



## After-School Programs for Children

### Policy Brief in Family and Youth Resiliency

Many families throughout the United States rely heavily on organized after-school programs to provide care for school-aged children. Such programs meet a variety of needs, including providing for adult supervision during after-school hours, fostering healthy development of children, creating alternatives to risky behavior, and shielding children from the increased risk of victimization that comes with time spent in unsupervised environments.<sup>1</sup> However, estimates indicate that in some urban areas, only 20 percent of those children in need of after-school programs will have the opportunity for participation.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, there is a growing conviction among the public that after-school programs can play a role in preventing problem-behaviors among children, as well as promoting healthy development and fostering increased academic achievement. Hence, investment in after-school programs is one issue that enjoys widespread bipartisan agreement. In 1998, a poll by the Mott Foundation found that 80 percent of those surveyed would be willing to add \$10 to their taxes per year to provide \$1000 per child for quality after-school care. Of the bipartisan voters surveyed, 92 percent said there should be an organized place for kids to go every day, 99 percent favored providing after school programs to children between 3:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M., and 82 percent said that such programs were needed in their communities.<sup>4</sup>

#### **The Problem: Children Left at Home Unsupervised**

In the United States, in 69 percent of married couples with children between the ages of 6 and 17, both parents work outside the home. Reports indicate that approximately 7–8 million children (and as many as 15 million) were left unsupervised on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup> Of third graders, 43 percent are at times without supervision.<sup>4</sup> As welfare reform moves a greater number of welfare recipients into the workplace, these numbers will most certainly increase.

Public school meets for only 6 hours per day, leaving up to 25 unsupervised hours per week between the time that children get home from school and parents who work full-time come home from work. Unsupervised children show a much greater risk of behavior problems, including antisocial behavior, delinquency, and failing in school.<sup>3</sup> Research demonstrates that most delinquent behavior occurs in the after-school hours from 2:00 P.M.–8:00 P.M.<sup>3,4</sup> Children may also not be spending their time in the most productive ways. In 1997, children aged 6–8 spent an average of only 22 minutes per weekday studying, while averaging almost 3 hours per day watching television. Seventeen percent of the children surveyed watched more than 5 hours of television per day.<sup>3</sup>

## **Benefits to Participation in After-school Programs**

Practice within after-school programs has gotten ahead of science, and there is a need for robust research on the effectiveness of after-school programming. For example, there are no published randomized trials of after-school programs' effectiveness and few well-conducted quasi-experimental trials.<sup>5</sup> Some research has suggested that children in after-school programs were found to have better grades overall; improved performance and interest in math, reading, and other subjects; better school attendance; more engagement in school activities; reduced drop-out rates; and higher quality homework performance.<sup>6</sup> However, the research methods used to collect this information are limited at best. In addition, selection bias was not controlled for in these studies. Beyond academic outcomes, children in after-school programs were found to develop new skills and interests; show healthier social adjustment, including increased self-confidence and conflict-resolution skills; and greater cooperation with adults and peers.<sup>7</sup> These children show a decrease in risky behaviors and have fewer discipline problems and a smaller chance of victimization.<sup>8</sup> They also display higher aspirations for the future.<sup>4</sup> Yet these findings are plagued with methodological problems that limited their ability to be generalized. Clearly more quality research is needed to identify effective after-school programs.

## **Funding**

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program, administered through the U.S. Department of Education, received \$1 million in fiscal 1997, \$40 million in 1998, \$200 million in 1999, and \$450 million in 2000. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act passed. Within section B, \$1 billion dollars was appropriated to fund the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC Program, and approximately \$325 million will be available for new grants. The administration for these grants has moved from the federal government to the state governments. Funding also comes from foundations granting to agencies and the private sector.

Recently, however, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program received a proposed cut in funding from \$1 billion to \$600 million for the upcoming fiscal year. The cut was brought on by the mixed findings of an evaluation of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program conducted by researchers at Mathematica Policy Research Incorporated.<sup>9</sup> In the evaluation, researchers found that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program had a positive impact on where and with whom students spend some of their after-school time and had increased parental involvement. However, the study also found that the

Programs had limited influence on academic performance.<sup>9</sup> This potential shift in funding from the federal government and the current down turn in the economy could signal difficulties in future funding for after-school programs .

## **Policy Issues**

### *Fragmented System*

The rapid increase in funding presents a particular challenge for policymakers, as the diversity of funding streams has contributed to the development of a fragmented system. The field of after-school care is filled with a myriad of program types, settings, and administering agencies, each with differing goals, expectations, and stipulations. This has led to wide variability in facilities, personnel requirements and skill level program scope, levels of autonomy, administrative structure (i.e., local vs. national), and the inclusiveness of diverse groups.

