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# Sustainability In School-linked After-school Programs

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*In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act reauthorized the federal government’s major after-school initiative, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program, as a state-operated authority. Under this Act, states receive funds on the basis of their share of Title I, Part A funds, and they may use their allocations to make competitive grant awards to support after-school initiatives designed by local educational agencies, community-based organizations, and other public or private consortia of such agencies. The new law also requires prospective grantees to specify plans for how their programs will continue beyond the grant’s funding period. As a result of these changes, both new applicants and current grantees face the need to consider long-term sustainability.*

*Policy Studies Associates (PSA) examined strategies for sustaining school-linked after-school programs, in order to help practitioners, funders, and policy makers understand the challenges of sustaining these emerging programs. PSA’s study, conducted in 2001, addressed questions such as: What practices have helped varied school-based after-school programs sustain their efforts? How can programs strengthen the community partnerships that are most likely to benefit participants? How do programs ensure that resources continue beyond the original grant? What are the links connecting sustainability, program quality, and positive outcomes for children and youth?*

*Researchers used a literature review and telephone interviews with more than 60 experts and program leaders to learn about program sustainability from long-running school-based or school-linked after-school programs that meet the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC. The study concentrated on learning from programs that: served large populations of youth at risk, showed evidence of achieving positive results for youth, and had continued beyond their initial funding for more than three years. Leaders of 10 long-running programs were interviewed in depth to learn about the sustainability strategies they used before 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC resources became available. The research team visited three of these in-depth sites to observe operations. The study found two central factors that contributed to sustainability: program leadership and program quality. This report focuses on these critical areas. Part I addresses program leadership, including strategies for managing external partnerships and attracting and using diverse resources. Part II describes the role of program quality in sustaining after-school programs. The discussion of sustainability presented here applies to programs that are strongly linked with schools; some of these generalizations may not hold in other contexts.*

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**T**he 1990s saw rapid growth in after-school programs for children and youth across the country. Parents, who want their children safely supervised all day, are strong proponents of these programs. So are local child and youth program leaders—experienced professionals who know that children need safe havens where they can find adult support, homework assistance, and shelter from personal, social, and psychological risks.

As advocates and champions of the after-school movement, program leaders have helped to build awareness about youth development among key decision makers. Although the leaders may work virtually alone during the start-up phase, over time their dedication and enthusiasm can motivate program staff, board members, and funders to commit themselves to providing good after-school care. And it is the leaders' passion, skilled management of partnerships, and savvy use of resources that keep after-school programs alive. In short, effective after-school programs result from the leaders orchestrating community partnerships. In this report, partnerships refer to formal arrangements between after-school programs and their advocates or constituents that:

Establish significant roles and responsibilities for developing, monitoring, and supporting the program

Produce measurable contributions to the program, in either financial or in-kind terms

Institutionalize deep and lasting commitment to the program within the community's major youth-serving agencies

In this definition, the people and entities that qualify as “partners” vary greatly, from business owners to school superintendents, and from grassroots organizing groups to city health departments and school systems.

## **Program Leadership**

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### **Leaders are knowledgeable, politically savvy, and well-connected.**

Leaders of sustainable after-school programs may come from education, youth development, or business environments. Their training and long-term community involvement makes them fervent and well-connected advocates for youth.

Many leaders of sustainable programs began their work in grassroots political organizing, and they know how to keep pressure on the public and private sectors to invest in safe, supportive

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environments for children and youth. They understand that their fundamental responsibility is to “work the politics” of their communities, so they constantly look for opportunities to reach new allies and nurture potential supporters. For example:

**The Leadership, Education, and Athletics in Partnership (LEAP)**, a 10-year-old school-linked program in Connecticut, began as an after-school summer mentoring program operating in housing projects near Yale University. Founded by a law school student and an undergraduate, the program partnered with other summer programs serving low-income New Haven students. Added support from community advocates tied to the Yale Law School, combined with grassroots organizing in the communities LEAP served, established the program’s credibility, won strong political allies, and attracted financing from several donors. Connections with universities, state legislators, and the governor eventually stabilized LEAP’s funding and provided the visibility needed for statewide expansion.

South Dakota’s **Out of School Time (OST)** initiative grew out of grassroots efforts by child care advocates working closely with Gov. William J. Janklow. Loila Hunking, then-director of Child Services for the state, and her staff demonstrated to the governor the benefits of after-school support for youth, and, with Gov. Janklow’s advocacy among state legislators, the OST initiative received state funding. The funds were redistributed to communities that wrote competitively successful grants. Hunking’s staff offered technical assistance throughout the state to encourage community-based education and social service leaders to develop programs in communities where they would have quick local acceptance and success. Within three years, the state moved from sponsoring 350 after-school slots for elementary and middle-grade youth to supporting more than 3,800 openings. When federal 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funding became available, 17 more programs received funds, expanding services to approximately two-thirds of the state’s school districts.

Savvy leaders use their commitments from community partners to embed the after-school programming agenda into targeted spheres of influence. They have learned that long-term sustainability occurs when programs are integrated systemically with local policies, thus establishing permanent links among schools, community agencies, and after-school initiatives. For example, the **LA’s BEST (Better Educated Students for Tomorrow)** program, the mayor’s office and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) share core administrative functions and jointly ensure sustainability. The LA’s BEST administration, the “corporate arm” of the organization, is located at the mayor’s office; it directs community and political advocacy, outreach and public relations, the organization’s Board of Directors, and resource development. LA’s BEST “operational” component is located within LAUSD, and manages the day-to-day program in the schools with the input of an Advisory Board. LA’s BEST relies on two boards which have complementary functions. The Advisory Board oversees and nurtures staff and programs, while the “give-and-get” governing Board of Directors solicits funds, leverages resources, and makes connections to other programs. The two organizational components and the two boards work together to build community connections, seek out new opportunities, and keep program quality strong.

