



7 Keys to Elevate Your After-School Program

By Kim Templeman

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For some students, the school day may end when the bell rings. But peek into my school at 4 p.m. on most days of the week, and you'll find dozens of students immersed in collaborative, hands-on projects in which the students are a part of the planning and design.

Here at Crooked Oak Public Schools in Oklahoma City, we have a thriving after-school program. We keep students safe and make sure they have a wholesome snack, but our mission is decidedly educational. Through our after-school program, we provide hands-on, engaging lessons that extend the learning from the regular school day. This is critical for several reasons. After-school time adds two hours to the regular school day, time that benefits both struggling and gifted students. We structure the time so that the students in need have access to remediation and support, while students on level and beyond are challenged to go deeper.

Our program also gives students the opportunity to explore and develop a wide variety of personal strengths and interests. We cover health and wellness, the arts, and STEM. Last—and very important to us—is that the after-school program benefits families and the community by providing parents a safe and productive alternative to childcare. It also strengthens our sense of community by engaging families, the school, and our local partners in growing our youth.

Our after-school program, funded through a U.S. Department of Education 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, serves between 150 and 200 students, four days a week from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. Come June, we offer a summer learning program that runs five days a week for four weeks, serving up to 150 students a day. Here are seven keys that have made our program successful.

1 Seamless transition
Our after-school program and our regular school day go hand in hand. Many of our after-school staff are teachers during the regular day, so they're well aware of what's being taught and have a feel for the rough spots and who might need extra help. We coordinate lesson planning so that after-school can reinforce and expand on what's taught during the regular day.

2 Academic relevance
We use our after-school program to extend our learning goals and connect them in a developmentally appropriate way to our students' worlds. For example, we work with older students on navigating higher education and with elementary and middle school students on connecting current learning to their prior knowledge and future skills.

3 Skill-building
We also use after-school time to build students' skills for success. It's our venue for strengthening problem-solving skills, building teamwork, offering lessons in STEM topics, encouraging project-based learning, and so much more.

4 Leveraging extra time
After-school time is different from the regular school day, and we take advantage of the differences. Our after-school students have the time and space to manipulate the content of lessons, work in teams, explore individual areas of interest, and discover their strengths.

5 Digging deeper
We work to create connections between our students and their worlds. For instance, we present math and science standards in ways that allow students to see their purpose and relevance outside of our school walls. These are goals we set for ourselves within the traditional school day, but we believe our after-school program gives our students and our community a chance to dig deeper in all academic areas. In addition to that, we can connect our students with people in our community who bring expertise about and passion for fields that students would otherwise have no opportunity to learn about. This, we believe, is invaluable.

6 Challenging material
We work within and across grade levels to engage students in challenging, enriching activities that tie to our standards and go beyond. Working across grade levels allows our students to manipulate content at deeper levels than is possible during the traditional school day, as well as interact closely with students of other ages. This seems to be beneficial both academically and socially for all.

7 Links to the school day
As we map out our curriculum, we don't treat after-school time as if it were stapled on to the regular school day. It's part of our overall planning. I have found that this creates many opportunities for dialogue about student progress, effective instructional strategies, and a sense of community in terms of serving our students. ■

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