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Young Adolescents and Afterschool: Making Connections to Foster Success

Why After School and Young Adolescents?

Young adolescents typically need a lot of connections to caring adults and community institutions. Although they often ignore or express disinterest in these people and places, we believe what they “really want” is to be treated more like adults. They want to share in more independence and responsibility.

Co-author and graduate student Bryan Fox has worked a great deal with adolescents abusing alcohol and drugs. He observes that, while many of these young people desire independence and responsibility, they are often not fully equipped to handle the charge.

A growing area of interest in the US as well as a number of other countries is the potential for quality afterschool and summer programs to make more positive connections and to provide adolescents with extra time to better equip themselves to handle independence and responsibility while also improving their achievement and performance. The innovations seen in many of these programs are amazing.

One program turned a simple fishing trip into an engaging lesson on biology and math, while, at the same time, teaching practical skills such as completing a fishing license and preparing and cooking fish! Another engaged failing eighth graders with the writing, construction and design of a play starring 12-foot puppets. The adolescents then performed the play in the local park for a fascinated group of four and five year olds. Despite the absence of “text books,” these examples demonstrate teaching and learning of independence, responsibility, and academics through clever school and community partnerships and through hands-on learning projects.

Out of School Time: An Opportunity or Trouble?

Adolescents love to learn and be challenged. However, many young people in the US and other countries do not have access to these types of programs and partnerships during the typical afterschool hours or summers. Furthermore, we have growing evidence in America that those out-of-school hours—when most parents are working—are not a wholesome time for many adolescents.

A publication from a group called Fight Crime Invest in Kids cites a 1999 national report that targets the hours of 3 – 7 PM on school days as having the highest youth crime rate. However, while most young people are not involved in some type of crime during these hours, there are some who basically go home and disengage or “zone out,” making them even harder to reach since they are not actually involved in “criminal activity.” Clearly, these are reasons for the increase in interest for afterschool and summer programs, and a study by Deborah Van Dell at the University of Wisconsin has produced promising early findings on the impact of quality afterschool programs on keeping young people engaged.

In addition to increased interest by local educators, youth development groups, parents and crime prevention organizations in afterschool and summer programs, an emerging national Afterschool Alliance, working with the Mott Foundation and the National Community Education Association, is helping to secure more money from Congress for the US Department of Education to start afterschool and summer programs. This program, based within or linked to schools, is called the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Initially, schools with community partners applied for three year funding. Recent changes in federal education law has moved the coordination of the 21st Century learning centers to the individual states' departments of education, but Congressional funding will still go through the US Department of Education.

A priority was given to middle schools in the first years of the program. As a result, around 3-4000 middle schools are now involved in offering afterschool and summer programs with 21st Century funding. The funding has escalated from \$1 million in 1997 to \$1 billion this year.

A few of the findings illustrate the potential for the 21st Century programs to engage young adolescents:

Highland Park, Michigan, reported a 40% drop in juvenile crime in their neighborhood after the program's implementation. (Afterschool Alert #3)

Chattanooga, Tennessee's, programs reported a drop in absenteeism from 568 days per year to 135 days in one school and from 148 to 23 at another. (Afterschool Alert #3)

Plainview, Arkansas, implemented an abstinence program that resulted in no pregnancies in their high school graduating class of 2000, compared to 6 teen pregnancies in 1998. (Afterschool Alert #3)

Bayfield, Wisconsin's, 7th through 10th graders no longer loiter near the grocery and liquor store. Instead, they hang out in the afterschool program where they finish homework, do special projects, and play organized games with adult supervision. (US Department of Education)

Although not all the programs are getting these fantastic results, we are beginning to see some interesting patterns. In fact, when visiting schools and communities, the ingredients for successful afterschool programs almost jump out at you. They must be engaging, they must be enriching, and they must include a lot of extra hands, help, and hope; this is not easy to accomplish.

Connecting to Community Learning Sectors

Because of their flexibility and community connections, successful afterschool programs for middle school students typically have many partnerships with many community sectors, and, as evaluations are beginning to demonstrate, these extra connections to caring adults and positive community institutions are helping many young adolescents stay on "the right track."

Also, young adolescents like to be challenged by new experiences and opportunities. Therefore, engaging and enriching afterschool and summer programs combined with community connections and caring adults are a winning combination. They can link academics in the regular school day with real life practical and mentoring experiences, which not only helps these adolescents develop 21st Century skills but also reinforces typical "text book" learning with a more hands-on approach. This gives them a little independence and also equips them to learn and to handle their newfound freedom.

All types of sectors can be assets in helping develop successful afterschool and summer programs. They can also help transform a school into a community-learning center through family-school-community partnerships and through comprehensive use of out-of-school learning opportunities. What sectors have potential in developing these programs and opportunities? They are numerous:

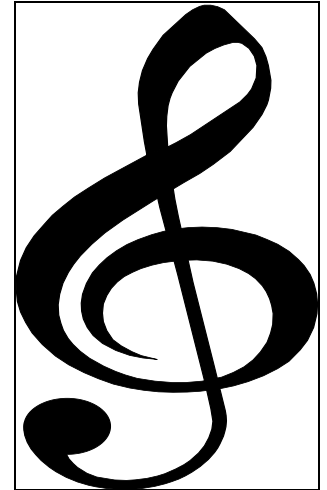
**Senior Citizens and
Grandparents**

Employers and Employees

**Artists, Cultural Groups,
and Museums**

**Colleges and College
Students**

High School Students



The following are examples from each sector describing how quality afterschool and summer programs connect schools, families, and communities.