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## **Leaders of sustainable programs know where and how to find support.**

As one after-school program leader observed, “A lot of our sustainability comes from being proactive and understanding institutions,” in other words from seeking institutional collaborators, engaging their interests, finding ways for them to help shape the program, and letting them take credit for good practices. Added another leader, “Anyone who doesn’t think this is a political arena is being disingenuous.” Such pragmatism recognizes that while one or two leaders may set the vision, groups of program champions must push from behind to maintain the program’s viability.

### **Business Expertise Offers Lessons about Sustainable Leadership and Management**

Assistance from a business consulting firm helped **LA’s BEST** create a strong infrastructure during the program’s expansion years and helped convince funders that they were betting on a sure thing. The program continues to benefit from businesses that provide excursions, scholarships, and in-kind contributions.

One lesson LA’s BEST learned from the business world was to use team decision-making at the administrative and program levels. That practice fostered staff commitment and ownership of the program. Today, staff members echo the perspective of Chief Operating Officer Debe Loxton, who explains, “The [leader] must be able to give up personal authority [and also] willing to risk failing and sharing the failures equally.”

Leaders use their political skills to obtain information and assistance. Many maximize day-to-day access to powerful allies by locating their program headquarters in school districts’ central offices, community centers, or mayors’ offices. This practice also keeps political partners informed and engaged in the overall advocacy effort.

Leaders reach out to systems and institutions that can support their programs, both nationally and within the community. Local after-school programs that affiliate with national youth-serving organizations, for instance, gain resources such as the following:

- An established governance structure
- Mechanisms to access health services and other youth supports
- Connections to proven allies in the local business sector
- Credibility with faith institutions and community members, which often leads to volunteer support
- Expertise in community needs assessments, program planning, and evaluation

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Many youth-serving institutions have the added benefit of being politically neutral, so they impart credibility and “political cover” to emerging programs. That is especially important in communities where several community groups must compete for limited funding and local authority.

### Schools Are a Key Partner

Ellen Manning, director of the **CHAMP** program at Pine Grove Elementary School (Del Ray Beach, Florida), attributes her program’s sustainability to the fact that “we are interwoven into the make-up of the school.... They give us space. They pay the electric bill and phone bills. We have access to the computer center, cafeteria, theater, media center, and classrooms.” Most of the staff also work for the school and know students’ needs, parents’ interests, and the faculty’s concerns. The director meets frequently with the principal, assistant principal, accounting staff, and magnet coordinator.

Good leaders apply their knowledge of how systems work to their own programs. While they concentrate on handling vital outreach, they rely on well-trained, talented site leaders and staff to sustain day-to-day operations. Strategies for sharing leadership include:

**Cultivation of school-level support.** Programs gain strength from principals who open their facilities, faculty, and decision-making structures to collaborators. Debbie Zipes, director of **Bridges to Success** in Indianapolis, spoke for many leaders when she said that sustainability “stems from leadership at the school level, through a principal who willingly shares power” with organizational partners.

**Full-time program coordinators.** These on-site leaders ensure program-level coordination and day-to-day continuity for children, families, schools, and community partners. Coordinators’ roles and responsibilities vary, but most have strong ties to the community they serve, which they use to manage staff and ensure that services are reliable and high-quality. Although there is no typical coordinator profile, many have been practitioners or directors of youth development, recreational, or family services and have both administrative training and relevant content knowledge. In addition, coordinators expand their reach by turning to management teams and communications experts to advise about overall program implementation.

**Connection with a national or regional initiative.** Many programs link with organizations that define and sometimes manage the program framework and fiscal procedures, lead outreach to partners, raise funds, and handle public relations. Alliances with national, regional, or local organizations also provide access to research and technical assistance. Among the national organizations whose local affiliates often support local after-school programs are the **United Way, Save the Children, Boys & Girls Clubs of America,** and the **YMCA.**

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**Use of replicable program models.** Established models provide dependable infrastructure and guidelines for curriculum, staffing, and management. Sustainable models allow flexible implementation, so site-based directors and staff can adapt the model to their clients' specific needs. Models featured in our study included: **Beacons; Bridges to Success; Foundations, Inc.; LA's BEST; School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; and the Greater New York YMCA's Virtual Y.**

**Grassroots involvement.** Site-based councils, youth advisory groups, steering committees, and other local stakeholder participation creates ownership among the people with ultimate responsibility for sustaining the program, according to Mike Brown, former director of **Bridges to the Future** in Flint, Michigan. Similarly, Rhode Island's United Way Senior Vice President Allan Stein credits the 24-member, community-based steering committee of **SCOPE** with being the driving force that initiated the program and ensures its continuing growth and success.

Successful after-school leaders also use lessons gleaned from business or systems management to frame their programs, especially the emphasis on outcomes, continuous improvement, teamwork, and commitment to negotiating the best "win" for everyone involved.

