exciting thing to do.”

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