Senior citizens and grandparents automatically bring a certain level of respect and history to an afterschool and summer program. They are a wealth of oral history, and, what's more, they can tutor adolescents in areas often overlooked by traditional learning. For example, two urban programs, 1500 miles apart, involve knitting circles led by elderly women who teach both the practical skill of knitting as well as how to have a roundtable discussion, take turns, and respect one another.

In the Appalachia area of the US, a few senior citizens created a program to reintroduce the tradition of building and playing mountain music instruments. This program was so popular that the elders and adolescents have formed a band that plays civic clubs and events, in addition to writing and producing a CD. The combined effort of the students, the school, the community, and the senior citizens is a prime example of the type of afterschool and summer program that can actually help transform a school into a community-learning center.

Employers and employees are a good source of people connections and also work-site experiences for adolescents, although providing a framework to mobilize enough well organized volunteers and work sites proves to be a major challenge. However, in Charlotte, North Carolina, the local Chamber of Commerce encourages all employer members to join a school district and citywide effort to provide volunteers to afterschool and in-school programs. The powerful framework that makes this possible is this: for every two hours that an employee voluntarily gives to work in a school or afterschool program, the employer pays for another hour of volunteer work. Initially, only a few employers signed-up to participate, resulting in few hundred volunteers in the school district of 120,000 students, but now, 5-6 years later, hundreds of businesses are involved and thousands of employees are volunteering.

Job shadowing is a good way for young adolescents to get a sense of real adult work and possible careers. A few years ago, in Fort Worth, Texas, 7th and 8th graders were involved in visiting a wide range of employers regularly, and, when asked what stood out, students replied that they were surprised that adults use computers to do all kinds of jobs and not to play video games, while teachers were amazed that so many jobs required algebra-like problem-solving skills.

Artists, cultural groups, and museums offer an array of people and experiences for middle school students in afterschool and summer programs. And this age group in particular really is “turned-on” by the creative connection. One middle school teacher involved in the Arts Basic Curriculum project in South Carolina described the potential of the arts this way – “Arts enable us to serve the diverse learning styles and rates of our students.”

“Arts enable us to serve the diverse learning styles and rates of our students”

Philadelphia created the Mural Arts Program to help eradicate graffiti throughout the city, and, in 1997, professional artists developed a sequenced year-round curriculum involving art workshops, skills training and basic employment. The program is now offered in 23 afterschool and summer sites and involves 1,000 children ages 8-15.

Some of the most interesting out-of-school art and music programs are found in Brazil. For example, one program in Salvador, Brazil, uses drumming, while another uses fashion design as a way to reconnect homeless, street children with society. Once re-engaged, they are encouraged to learn more about their subject. The success of this program lies in bringing education to the streets and engaging the adolescents’ interests.

College and University students are another great source of mentors, tutors, and team leaders. In America we are using three different methods to encourage college students to be engaged in afterschool and summer programs.

The traditional, and still largest, way to solicit volunteers is by tapping into the college students’ sense of community service, resulting usually in an hour or two of help per week. The second method is a recent initiative called AmeriCorps, in which a future college student works full-time on service projects in exchange for a stipend and future help with financial aid for college. The third way is through a new feature in our federal college work-study program. Afterschool and in-school tutoring programs can receive 10-12 hours of a college student’s time without any cost to the elementary or middle school because the work-study student gets paid his/her normal rate from the federal government. Together these options and others provide a great way to get college and university students involved with young adolescents in afterschool and summer programs.

In one middle school with many new Hmong and Hispanic immigrants, a number of teachers worked with college students to design a whole series of “College Jeopardy” games in which the middle school students competed in teams and learned everything they would need to know about college in an effort to create awareness and generate interest among students who, in the past, had not gone to college. Clearly these connections are enrichment activities that expand opportunities. And, in Charleston, SC, many college students, paid and volunteer, are involved in a program called Project WINGS, which helps to infuse “emotional intelligence” into the activities. After five years, the program has shown positive results, which the director attributes not only to a very good professional staff and program design but also to the college students’ direct interaction with the children and adolescents.

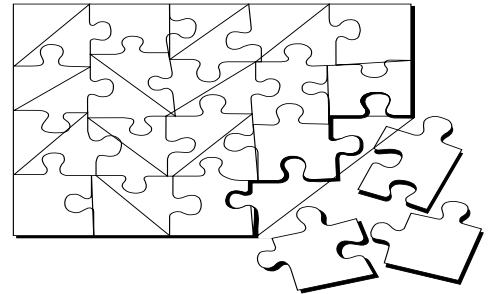
College students designed a whole series of “College Jeopardy” games in an effort to create awareness. . . among students who, in the past, had not gone to college.