### **Leaders inspire the confidence of parents, investors, and community partners.**

Few of the after-school programs examined in this study are even a decade old, and many of their founding leaders and school-based staff directors are still at the helm. Most shoulder the burden of sustainability personally by continuously reaching out to staff, participants, parents, political allies, community partners, and investors to inspire their commitment. When local stakeholders believe that a program is stable and trustworthy, they will advocate for it, invest their time in it, provide facilities, contribute funds, and recommend it to other potential supporters. All these actions are vital to sustainability. As Mike Brown, formerly of **Bridges to the Future**, notes, "Programs need to develop a level of trust to gain political credibility."

Trust grows out of staff longevity and deep connections to the community, according to Katie Brackenridge, co-director of the **Jamestown Community Center** program in San Francisco. Program leaders also inspire confidence by helping local stakeholders "own their program, follow it through, and champion it," United Way's Stein observed. "Assistance from Washington or the state [will have little impact] if there's no one locally to own it. Without that ownership, the program will evaporate," he added.

Leaders of sustainable programs build community connections and ownership by inviting business and organizational leaders to activities where they interact with youth, opening their board meetings to potential funders, and disseminating evidence of the value of their program for local youth. Summarizes Susan McCallion, executive director of **Communities in Schools of Miami**: "I'm always looking to make the organization work more effectively and systematically... [and]

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seeking the most efficient model. I couple that with valuing my team and valuing our partners, and working to negotiate the best win-wins for everyone.”

Those and other confidence-building activities can create a broad constituency that will encourage the public sector’s investment in after-school services, says Carrie Laughlin, evaluator of the **Alliance Schools Project**. Adds Jennifer Heath, former program manager for **School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century** based at Yale University, “[Trusted] programs become something that people expect and want, and they are hard to cut politically.”

Leaders’ commitment to building community confidence in their programs can have dramatic results. One director reported that her outreach to community supporters ensured the program’s continued funding during six tumultuous years of shifting state priorities.

### **Leaders emphasize community roots.**

Many leaders make an effort to ensure that their site-level programs recruit staff from the school and community served by the program. That practice helps communication between the program and families and ensures that youth have the opportunity to find mentors with cultural backgrounds and experiences similar to their own. Explained David Mena, an **LA’s BEST** site coordinator, “[Our leaders] are from the neighborhood, and they want to give something back. A lot of us came out of these schools.” The youth attending these programs say that such leaders are personally invested in their lives. Many community-based staff also are willing to spend time after program hours and on weekends playing pick-up ball games with students, encouraging them to take school more seriously, and even taking them out of the neighborhood on trips to amusement parks or ball games.

For the same reasons, a growing number of programs also recruit leaders from among former participants, including **Jamestown Community Center (San Francisco)**, **LEAP (New Haven, Connecticut)**, and **LA’s BEST (Los Angeles)**.

## **Managing External Partnerships**

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After-school programs can gain momentum from relationships with schools, government agencies and services, youth-serving organizations, neighborhood and parent groups, libraries, volunteer and faith groups, business groups, private philanthropies, and other local institutions. Among other benefits, these partnerships create consumer demand for after-school services, which stimulates financial support and produces allies who will work to preserve youth-focused activities.

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They also offer opportunities for community oversight and governance, which further embed after-school programming within a shared local agenda.

Leaders of sustainable after-school programs aggressively seek alliances with many program-related partners. They often are very good at leveraging one collaboration into several more, so that the program keeps a critical base over time.

### **Partnerships create interesting programs that attract supporters.**

Partnerships add special dimensions to programs that help attract long-term participants and supporters. Community agencies and institutions, for instance, often donate or arrange health and human services. Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs, and other community programs link after-school participants with caring adults and mentors. Parks and recreation departments give youth access to sports and fitness activities. Libraries, theaters, and museums lend their educational specialists to after-school activities. Community colleges and other institutions of higher education contribute student volunteers, training, meeting space, utilities, supplies, and access to computers and other technology.

**Molly Stark Elementary School** (Bennington, Vermont), for example, is a community school that also operates a school-based Family Center. The center coordinates with the after-school program, which provides extra-curricular and enrichment activities for children in kindergarten through grade five. The center's services include a preschool program, free dental clinic, and mental health services. It also links students and parents to more than 30 community partners who offer tutoring, recreation, content-based enrichment, and week-long courses on many topics.

Similarly, the **SUCCESS Program** of the Des Moines, Iowa Independent School District, partners with 20 community agencies to provide after-school mental health services. Partners include the community mental health agency, a substance abuse prevention program, and other child and family counselors.

### **Partners build demand for after-school programs by keeping constituents involved and informed.**

As a program's public champions, partners try "to move decision makers to a point of view that supports youth development," program leaders report. Thus leaders of sustainable programs work hard to make sure their current and potential partners know about the program's strengths and needs and have opportunities to provide feedback. As one leader notes, "It's more than programming. It's about bringing people along at all levels so no one is excluded." For example:



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**LA's BEST** raises awareness about youth development by involving business partners: as board members; as hosts of citywide events that showcase youth accomplishments and bring families together; and as providers of educational outings, recreation, arts activities, and community service opportunities. Leaders of LA's BEST publicize these contributions through feature stories in local media, flyers, and other products—a powerful strategy for expanding the circle of public support.

The **Letcher County (Kentucky) after-school program** relies on its partners (Save the Children, the Cowan Community Action Committee, PowerUP, VISTA, AmeriCorps, 4-H, the Kentucky Department of Education, a community college, an arts center, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, churches, individual donors, and others) to “talk up” the program in the community. Along with other contributions, these partners build public awareness of how important after-school learning activities are for this rural community's children and youth.

