



A Lifeline for At-Risk Children

Afterschool programs expand wraparound services through community partnerships

By Jodi Grant

When Michael Wilson, a principal and afterschool provider at Glen Iris Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama, noticed students walking into school still eating their breakfast—often a bag of chips—he started a farm-to-market afterschool program that today engages students at seven of the city’s public schools.

Wilson created the partnership with the Jones Valley Teaching Farm in 2013, and ever since, Glen Iris students have been growing their own fruits and vegetables. The afterschool program runs a weekly farmers market, selling the produce grown in the garden for a nominal amount and teaching the students

lessons in marketing, accounting, and business practices.

Glen Iris Elementary also hosts a family kitchen, where parents learn how to make the foods they love in healthier ways—substituting vegetable oils, for instance, for lard or fatback. After a session, everyone dines together, chats over the meal, and, Wilson hopes, models dinners at which family members talk to each other without staring at their devices.

Expanding the Community

The Birmingham farmers market experience isn’t unique. Taking cues from community schools,

afterschool programs throughout the country are stretching the boundaries of what programs provide in order to meet the emerging needs of students and families. They are stepping in to provide wraparound services that deliver community resources to the students and families who need them.

The story of afterschool programming in America today is often the story of school- and community-based program directors identifying the needs of students and families, and marshalling resources to meet them. But afterschool providers sometimes struggle to find such resources, lacking guidance or support.

Bringing together school and community organizations often relies upon maximizing the funding, partnerships, and family engagement elements of 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs), says the Coalition for Community Schools report “Expanding Minds and Opportunities.”

The report recommends greater use of Title I monies including supplemental educational services funds, applying the community school strategy to enhance and sustain expanded learning, incentivizing partnerships, and leveraging funding through the community school strategy.

Jay Roscup, director of Finger Lakes Community Schools in upstate New York, says afterschool programs offer young people additional time and flexibility. They give students freedom from standardized curricula and testing, as well as the chance to work with peers and choose their own activities.

Community schools, he says, can go a step further. Roscup is bringing trauma-informed approaches, mental health services, dental and health clinics, and other services to students and families at Finger Lakes while retaining the afterschool program. Success lies with making services person-centered, he says: “Nothing about them without them” is the motto.

Power in Partnership

Solutions start with community engagement, Wilson agrees. Schools can’t satisfy every

need, but partnerships with a local medical school, college of dentistry, and department of health have made it possible to provide some health services in Birmingham schools. “It’s always going to cost something, but it doesn’t have to cost a lot when you develop partnerships,” he says.

Angela Henry, project director at SAFE BASE 21st CCLC in Iola, Kansas, says her program is viewed not just as an afterschool program, but as a “connector to resources.” For instance, SAFE BASE stepped in after a once-in-a-generation flood hit the community several years ago. The Federal Emergency Management Agency had provided mobile homes to many families who suddenly found themselves homeless, and cut checks for the value of the homes lost.

Recognizing that many families affected had little concept of how to manage money, SAFE BASE 21st CCLC brought in an expert on poverty to advise county school districts, local law enforcement agencies, mental health providers, city administrators, and community members about how best to help displaced and uninsured families affected by the crisis.

In addition, SAFE BASE brought health services to the community. When Henry noted a kindergarten with severe dental problems, she spoke to his mother and learned the family didn’t have enough gas money to take him to a dental clinic 90 minutes away. The conversation led Henry to solicit funds from a private foundation, which SAFE BASE used to sponsor a health fair.

The program offered a year’s worth of basic school supplies, free of charge, as an enticement to any student who attended. It was a tremendous success, identifying several children with head lice and treating it at no charge (and with great discretion); offering free physicals, vision tests, and immunization vouchers; and connecting students in need to volunteer dentists. Over the course of several years, some 700 students got dental treatment. The county’s three dentists also began accepting Medicaid payments and taking new patients.

Whether it’s financial advice, health and dental care, social-emotional support, or another need, afterschool programs are supporting students, families, and communities in the afterschool hours and beyond by finding ways to provide wraparound services that otherwise wouldn’t be available. 

Jodi Grant is executive director of the Afterschool Alliance.



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