### *Sustainability*

Financial sustainability is also of vital importance. While after-school programs are a "hot issue" right now, some sources of funding may not be available in the future as public and political interests shift. The impact of a budget cut on a community that has come to depend on after-school programs could be disastrous. Long-term sustainability programs, which require local partnerships, must be developed. It may be that guidelines for the establishment of collaborative efforts across organizations in achieving financing should be put forth. Such efforts will have the additional benefits of helping to establish partnerships within the greater community (e.g., between community organizations and schools).

### *Developmental Needs of Children*

It is important to consider what types of programs will meet both the educational and developmental needs of the target age group, and what types of programs the children within that particular community are most likely to attend. Elementary-age children have particular needs based on developmental considerations. In order to pay attention, these children need a different pace in after-school programs than in school. They need hands-on opportunities to practice existing skills (e.g., math and science), to learn and develop new skills, and to foster character development. They also need a sense of community, the chance to learn conflict resolution without violence, and time to play and unwind. Finally, children need consistent, caring adults besides their parents as role models in their lives.

### Program Quality and Staff Development

Research-based standards are needed to safeguard program quality. These standards must be monitored through an accreditation process that would identify both quality programs and programs that do not meet the standards. Performance on the accreditation has consequences linked to reimbursement. How well a program meets the standard could be linked to a tiered reimbursement system similar to the system by which childcare standards are enforced in Pennsylvania. Thus, there is a need for a national accreditation board. The vast majority of staff for after-school programs lacks formal education about child development and teaching methodologies.<sup>10</sup> Currently, there are no professional standards outlined for the staff of after-school programs. One idea to consider is developing staffing certification in order to ensure a base level of expertise among staff. In addition, retention of quality staff is a major issue, because the pay is traditionally low. For example, staff turnover rates exceed 60 percent per year in many programs.<sup>12</sup> This lack of stability of staff decreases the opportunity for a positive relationship to be built between staff and children.<sup>13</sup> This would have the added benefit of opening a new career path for the staff of qualified after-school programs.<sup>11, 12</sup> Few organizations currently have the infrastructure to provide ongoing training and staff development.

### Educational Enrichment vs. Positive Youth Development

Both academic and youth development goals are blended in after-school programs. The question of what particular type of program or mix of program elements will provide the best care for our children remains unanswered. There is currently controversy over what should be the curricular goals of after-school programs. What percentage of after-school time should be spent on topics such as homework, new academic learning, and tutoring, and what percentage on arts, sports/recreation, and other topics that support positive youth development? Approximately one-third of both fourth and eighth graders scored at the proficient or above level in national standardized testing;<sup>11</sup> therefore, partially focusing on educational aims in after-school programs is clearly desirable. However, many experts in the field are concerned that, by channeling the majority of funding into programs directed by schools and focused on homework and learning, we are overlooking the role that community-based organizations can play in the provision of after-school activities that may be equally as important as academics.<sup>11</sup>

### Access

Currently, after-school programs are not equally accessible. Affordability is an issue as costs are estimated at \$2652 to \$2920 per child annually.<sup>14</sup> Transportation is another important issue. Are parents able to find and pay for transportation to get their children to the appropriate after-school programs? If not, how can programs meet this need affordably? For example, one study of families with children between the ages of 5 and 7 years old found that 43 percent of parents cited cost and 16 percent cited transportation as their greatest barriers to accessing after-school programming.<sup>14</sup> Children with special needs have not received the same access to after-school programs. A balance of parental and governmental funding must be achieved in order to address the needs of low-income families who may not be able to contribute to the costs, in conjunction with the needs of those families who can afford to pay for such programs.

### Lack of Facilities

With the exception of those after-school programs administered through schools, many community-based programs (e.g., in churches and community centers) are lacking adequate facilities and resources to provide high-quality after-school programs. Without such facilities as a library, museum, art or music room, computers, playroom, playground, or park, programs may be forced to engage children in such passive activities as playing video games or watching television.

### **Conclusion**

The convergences of a variety of interests in the after-school care area make it a critical time for policy makers to design programs that will meet the needs of children, families, and communities that they intend to serve. Given the widespread attention focused on these issues, it is important to build a system of high-quality after-school programs that will sustain, improve, and endure through social change.

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*After-School Programs for Children* is first in a series of briefs written by:



Daniel F. Perkins, Ph.D., Associate Professor  
Family/Youth Resiliency and Policy  
Dept. of Agricultural & Extension Education  
323 Agricultural Administration Building  
The Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, PA 16802

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