### **It can matter very much *who* a program's partners are and what roles programs ask them to play.**

Every partner brings a different value to the table. Some mobilize financial and in-kind resources, including access to facilities or direct services such as case management, health care, and counseling. Others advise and advocate on behalf of the constituents they represent, ensuring that the after-school program has access to specialized knowledge. And some partners can open the door to extra opportunities for program staff and participants, including mentoring, special events, volunteer placements, and recreational facilities.

Given the variation in attributes, it's important for a program to have partners with the qualities that contribute directly to sustainability. As one program leader observed, “We had the best grassroots support in the country, but grassroots supporters are not fund-raisers. It takes people with money to sustain a program.” Many program leaders say it also takes affiliations with highly visible, resource-rich national or regional organizations to sustain a local program.

For example, the regional United Way served as a major fund raiser, intermediary, planner, and policy advisor to the **SCOPE** program in Rhode Island's Central Falls School District. As soon as funding and programming were secure, explains United Way's Stein, the regional United Way affiliate turned the project over to the community and the school district; but it continues to play leadership and consulting roles as local players carry the program forward.

Other after-school programs, such as those at **Molly Stark Elementary School** and **Children's Aid Society** sites, have embraced the community schools model. Still others, including several school districts in our study, partner with **Foundations, Inc.**, or other national after-school program models. The question of which partner is most helpful for sustainability varies from community to community. While the affiliations with after-school models work well for some

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programs, leaders in other sites resist partnering with models developed outside their community because they fear losing the local involvement that ensures their full and continuing support.

**Oversight strategies used by sustainable programs are responsive to local stakeholders' relationships and interests.**

Leaders of long-running after-school programs know that community members want to help shape program priorities. They also know that some stakeholders possess expertise and political connections from which their programs can benefit. These leaders support sustainability by ensuring that community members have opportunities to share their talents and knowledge with the program.

Structures for shared oversight include: boards of directors whose members live in the community served by the program; advisory groups, which may include schools' site-based decision-making teams; steering committees that represent major health and youth services agencies; and school district steering committees, often including the superintendent, instructional leaders, principals who host after-school programs, teachers, and operations managers (e.g., fiscal directors, building supervisors, budget staff).

Oversight groups capitalize on constituents' interests and skills in several important ways. For example:

Affiliates of the national **Bridges to Success** organization have steering committees that link schools, United Way organizations, and grassroots groups with local service providers. **SCOPE**, the Rhode Island affiliate, has a districtwide steering council with subcommittees that address youth leadership, programming, budget allocations, evaluation, wraparound services, and sustainability. Issues requiring decisions are researched by a subcommittee and presented to the full council for a vote.

At the **Jamestown Community Center (San Francisco)**, an actively engaged board of directors has protected the after-school program several times in its 30-year history. When space and funding are threatened, board members, most of whom live in the community the program serves, have mobilized residents and lobbied political allies to secure a new location.

While collaborative oversight is common, shared governance of day-to-day program activities is rare. With the exception of the unique collaboration between LA's BEST, the school district, and the mayor's office (described on p. 3), after-school programs typically are managed by a single entity, a school, school system, community-based organization, community center, or youth-serving organization, which has clear authority for decision making and management. One explanation for this practice is that limited resources dictate a need for efficiency, and cooperative decision-making and negotiation are inevitably complicated processes.

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## Attracting and Using Diverse Resources

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Regardless of a program's size or the complexity of its funding streams, resource development is a nonstop, primary activity for program directors. Even for well-funded, long-running programs such as those supported by the **United Way, Save the Children, or Children's Aid Society**, or programs with strong state and local support, most initial resource pools "tap out" over time.

The constant pressure to renew resources is toughest on programs in remote locations, which typically have few local funding options. Program leaders say they are "scrambling all the time" to cover current commitments and to expand services. As the leader of one successful school-based program said, "We're always looking for a funding stream. Once you've found it, you have to make sure you keep it."

Sustainable after-school programs seek funds from varied sources, including the public sector (at national, state, and local levels), national and regional foundations, and local private and corporate funders. Some program directors suggest that, after the start-up phase, no more than a quarter to a third of a program's funding should come from any one source.

A diverse funding strategy can help an after-school program achieve sustainability in three ways. First, it protects the program from changes in the priorities or fiscal instability of any one funder. Second, integrating resources from several funders with a common agenda for youth can support high-quality staffing and advocacy. Blended funding streams also give the program greater budgetary flexibility, because funds from corporate, nonprofit, and private sources generally carry fewer restrictions than do state and federal resources. Third, programs with diverse resources can address emerging needs quickly, making them more responsive to long-term constituents.

At sites included in this study, foundations and private-sector organizations typically funded program start-up, technical assistance, evaluation, and public engagement. State, county, or municipal contributions subsidized operations, including facility and staffing costs; provided non-consumable supplies; and facilitated reimbursements from federal funding sources (e.g., child care funds from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and other state sources, Community Development Block Grants, snacks from U. S. Department of Agriculture programs). Most sites also generated their own revenues from fund-raising activities, whether large or small in scale. Few sites interviewed for this study received federal funding from the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC programs, because this study focused on high-quality programs in existence prior to the initial awards under the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC program. However, by the time the study was concluded, some programs reported that they were partnering with school districts in new ways to initiate program expansion and to reach larger numbers of children and youth, often with assistance from 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grants.

