Out-of-School Time Programs

Today, millions of students finish the school day and return to empty homes while their parents are still at work. Including summers, weekends, and after-school time, it is estimated that these students have almost 2,000 hours of discretionary time to themselves each year. Numerous studies have been conducted on these “latchkey kids” suggesting that the time spent alone, particularly between the hours of 3 PM and 6 PM, makes them more susceptible to a variety of negative effects, ranging from loneliness and boredom, to a greater probability of alcohol abuse and smoking.

To mitigate these negative outcomes, schools and communities have turned to after-school programming to provide tutoring and academic support to students, and research suggests that these programs may have a positive impact. On average, students who participate in after-school programs perform better academically, attend school more regularly, have higher homework completion rates and have increased social competence. But what about the students who may need more than just after-school support—the students who are home alone during spring vacation or summer break or the students whose parents work during the weekend? To support these students and many others, states and LEAs are beginning to explore out-of-school time (OST) programs.

In many ways, OST programs are a reimagining of the traditional after-school program. OST programs may occur before school, after school, during weekends, holidays, and school breaks, encompassing a much greater portion of time than the 3 PM – 6 PM time period that traditional after-school programs provide services. This flexible structure may offer year round opportunity and much needed stability for student participants.

OST programs also offer a broader range of student services than typical after-school programs. While traditional after-school programs focus on providing academic assistance to students in a safe, supervised setting, OST programs tend to operate more holistically. In addition to providing academic support, OST programs may focus on myriad different topics such as leadership development, combining work with community service, health and wellness, and even arts and crafts.

The number of OST programs has ballooned in recent years. In New York, for example, the Department of Youth and Community Development estimates that it has sponsored more than 600 OST programs serving over 80,000 youth annually since 2005. Nationwide, longitudinal research of the effects of OST programs on student development and academic achievement is spotty, but positive. Students who participate in OST programs tend to have increased academic achievement and school attendance rates. In addition to the academic gains, students who participate in OST programs also demonstrate more involvement with extracurricular activities, better behavior, a stronger self image, positive social development, and reductions in destructive risk-taking behavior.

Elements of Effective Programs

Even though there is great diversity in the structure and scope of OST programs, the American Youth Policy Forum identifies a number of key elements that successful programs tend to exhibit. Among those factors are the following:

- **Effective OST program leaders and staff develop strong partnerships with administrators and teachers at nearby schools.** OST programs and schools can work together to increase academic gains. Many OST programs have academic goals, so if program staff are able to work with schools to supplement classroom instruction, the content may become more meaningful for students.

- **Successful OST programs hire staff who want to work with adolescents.** When students are polled as to why they routinely attend OST programs, the program’s staff is usually a key lever in their decision. Just like in the classroom, caring, committed adults are able to make the strongest impact on students.
Successful OST programs use evaluation as a tool of self-improvement and use a range of evaluation tools to collect data and use a variety of measures to determine effectiveness. OST program outcomes extend beyond academic achievement. Accordingly, other positive youth outcomes should be evaluated.

Funding Sources for OST Programs

Funding for OST programs may come from a variety of sources, including parents, federal and state grants, local funds, and private donations. At the federal level, the Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers formula grant is the only federal funding stream for OST programs. This grant, authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title IV, Part B supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities and complementary programming for students during out of school time.

The Department of Education also offers Supplemental Educational Services (SES) to eligible students under Title I Part A section 1116(e) of the ESEA. SES, which are out-of-school time tutoring and remedial services, are available to low-income students attending a Title I school that is designated by the state to be in need of improvement for longer than one year. Grants are awarded on a per pupil basis and annual awards may vary by school district. The Department of Education requires that SES and 21st Century Learning Community Learning Centers evaluate service providers regularly.

In some cases, states may also use the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to finance the maintenance and expansion of OST programs. States typically use these funds for out-of-school time programs through a transfer to its Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). The funds become part of the child care subsidy system that provides subsidies for eligible children up to age 13. Parents of school-age children may then use the subsidies to purchase out-of-school time care in a setting of their choice.

Issues to Consider

OST programs are differentiated in content, scope and outcome, and are largely student driven. Due to their amorphous nature, OST programs present a variety of considerations for state policymakers.

Connecting OST Development with Existing Priorities — Ensure that state OST goals fit with other statewide efforts, such as middle and high school reform, career and technical education, and healthy lifestyles promotion.

Develop Consistent Structures for Statewide Programs — OST programming may be offered through a variety of different programs and providers, each offering a variety of different structures, goals, and program delivery methodology. This lack of a consistent structure may make makes policy development, which often sets uniform guidelines and expectations, a challenge. Policymakers should avoid funding, programmatic, and accountability structures that might restrict the effectiveness of OST programs.

Objective Evaluation of Providers — Not all OST providers are created equal. The fact that there is variance in the performance of OST programs, coupled with the current economic climate makes it difficult for states to support the growing number of programs and the students they serve. Policymakers must be able to establish objective and relevant evaluation and assessment criteria for OST providers. Careful evaluation of OST programs will allow states to help strong OST programs improve, while holding underperforming OSTs accountable to programs goals and the needs of the students that they serve.

Resources


National Institute for Out-of-School Time (NIOST). Online at www.niost.org. NIOST’s journal is Afterschool Matters, online at www.niost.org/content/view/1645/297/.


Author: Darin Simmons (darins@nasbe.org)