Afterschool Programs

For over a decade, afterschool programs have been a focus of federal, state, and local education policy debate. According to the Department of Labor, the parents of more than 28 million school-age children work outside the home. And it is estimated that about half of these children return to an empty home after school. It is during this critical time that unsupervised children are susceptible to risky behaviors, including crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and sex. A study conducted by researchers from the University of Southern Illinois and the University of Chicago found that middle school students who spend three or more afterschool hours unsupervised are more prone to high levels of stress and anger, depression and behavior problems, low self-esteem, and academic struggles than children who have adult supervision.

Communities have responded to this need by creating a vast array of programs to keep children engaged, including tutoring and mentoring, community service, sports and recreation, computer training, and other arts and cultural enrichment programs. With the challenging standards and accountability measures the No Child Left Behind legislation presents, programs that aid children who are struggling academically have become especially sought after by districts and parents alike.

However, the quality and caliber of these programs varies greatly. Students who participate in high-quality programs that promote active learning and consistent student engagement have been shown to perform better academically, attend school more regularly, have higher homework completion rates, and increase their social competence. When selecting afterschool programs, it is important that communities look to their local populations and offer programs that fit the needs, interests, and values of the diverse cultures they serve. Successful programs have been found to blend academic, cultural, recreational, and enrichment activities.

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Components of Successful Afterschool Programs

After-School Programs: Keeping Children Safe and Smart, published by the U.S. Department of Education in 2000, provides the following list of components of effective afterschool programs:

- **Goal setting, strong management, and sustainability.** Clear-cut goals, which meet licensing and other legal requirements, are a prerequisite for an effective afterschool program. The type of organizational structure will change depending on whether the program is developed by the school, social service agency, or other community-based organization, but the governance structure of successful programs couples onsite management with regular oversight and accountability.

- **Quality afterschool staffing.** It is vital for programs to hire skilled, qualified, and committed administrators and staff. It has been shown that this relationship with caring, stable adults is highly important to children, especially those who may not have the support and guidance they need at home.

- **Attention to safety, health, and nutrition issues.** Afterschool care should provide a "safe haven" for many students. Good programs also provide a nutritious snack and promote good nutritional habits.

- **Effective partnerships with community-based organizations, juvenile justice agencies, law enforcement, and youth groups.** Stakeholders—parents, schools, staff, and community leaders—must plan together and build partnerships in order to make a program work. An effective collaboration gives students more options and extends resources available for enrichment and recreation.

- **Strong involvement of families.** Helping to accommodate family schedules by operating before-school, school holiday, and summer vacation programs is another important step in assuring the success of a program. Administrators also try to involve parents in the program planning through orientation sessions, volunteer opportunities, parent-advisory committees, and workshops.

- **Enriching learning opportunities.** By providing enriching learning opportunities, after-school programs can be a meaningful resource to help improve students’ academic...
performance, as well as meeting their social and emotional needs. Also, because they may be cut from the regular school day due to budgetary constraints, classes in art, music, and drama can be provided as a complement to school-day activities.

**Linkages between school-day and afterschool personnel.** Particularly in afterschool programs that are held at the school itself, a coordinated partnership between teachers and afterschool personnel is a valuable resource to ensure a high-quality program.

**Evaluation of program effectiveness.** Though varied in scope and design, programs must be evaluated on a regular basis to measure the success or failure of specific goals set forth.

### Funding Sources

Most of the money for afterschool care comes from parents; however, it can also come from federal and state grants, city and school funds, local voluntary contributions, and private foundations. Federal funding for afterschool programs comes from the Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant program. The focus of this program, re-authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act, is to provide expanded academic enrichment opportunities for children who attend low-performing schools to meet state academic standards. In addition, activities that are complementary to academic development, such as art, music, technology, and drug/violence prevention, are funded.

While the demand for effective programs is great, those most in need—low-income students, English language learners, poor performers, and children who live in dangerous neighborhoods—often find their access limited. America After 3 PM: A Household Survey on Afterschool in America finds that the parents of 30 percent of children not currently participating in afterschool programs say their children would participate if a quality program were available in their community.

Indeed, the $991 million Congress will probably reach only a fraction of community grants in FY05 (down from the $999 million spent in FY04) will probably reach only a fraction of community grant requests; in 2003, federal monies fulfilled just 25 percent of such requests. Afterschool programs are also vulnerable to state and local budgetary demands. California’s Proposition 49 was intended to allow every elementary and middle school student to apply for afterschool grants; but faced with a state budget deficit, these programs are feeling the squeeze. Local governments in California are also eliminating afterschool programs to balance their budgets.

Due to these budgetary woes, many states and districts are considering a community school model, which has drawn support from a number of private groups and foundations. The Mott Foundation has been supporting community schools for the past seven decades. Its goal is to bring extended learning, recreation, and social activities into schools with the backing of local education systems. Nearly 10,000 schools throughout the nation have used or adopted some part of this model.

### State Practices

**Connecticut’s Collegiate Awareness and Preparation Program (ConnCAP)** supports efforts by state institutions of higher education to develop linkages with public school districts targeted by the Connecticut Board of Governors for Higher Education. The state-funded program provides motivation and cognitive skill development for academically at-risk and low-income middle and high school students, and prepares them for success in college. Students receive the following: tutoring; academic advising and enrichment; SAT preparation and fee waivers; financial aid advising; cultural and educational enrichment activities; college admission information and campus visits; computer technology training; career development; and college tracking and follow up.

**Georgia’s 3:00 Project** aims to transform the out-of-school time of early adolescents (grades 6–8) from unstructured, and unproductive hours to an opportunity for challenge, commitment, and care through academic enrichment; recreational/arts/dance/music, life skills/job training, nutrition/snacks, community service, and conflict resolution/violence prevention. Developed by the Georgia School Age Care Association, funding for this program comes from the state and parent fees. The program is designed to meet state academic standards.

#### References