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### Stable Programs Draw Support from Many Sources

- The United Way of America encourages its regional affiliates to develop a solid, self-sustaining resource base for after-school programming by combining state, local, and federal contributions. Programs begin as school-community collaborations, typically with one school district and several schools. Regional or local leaders find collaborators in nearby counties or school districts, bring community groups together as advisors and partners, and obtain additional funding through regional and local United Way campaigns and the parent organization's access to major funders. Flint, Michigan, for example, formed a consortium of 12 school districts and several community colleges to develop its program. The consortium solicited and received several million dollars of state welfare funds for students from low-income families. The regional United Way contributed funds for administration and reporting to support the local **Bridges to the Future** program.
- In 2000, **LA's BEST** was funded by about 20 major sources. Half of the funds came from the state, 25 percent from the city's general fund and Community Development Block Grants, 13 percent from private foundations, and 9 percent from the federal government. City funds supported a one-time project that produced staff guides and training videos used in almost 60 workshops citywide. In-kind contributions from corporations, individuals, and local foundations provided food and snacks, special events, transportation, sports programs, and professional services. Local groups sponsored cultural, athletic, and arts events and special projects, such as management consultation and public relations campaigns.

### Sustainable programs sometimes shift their tactics and methods to match the goals of new youth-centered funding sources.

As sources of funding change, programs' priorities are sometimes redirected or phased out. One program founder observed, "We are always beating the bushes [for funds], so we package our program in different ways for different folks. We've framed our ideas through the targets of each foundation and marketed accordingly." At many programs contacted for this study, for instance, the emphasis on academic programming increased when federal 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funds became available for program expansion.

The practice of adjusting program content or methods to match "mega-funder" priorities may extend an after-school program's life, but it also makes the program vulnerable to shifting political trends. Sometimes, those shifts are substantial. At sites in this study, a change in federal or state funding streams sometimes meant switching from providing general enrichment for a broad group of at-risk youth to offering more limited services to a narrower client base.

As one program leader explained, "The trick is to find funders who are willing to keep what you have going." But that is no small feat; as another director noted, "Everybody wants to fund something new, or an addition or expansion, but they don't want to fund what you have going already."

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Dependence on shifting funding streams is especially problematic for small programs that are designed to meet specific local needs, because they have less leeway to match their priorities to those of large funders and are ill-prepared to weather economic setbacks. To overcome this barrier, Rhode Island United Way's Allan Stein suggests linking the after-school program agenda to general community support. The after-school program can be "the camel's nose in the tent" that moves people toward integrated holistic full-day services for children and youth, and stimulates school reform. In Rhode Island, for example, state legislation provides impoverished districts with funds for after-school services to middle-school students as part of an overall school-linked service policy, Stein says.

## **Implications for Research, Policy, and Funding**

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The major lesson about program leadership, management, and sustainability offered by this study is that the quest for sustainability demands the constant attention of knowledgeable, politically savvy program leaders and strong partners, but that may not be enough. Many long-serving program leaders report that they still have not addressed sustainability issues to their satisfaction. Although some states are beginning to provide new pools of targeted funding for school-based after-school programs, those resources are slow in coming, usually support pilot projects rather than continuing programming, and are vulnerable to shifting gubernatorial and legislative priorities.

Our study suggests four lessons that should guide efforts to sustain school-based after-school programs:

### **The sustainability of after-school initiatives depends on leaders' managerial skills and political savvy.**

The priorities and political strength of community leaders appear to have more influence on the sustainability of school-linked after-school programs than programs' funding strategies, jurisdictional sponsorship (i.e., federal, state, local), or activity focus (e.g., academics, enrichment, mentoring, recreation). Put simply, it takes a uniquely talented, politically savvy individual to create a sustainable program *and* keep the money flowing.

Policy makers and funders who want to foster such leaders will need to support risk-takers and emerging talent, not just well-established or known quantities. They will have to provide a level of funding sufficient to attract and retain exceptional leaders. And they will need to give good

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leaders the flexibility to use seed money for investments that will get their programs off the ground, including expenses for public relations and other operational needs.

**External partnerships sustain after-school programs but do not guarantee permanence.**

Sustained programs are closely connected to the schools, districts, and communities that host them. The most basic and perhaps important partnership is between the after-school program and the school, and that connection relies largely on successful personal relationships between the leaders of each entity. But locating a program within a school does not automatically lead to alignment of classroom and after-school instruction (developments that might help to embed and therefore sustain the after-school program), unless there is substantial buy-in and willing involvement by the school's staff.

To the extent that there are both formal and informal opportunities for exchanges across programs, mutual understanding and program continuity will develop. Financial resources that reimburse staff for joint planning and collaboration, before programs begin and throughout the school year, encourage stronger after-school and school-day partnerships. In addition, funders should look for firm evidence of institutional support both from the school and the program as a prerequisite for new funding.

**Programs and funders need research-based guidance to determine appropriate funding priorities.**

Many after-school programs are shaped more by changing political priorities than by research-based evidence of program strategies that benefit youth after-school. In particular, funding sometimes carries requirements for particular staffing configurations, ratios, and credentials. These requirements can act as disincentives to program development and expansion, especially for programs that are small or located in rural areas.

The constant quest for funding sometimes leads after-school programs to adjust their designs and goals in ways that do not reflect the priorities of their key constituents and communities. Additional research is needed to produce evidence of the link between specific program features and outcomes and to help program leaders and funders agree on consistent, continued priorities and goals.

