




School-County Partnerships Drive Growth and Sustainability of After-School Programs

All 26 middle schools in Fairfax County, Virginia, have a comprehensive five-day-a-week after-school program in place with a full-time program specialist on site.

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Quality after-school programs provide an environment in which middle school students can feel safe. They provide opportunities to improve academic development and performance; social, emotional, and physical well-being; and school and community connectedness. They also reduce the potential for risk-taking behaviors.

In addition, after-school programs can create a powerful dynamic for crafting collaborative relationships among schools, local government, community organizations, cultural institutions, and other entities to help create an expanded support network and greater opportunities for young people.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) and the Fairfax County government have taken the initiative to establish and fund after-school opportunities for middle school students. This new investment and partnership expanded a three-day-a-week after-school program to a five-day-a-week program in all 26 FCPS middle schools. After only one year of full implementation, outcome measures show improvement in academics, behavior, and relationships, and an average weekly attendance of 15,000 students.

A Diverse Population

FCPS, with almost 165,000 students, is the largest school system in Virginia and the 13th largest in the country. More than 37 percent of the county's 1 million residents speak a language other than English at home. FCPS minority enrollment is at 49.8 percent and almost 22,000 students study English for speakers of other languages.

Fairfax County is a wealthy area; however, it also has the highest cost of living in the state, making home ownership an impossible dream for many low-income families and putting many necessities out of reach for them. This school year, nearly 33,000 FCPS students are eligible for the free and reduced-price lunch program. Most adults work full time and many hold multiple jobs. More than 20 percent of youngsters aged 5-12 are in day care, with another 33 percent of youths in need of care.

Demonstrated Need

The middle school after-school program was introduced in 2001 when the Fairfax Partnership for Youth, a local public-private partnership serving as an intermediary between FCPS and Fairfax County's Department of Community and Recreational Services, helped establish a mini-grant process to fund one- and two-day after-school programs. Seed money was provided by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and local school-community coalitions provided matching funds and programming support.

That same year, the results of a countywide youth survey indicated that 57 percent of respondents spent time at a friend's house without an adult present; 34 percent spent time at least once a week when no parents were present; and 50 percent hung out at a mall or in a parking lot three or more times a month. Respondents reported lower than average feelings of neighborhood attachment and connectedness toward school.

Program Implementation

Partly in response to these survey results, the Fairfax County-Falls Church Community Services Board partnered with FCPS and the Partnership for Youth. Using funds from a three-year Virginia State Incentive Grant, they adapted selected evidence-based prevention

programs to an after-school environment and trained staff members to deliver those programs.

By spring 2004, all the middle schools had received \$5,000 mini-grants to convene after-school programs at least two days a week. These programs were a mix of primarily academic support and enrichment and prevention-based programming. Average weekly attendance was about 3,600 students.

During this period, Fairfax County experienced a marked increase in youth gang activity, with more than 100 gangs operating in the county. At nearly every Gang Prevention Task Force forum, the No. 1 prevention initiative discussed was the need to expand after-school programs at the middle school level.

In fall 2004, the school board invested nearly \$1 million in after-school programs and formed the Office of After-School Programs. A year later, the Board of Supervisors earmarked \$3.4 million to implement a three-year expansion of after-school programming to five days a week in all 26 middle schools. A school-county partnership was developed between the Office of After-School Programs and the Department of Community and Recreational Services to implement this initiative, and the time frame for full implementation was reduced to one year.

Coordination Is Key

By the end of the 2006-2007 school year, all middle schools had a comprehensive five-day-a-week after-school program in place with a full-time program specialist on site. The program specialist plans, develops, coordinates, and implements program activities and schedules all community use of the school buildings and grounds. The specialist is a 12-month school employee and is part of the school's administrative team, which helps facilitate a strong link between after-school and in-school activities and programs—one of the keys to the success of the initiative.

The specialist, who is the administrator in charge during the hours of the after-school program, has relieved many of the initial concerns of the principals, who were reluctant to add the responsibility of running an after-school program to their already full schedules.

With the support of the Office of After-School Programs and the Department of Community and Recreational Services, each middle school develops and implements its own program and budget. Needs are identified, program goals are established to address those needs, specific programs and activities are selected to meet the goals, and performance measures are established for assessment.

Specific program activities vary among the schools, but each program must address the four key strategies that govern the after-school logic model:

1. Academic support and enrichment;
2. Social skills and youth development;
3. Health, wellness, and recreation; and
4. Family and community involvement.

In addition, each program activity is aligned with the FCPS student achievement goals: academics, essential life skills, and responsibility to the community.

A broad spectrum of caring adults—teachers, parents, members of community- and faith-based groups, and business persons—provide program activities. These activities range from tutoring, homework help, and enrichment activities to peer mediation and leadership opportunities. They also include parent education programs, service learning, and community involvement programs. During the 2006-2007 school year, the schools partnered with more than 140 outside organizations, groups, and individuals to offer a total of 767 different program activities.

This past year has been one of significant transition for the middle school after-school initiative. It also has been marked by success on multiple levels. For example, the collaborative partnership between the Office of After-School Programs and the Department

of Community and Recreational Services has allowed the schools and the county to leverage resources, personnel, programs, and concepts to expand program offerings, supports, and services; to be more effective and efficient; and to be more strategic in the way that programming is offered.

Program outcomes are examined through multiple measures: planned and unplanned site observations; quarterly progress reports; student, teacher, staff, and parent surveys; and academic and behavioral data. Correlations among these measures are investigated to obtain a more complete picture of the impact of the program.

Perhaps the most impressive outcome is one that has been noted by many of the school principals: The after-school program has transitioned from simply an “add-on”; it has become an integral part of the school day that is incorporated into each school plan.

A Recipe for Success

A strong and stable framework has been established to support the continued growth and expansion of the middle school after-school program. The core of that framework is the strong collaborative partnership between school and county staff members charged with developing and implementing this initiative.

Other factors that contribute to the success of this initiative include:

- Having a structural base and action plan in place and ready to move forward when resources became available;
- Integrating full-time after-school specialists into the school’s administrative team;
- Having the support and leadership of principals who understand the parameters of the program; and
- Having teachers and administrators who see the needs within their school that can be met by the after-school program.

After-school activities provide young people with greater opportunities for success in developing the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and abilities to live healthful lives and to become productive adults. Research shows that when young people are provided the opportunity to build positive peer and adult relationships, the results include greater school and community connectedness; better school attendance; increased social competence; increased engagement in learning; and fewer substance abuse and behavioral issues, including gang involvement. Initial outcomes from the middle school after-school program in place in Fairfax County appear to support that research.

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