In the past we have often ignored a huge resource of people already in our schools—namely, high school students. High school students are a great source of tutors and assistance in afterschool and summer programs. For instance:

Members of a high school Spanish class became tutors for middle and elementary students who were recently arrived from Spanish speaking Central and South American countries. The results were powerful: the young students gained in reading comprehension skills, while also enhancing their new language skills. Both groups gained a sense of service to others.

In a rural Florida school with very few sources of volunteers, an afterschool program pairs high school students interested in creative writing with middle school students in an effort to strengthen their writing skills. While the teacher's suggestion to improve their short story introductions was met with yawns, the high school students were able to speak bluntly, like an older sibling, in order to motivate the middle school students get busy with a serious rewrite.

Senior high school students involved with LA's BEST after school initiative are both providing tutoring in the Literacy Loop program in a nearby elementary school and leading the teams of tutors for three afternoons a week. The elementary students and high school students involved have the highest praise for this effort, and, when asked what they would recommend to improve the program, they suggested the program follow the elementary students into middle school.



What have been described thus far are the many sources of connections to caring adults, young and old, for middle school students in summer and afterschool programs. Yet, there is another often forgotten sector, and that is the middle school students themselves. Their involvement is necessary not only for creating successful afterschool programs, but also for transforming schools into community learning centers.

Students can give back to the community through service projects. In one school, students helped build and stock a library in a community center in an isolated area of town. In another capacity, middle-aged working people, as well as senior citizens and immigrants, often have limited computer skills, and the thought of going to a community college or even a high school may be too intimidating. Middle school students serving as assistants in beginning computer classes for older adults provides a positive network to serve and learn across the generations.

21st Century Learning Now

The various partnerships and experiences described in successful afterschool and summer programs show how to connect with young adolescents. Furthermore, they show that today's adolescents need, not only basic skills, but also a set of skills that go beyond traditional academic and textbook skills; they need 21st Century skills.

In the US, fifty years ago the earnings of a high school dropout and college graduate at age 30 were almost the same. Now college graduates earn almost 100% more, and those with 2-year associate degrees also do much better. These skills, attributes, and dispositions, combined with the foundation basics constitute a 21st Century education, or a **Basic Plus Curriculum**. And, while the regular school day can help develop these 21st Century skills and basics,

afterschool and summer programs are especially well suited because they have the flexibility, community, and other connections that are necessary to make it happen.

“Hand Middle School keeps hours of a convenience store from 6 am to 10 pm.”

—*Time* magazine

As a final example, observe the impact of such programs on one middle school and its community—Hand Middle School, in Columbia, South Carolina. They combined the basics with developing 21st Century skills in afterschool, weekend, and

21st Century Skills

Knowledge of English plus 2-3 other languages and cultures

Creative problem solving skills that can be developed through the arts and sciences

Ability to use technology to learn and work smarter

How to work in teams and develop civic responsibility

Technical training or a college education beyond high school

summer programs through aggressive community-school-family partnerships to, ultimately, become *Time* magazine's 2001 middle-school-of-the-year in the US. This is surprising because 15 years ago it was an okay school, though, at times, somewhat disorganized and isolated from the community. Furthermore, the past few years saw more and more portable classrooms brought in, which was perceived as further evidence of disorganization. Yet, the reality is quite the contrary.

The school is now so popular and getting such high achievement rates that many people are moving into the neighborhood, and some residents are pulling their kids out of private schools to send them to this diverse community-learning center. The portables are certainly filling up now. *Time* described the school as "enlisting aid from the clergy, police, civic groups, parents, teachers, and businesses." Senior citizens tutor students, and preschoolers take computer classes there. Hand Middle School, *Time* reports, "keeps hours of a convenience store from 6AM to 10 PM." Does this sound like a successful afterschool and summer program? Does it sound like a 21st Century Community Learning Center? It is.

If this kind of progress and effort seems overwhelming, consider the words of one who struggled against all odds to acquire an education and then become a fantastic educator himself—Dr. Benjamin Mayes—as a motivation to push forward. Dr. Mayes was a mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He said: "It is not a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream." Dream for the ideal afterschool and summer programs that will give our adolescents the connections and experiences they need to handle the new independence and responsibility that they desire, and, at the same time, improve their basic and academic skills.

Now, after visualizing and dreaming about these programs, please make them a reality. Be partnership builders. Be connectors. Bring families, schools, and community groups together to provide our young people with 21st Century skills, and to transform our schools and communities into Community Learning Centers. Will you be applauded for being partnership builders and developing shared leadership? No, not in the short-term, but you will make a positive long-term difference for many students, their families, the schools and the community.

Addresses and Related Links

Afterschool and Community Learning Network
USC Carolina Plaza—Rm. 207, Columbia, SC 29208
803.576.6175 or FAX 803.576.6198
or
College of Charleston, 9 College Way—Rm. 203
Charleston, SC 29424 - 843.953.7403

Links and Resources
<http://www.nccenet.org>
Grants and Funding Opportunities
www.acf.dhhs.gov

Resource Guide for Planning and Operating Afterschool Programs
www.sedl.org
Example of Best Practice
<http://www.tascorp.org>