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## **After-school programs need diverse funding, especially from state and local sources, to achieve sustainability.**

Apart from the well-recognized strategy of diversifying funding, no single funding strategy or set of strategies emerged in this study as consistently reliable in ensuring program sustainability. While connections with large regional or national after-school models, or the short-term availability of restricted federal funds, may bolster a program's goals, curriculum, technical assistance, and links to resources outside the school, they do not guarantee sustainability. Reliable, continuing streams of state and local funds, with community backing, are the most important sustainability factors, especially when they help programs bridge the funding cycles of individual sponsors.

## **After-School Leadership and Sustainability: More Information**

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Watson, S., and Wertheimer, M. (April 2000). *Financing family resource centers: A guide to sources and strategies*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

### **Selected Resources from The Finance Project's *Out-of-School Time Project***

The Finance Project offers materials and technical assistance to help leaders plan, finance, and sustain after-school programs. The following publications are available at [www.financeproject.org/osthome.htm](http://www.financeproject.org/osthome.htm). For more information, call (202) 628-4200.

**Planning for Sustainability:** These materials suggest clear, sensible, and convincing plans for establishing and keeping the key elements that make an initiative successful.

**Finding Funding:** This resource helps program leaders access specific funding sources, such as federal Title I education funds, and find support for specific program components, such as facilities or transportation.

**Building Partnerships:** These materials address funding, leadership, technical expertise, and in-kind contributions.

**Mobilizing Communities:** These resources describe strategies for developing champions and political support, building relationships with foundations and businesses, developing parents' leadership skills, engaging public audiences, and connecting with community groups.

**Measuring and Using Results:** These materials help leaders select appropriate target outcomes and indicators of progress, frame evaluations, and use data to manage and inform their work.



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**M**ost after-school program leaders who were interviewed for this study agreed that program quality is an important component of after-school sustainability, although not the only one. As one leader put it, “Certainly it is easier to lose a program that is not very good, but I’ve seen just dynamite programs die on the vine.” After-school initiatives often are part of a wide safety net of support for children and youth funded by strong political coalitions. Constituency appeal, more than program quality, typically is the first rationale for funding. Nevertheless, program leaders generally agreed that a minimum level of quality is essential to attract long-term support. The better the program quality, the more likely it is that the program’s customers, parents, and children will return and that political and financial backing will continue.

In particular, our study of program leaders’ perspectives found that the following quality-related factors affect an after-school program’s capacity to attract, serve, and retain participants, and thus have bearing on sustainability: dynamic, developmentally and educationally balanced program content; recruitment and retention of high-quality staff; collaboration and coordination with stakeholders; and demonstration of success.

### **Providing Dynamic, Balanced Program Content**

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Ask an after-school director what makes his or her program sustainable, and the chances are you’ll get an answer similar to that of Julio Ramirez, director of an **LA’s BEST (Better Educated Students for Tomorrow)** site in Los Angeles: “There is always the right balance of activities, [and] they are very different from [those offered in] school.”

Directors frequently report that offering a range of dynamic, engaging “non-school” activities is the best hook for attracting youth to after-school programs. These activities typically feature relationships with peers and adults, a high level of interaction, and exposure to worlds the students might not otherwise experience: the arts, performances, musical programs, dance and drill teams, sports and recreation, community service, multi-family celebrations, and special interests (e.g., cooking, games, computers).

Academic activities that draw youth and keep them in after-school programs involve individual or small-group tutoring; interdisciplinary, project-based learning; hands-on science and math; literacy projects (e.g., writing, acting, reading aloud); and mentoring. Such substantive and varied program content contributes to sustainability by holding students’ interest and encouraging them to choose to spend time within the program instead of in unsupervised, risky contexts.

A high-quality after-school program is more than a collection of dynamic components, it is a carefully balanced and integrated set of opportunities for youth to grow by learning, making

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choices, and developing problem-solving skills. Christopher Darwin, director of the **New York City Beacons program**, says the appropriate mix of academic and non-academic activities depends on the specific needs of participants and their communities. “I don’t think you can do a cookie-cutter approach,” he explains. “There are themes that have to be addressed, national needs, cultural expectations, and political issues that will come up at different times.” There are many ways to integrate and balance after-school components effectively, as the examples in this report illustrate.

### **Recreational, aesthetic, and enrichment opportunities draw youth into the program.**

Many after-school programs integrate academic instruction into their programming, but it is the non-academic opportunities that give students much-needed time for relaxation, socializing, and personal pursuits. As one leader explained, “Our program is not teacher-directed; it’s developmentally directed... Children have to have fun choices, and we’re developing a program around those choices.”

When academic activities *are* a core focus of the program, staff find ways to make them meaningful to students. “If you can get kids hooked up to something that will improve their self-esteem, and then link it to getting their grades up, that will work,” advised the coordinator of the after-school program at **Woodrow Wilson Middle School** (Sioux City, Iowa). This program focuses on sports, arts and crafts, journalism, and computer activities rather than homework, but students must maintain satisfactory grades to play on the sports teams.

