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The success of the program is in the partnerships. By leveraging school, community and family resources for a common goal, everyone benefits.

-- Mindy DiSalvo, DeKalb County School System, GA

Afterschool: The Bridge Connecting Schools and Communities

Current school reform efforts place a strong emphasis on strengthening schools so that every child can succeed academically. However, there's more to success than academics, and schools cannot be solely responsible for the education of students – all community players, including families, must work together to provide a total educational experience for youth. Regrettably, in too many neighborhoods there is a real disconnect between schools and their surrounding communities – especially in low-income areas where such partnerships may be needed the most, and during the afterschool hours – a time of day when they are needed the most.¹

Afterschool programs can play a vital role in reconnecting schools and communities. These programs help schools move beyond the constraints of the regular day and embrace the surrounding neighborhood, capitalizing on the resources, assets, and perspectives of organizations and individuals outside the school. Partnerships forged through afterschool offer students a way to achieve academically, socially, emotionally, vocationally, civically, and physically.² Successful afterschool programs recognize the importance of strong community connections and actively pursue them. The benefits of such collaboration are many and include:³

- greater relevance of curriculum for students
- increased student responsibility for learning
- improved linkages between school and community
- improved problem-solving, teaming, higher order thinking, time management, and other vital skills that benefit students' school achievement and workplace readiness
- expanded learning environments
- greater motivation of reluctant learners
- enhanced problem solving and conflict management skills
- reduced behavior and truancy problems

Bridging schools and communities benefits children and youth

Afterschool programs benefit youth by decreasing risk-taking behaviors and by developing interests and competencies that in turn support academic learning and achievement.⁴ In an evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers – afterschool programs receiving funding from the U.S. Department of Education -- participants in afterschool had:

- fewer absences and less tardiness

- higher grades
- higher rates of homework completion
- increased rates of parental involvement in school⁵

Some families can afford to enrich their children’s education with sports, academic tutors, private lessons and cultural activities, and can provide safe nurturing environments that give their children myriad ways to explore their interests. But some parents may have more limited options, including many of the 40 percent of families categorized as working poor or receiving public assistance.⁶ Many children in these families are among the 14 million K-12 youth responsible for taking care of themselves after school, and do not have the same access to enrichment activities.⁷

Research shows that community involvement can help afterschool programs close the achievement gap for students from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.⁸ Further, afterschool programs that partner with neighborhood organizations are better suited to help families overcome barriers to participation in afterschool, such as transportation, lack of programming, and fees.

When community-based organizations and schools work together to develop afterschool programs, students are exposed to new and creative learning styles in informal, relaxed settings that allow them to further explore topics of interest and discover new passions that they may have previously known little about such as photography, journalism, martial arts, tennis, chess, or engineering. The informal setting gives them the courage to try new activities in non-threatening environment. As a result, their interest and motivation to participate are enhanced.⁹

Afterschool programs that involve community-based organizations have the unique ability to reach at-risk children and youth who are disenchanted with school, hard to reach, or may be isolated from their communities.¹⁰ Research on childhood resiliency, development, and prevention of high-risk behaviors confirms the importance of positively connecting youth to their communities.¹¹

Children and youth benefit when schools and families value community partners and engage them as resources. Further, youth learn about the importance of contributing to their communities, and are in turn appreciated by those communities. Community-based service learning programs provide young people with valuable real-life lessons that are hard to duplicate in the classroom. By participating in these programs young people have the opportunity to:

- learn citizenship, responsibility and discipline
- develop problem-solving skills
- enhance self esteem
- learn about new career options
- improve academic motivation, school attendance, and school performance
- prepare for future work¹²

Through Children’s Aid Society, we have a bridge to the parents and the community. Not only because of the services it provides to the children, but to the parents themselves: GED courses, computer courses. Parents know they can go into any of these [classes], and they know they will be accepted, they will be supported and there’s always a helping hand.

-- Regina Fusco, Assistant Principal of a Community School in partnership with the Children’s Aid Society, New York, NY.

Quality afterschool programs are linking schools and communities with clear benefits to children and youth.