Examples of activities that program leaders sponsor to draw youth include:

Conflict resolution infused into everyday activities

Culminating events and public performances that give students a chance to demonstrate new skills

Art, theater, dance, creative writing, and science activities

Science projects and participation in community-wide fairs or competitions

Creation of portfolios, journals, and newspapers

Cognitive games, such as chess, Scrabble, Go, and challenging card games

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### Examples of Developmentally Balanced After-school Curriculum Content

**LA's BEST**, which operated in more than 100 high-poverty schools in 2001, provides a common program across sites that includes enrichment, recreation, homework assistance, social time, and a nutritious snack. Each site also selects activities that are suitable for its community, such as arts and crafts, science and math clubs, computer club, drill team and dance, seasonal sports, recreational reading, music, theater and visual arts, and field trips. The program partners with community-based organizations throughout the city, which enable participants to explore the world outside their neighborhoods. Through excursions and citywide events, including science and art fairs, citywide sports leagues, and annual dance and drill team showcases, youth and leaders share their accomplishments, learn together, and meet peers from different sections of the community. At Halloween, sites across the city create haunted houses, carnivals, costume parades, and contests to provide a safe alternative to "trick or treating." Several family gatherings every year bring participants' parents, siblings, and instructors together with community leaders.

The after-school program at **Molly Stark Elementary School** (Bennington, Vermont) serves up to 350 students with a menu of activities that changes every eight weeks. Participants choose from enrichment and tutoring programs, offered from Monday through Thursday, and they may join the school's recreational child care program on Fridays and other days after special activities conclude. The school's staff and community members lead the after-school activities, which include garden club, band, cooking, sewing, computers, sports, and arts and crafts. In addition, three homework clubs—one of which is conducted at a nearby housing project by Bennington College partners—address children's academic needs at various age and readiness levels. As part of the homework program, the school's reading specialist brings college student volunteers into the after-school program to read with students. Community members (business professionals and staff of organizations, such as the American Red Cross) also offer classes in grooming, babysitter certification, nutrition, weather forecasting, and writing.

**Pine Grove School of the Arts** (Del Ray Beach, Florida) adapted the Foundations, Inc., academic curriculum to its after-school program, Challenging Horizons After-school Mentoring Program (CHAMP). Because CHAMP is housed in an arts magnet school, it also emphasizes interactive learning. Every day, students spend one hour on a lesson from the Foundations curriculum, one hour developing math and language skills through games and other activities, one hour in tutoring, and a half hour in free time. On Fridays, they participate in special-interest clubs led by master teachers; topics include African dance, chess, and technology. CHAMP also uses Foundations, Inc.'s self-evaluation process, the Quality Assurance Program, to continuously improve implementation.

The **Letcher County** (Kentucky) after-school program partners with the local community center to offer activities throughout the school year and summer. Although program leaders insert academic components when possible, they mostly emphasize personal enrichment, an important resource for young residents of the isolated rural community. Choices include dance, photography, ceramics, choir, cooking, babysitter training and other job skill development, parent-child reading, basketball, and karate. Students perform community service by tutoring younger children in reading, cleaning public spaces, and visiting senior citizens. Activities are led by community organizations such as the Cowan Community Action Committee, VISTA, AmeriCorps, and 4-H. Local program partners include a community college, arts center, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and churches. Young students take classes at their home schools. Older youth build connections to the community through their association with the Community Center, and they gain a sense of purpose by mentoring, tutoring, performing community service, and participating in social activities.

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### Developmentally Balanced After-School Curriculum Content (Continued)

The **Leadership, Education, and Athletics in Partnership (LEAP) program** operates a year-round academic and social enrichment program in 13 high-poverty Connecticut communities. LEAP pairs college-age and high school students as mentors to younger children; these mentors, who themselves are being trained as “counselors,” guide younger students through a structured curriculum. The mentoring process, along with extensive parent involvement and community outreach, strengthens community bonds and develops local leaders. LEAP’s curriculum, organized around themes, includes reading enrichment, creative arts, science and technology exploration, and athletics, and is infused with conflict resolution and service learning activities. Each semester, activities end with events in which students demonstrate what they have learned.

**Girls Inc.** offers after-school curricula to various after-school programs. Among these, **Eureka** is a four-year program for middle-school girls that begins during the summer before eighth grade. It offers a four-week summer session at a college campus, followed by two summer-long job internships. It also includes Saturday sessions during the school year and after-school programming one day a week at the participants’ high schools. **Girlstart** is a daily after-school program of literacy development and general enrichment activities for first- and second-grade girls. Staff meet weekly with a licensed therapist to consult and receive guidance on participants’ emotional and behavioral needs. **Latinas Y Que**, developed primarily by participants, promotes leadership development for adolescent girls. It has a strong cultural component, career education, community service, health education, and physical activities.

### Curricula and activities match students’ ages, capacities, and interests.

Long-running programs adapt content and instructional strategies to students of varying ages and readiness. A simple example comes from the **School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century program** at the **Page Hilltop Family Resource Center** (Ayer, Massachusetts), where a cooking club encourages older children to find their own recipes and use appliances independently, while young children make food that doesn’t require the stove or blender. **Letcher County** (Kentucky) caters to varied student interests by offering activities both in schools and at a community center and by scheduling classes of different durations. Semester- or year-long courses help young children build relationships with attentive adults at their home schools. Classes that last a few weeks or months, located at community centers, match the more tightly scheduled lives of older students.

Many programs take steps to make their activities culturally responsive by bringing personal and family experiences into the after-school curriculum. When the neighborhood (rather than the textbook) becomes the center of the curriculum, “we change whose knowledge we value,” and children appreciate that, points out Paul Heckman, professional development consultant to **LA’s BEST**. Compelling programs start with “what kids know, and with their interests,” he adds; they encourage children to ask and investigate questions as a scientist or historian would.

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## Youth have opportunities for leadership and choice.