- Citizen Schools operates a national network of apprenticeship programs for middle school students. By connecting adult volunteers to students in hands-on learning projects after school, the participants develop the academic and leadership skills they need to do well in school, get into college, and become leaders in their careers and in their communities.^{13,14}
- Peekskill, New York's Extended Day Program incorporates cultural, recreational and civic resources to complement classroom instruction. Funded in part with 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds, the students learn leadership skills by serving as docents at art museums or volunteers at the community health center. Students are provided many ways to explore their interests and display their talents through performances, exhibitions, poetry readings, and other venues. Students show significant academic progress and greater self-discipline.¹⁵
- Young Audiences, Inc. (YAI) is a nationwide not-for-profit arts-in-education organization. Through in-school, afterschool, summer and family programs, YAI offers artistic and educational development for public school students by bringing young people together with professional artists of all disciplines to learn, create and participate in the arts. YAI programs take place in schools, libraries, community centers, hospitals, camps and parks. The programs reach children who might not otherwise have access to the arts. Research shows a correlation between arts education and improvements in academic performance and standardized test scores, increases in student attendance, and decreases in school drop-out rates.¹⁶
- YMCAs and many other community-based organizations recognize that afterschool programs are an opportunity to promote healthy living. Through their Pioneering Healthier Communities program, the Milwaukee YMCA works intensively with children and parents to develop healthier habits and reduce "screen" time while raising awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle.¹⁷ This is particularly important since opportunities for physical activity are disappearing from schools, and fewer than one in three teens get an adequate amount of regular physical activity.¹⁸ Afterschool programs play a key role in the fight against childhood obesity and associated health issues by providing children and youth with healthy snacks, nutritional education, and a safe place to engage in physical activity.

Schools cannot be the only magic bullet for kids. They need to be healthy, they need to be in adequate housing, they need their emotional needs met, they need their nutritional needs met. And schools can do that only in partnership with other agencies.

-- Judith Johnson, Superintendent, Peekskill, New York

Benefits of afterschool extend beyond the classroom and into the community

Communities are facing 21st century challenges such as: a technology-driven economy that is creating new knowledge and literacy needs¹⁹, changing socio-economic and demographic trends, and the spread of crime, drugs, poverty and violence from cities to suburbs.²⁰ As a result, more communities are recognizing that partnering with schools strengthens the community at large. Community leaders and stakeholders, especially in urban areas, are looking for opportunities to help improve the academic, social and professional skills of students.²¹ The advantages of having educators and community builders working together are many, but collaboration can be

difficult. Some educators are not skilled at engaging parents and community members in the work to strengthen schools. For example, *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher 2004-2005 Survey: Transitions in the Role of Supportive Relationships*, found that teachers and principals identified their interactions with parents as a significant source of stress and anxiety, and 45 percent of new principals expressed a lack of confidence in the adequacy of their preparation to work effectively with community members or organizations.²² Afterschool can effectively link communities and schools.

The benefits of community involvement in education through afterschool are tangible and real.

- The community as a whole benefits from having well-rounded youth who are productive and responsible community members.
- Adults and community members are able to reconsider any negative stereotypes they have of youth when they have positive interactions with young people. They are then more likely to hold a positive view of young people, voice their support for afterschool, and play an active role by volunteering or mentoring.²³
- Young people gain valuable experiences when engaged in community service learning opportunities provided by afterschool programs.²⁴

Afterschool programs are a positive force in the community.

- The Fremont Business Academy in Oakland, California has afterschool programs that offer youth the opportunity to manage businesses for their communities, ranging from tax help to publishing local newspapers. The students first gather information from their community, and then spend the next three years working on the selected community improvement project.²⁵
- The Kids Involved in Community Kindness (KICK) in Hampton, Virginia, gives students the chance to identify a neighborhood problem, develop an action plan, and implement a project to make a difference in their neighborhood. Students engage in activities such as journal writing, Internet research, games, interviews, creative writing, and walking tours. They interact with key community leaders and learn about how laws and policies affect communities.²⁶
- The Native Youth Club in Sioux Falls, South Dakota embraces community involvement, which is a vital component of the program. Tribal elders teach students about Native American customs, while high school volunteers mentor younger students. Through the program, students have the opportunity to showcase Native American dances at local ethnic celebrations, and keep tribal traditions alive.²⁷

Conclusion

Afterschool programs are a solid bridge connecting schools and communities. Quality afterschool programs work with communities to connect children and youth with resources, community-based organizations, volunteers, and mentors. In many places, the afterschool program serves as a hub of activity for children, youth and families by offering an array of community activities. Partnerships between schools and community-based organizations support academic achievement not by mimicking schools, but by complementing the schools' academic focus with a more holistic approach. This relationship not only benefits the participating children and youth, but strengthens the programs, the schools, and the community at-large.

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