Sustainable programs help youth serve as leaders and advocates for ideas and activities they value, which connects them to peers and adults in positive ways and lets them shape the activities they value. For example:

**Beacons programs** promote youth councils, which help staff plan and develop activities. Student members choose the topics they want to pursue, selecting among the arts, athletics, and academic enrichment in science, social studies, and literacy. The councils also have small budgets for trips and events.

**Latinas Y Que**, sponsored by Girls Inc. of Alameda County, California, engages participants in career education, visits to college campuses, cultural awareness activities, community service, social action, and health education and physical activities. Youth participants design the program, with assistance from Girls Inc. staff.

**Leadership Excellence**, in Oakland, California, offers leadership opportunities for African-American college students. Participants receive leadership training and then practice their skills by working with young neighborhood children. Activities emphasize African-American literature, history, culture, arts, and community connections.

Even programs that don't have specific leadership activities ensure that participants have plenty of opportunities to make choices, a feature that appeals to students and encourages them to continue participating. The **Jamestown (San Francisco) Community Center** program is typical: It lets students choose two out of six possible enrichment activities. Several other programs divide the afternoon into segments and let participants select among a changing array of thematic options or interest areas. For example:

Choices in the **SPARK** program (Des Plaines, Illinois) include photography, rainforest studies, aerospace studies, and gardening.

**LA's BEST** encourages students to select either a science or arts activity and, over the course of a semester, develop a project for the annual city-wide showcase.

The **CHAMP** program (Del Ray Beach, Florida) designates Fridays as the day to pursue special interests. At the end of the year, students demonstrate what they have learned during Friday sessions.

At the **Alston Brighton YMCA** (Brighton, Massachusetts), students have freedom to pursue their own special interests or organize and lead activities. They can select from topics such as cooking, soccer, and videography.

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### **Community Service and Mentoring Activities Help Students Become Leaders**

High-school students in the **Letcher County** program tutor elementary-school students in reading, assist senior citizens, and help maintain their community center.

The **Greenpoint Beacons in New York City** recruits middle-school youth to work in a summer literacy program for younger children; other youth serve as assistants. According to the program's developer, this practice supports both younger and older participants while creating "a training ground for new staff."

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## **Recruiting and Retaining High-quality Staff**

After-school staff come from many backgrounds, but they share a deep commitment to serving children. As one coordinator explained, "I do it for my heart. When I was little, I had a park and someone to help me. I'm here because these kids don't have that, and I felt I could make a difference."

### **Program leaders place a priority on hiring staff who come from the same community as the youth they serve.**

Most program leaders report that they prefer to hire from within the community if possible, because those staff share the students' personal experiences and cultural background and they make strong mentors and role models. In some cases, this means hiring former program participants. At **LEAP**, for example, at least half of the full-time staff participated in the program as youth. The program operated by the **Center for Young Women's Development** (San Francisco) is run largely by former participants. "We hire from the community," explained the associate director, "so it's not like we hire someone who doesn't speak our language. We really rely on these [community-linked] relationships to cement the culture." Staff recruited from the neighborhood also are more likely to stay with a program, ensuring continuity and maximizing the benefit of a program's investment in professional development.

### **Continuous staff development helps build a strong program and retain staff.**

After-school programs rarely have the luxury of hiring professionally trained staff at salaries commensurate to the skills required, so they rely on continuous staff development to bolster less-experienced staff and to keep them on the job after they have been trained. Staff thus consider

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skill-building to be a benefit that will serve them well in future jobs. Professional development is wide ranging, including on-the-job mentoring, program orientations, staff meetings, and workshops or specialized training (e.g., in youth and family development, teaching and classroom management skills, fundraising, evaluation). In some cases, programs are able to hire experienced classroom teachers to offer specialized tutoring or skill building for children and youth and, at the same time, to help less experienced community-based staff develop skills in tutoring and providing academic support.

High-quality staff development doesn't merely focus on developing skills, however. It unites staff around a common philosophy and vision while fostering a sense of teamwork, which increases the likelihood that staff will stick with a program for the long haul. As Beacons director Darwin observes, "When [the program] really jells, it's because the staff are really listening" and working together. The multi-tiered staff support of **LA's BEST**, described below, is a good example of this team-building process.

### **Peer modeling and teamwork are key approaches to staff development.**

Program leaders view role modeling as an important staff development tool. "We hire staff who cherish our values and who know how to live the collaborative philosophy that we're advocating," reported Debe Loxton, chief operating officer of **LA's BEST**. This program provides eight hours of flex-time each month so staff can attend workshops or training programs, while colleagues fill in onsite. Managers model collaboration and help young leaders create an "ecology of learning" based on their own ideas of what youth need.

Operations Manager Ana Rosenberg observes, "We tell people [that] we're hiring them to be a leader, and we let them lead. None of us is interested in micromanaging this program." That approach has produced a steady supply of qualified staff for **LA's BEST**. As the program expands to new sites, experienced leaders become mentors for new generations of site coordinators.

Working in teams, rather than through hierarchical structures, also establishes staff connections and increases staff retention. Explained Carla Sanger, president and CEO of **LA's BEST**, "We are a humanistic organization. We bend over backward and side-ways to de-bureaucratize ourselves... We have replaced the mentality of management-by-command with a management of common understanding."

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### Dialogue and Professional Development Foster Teamwork at LA's BEST

Eighteen staff members from three **LA's BEST** sites convene on a dark, cold winter's day with several "traveling" program supervisors and activities consultants, site coordinators, site staff, five of the initiative's top managers, a board member, and a consulting facilitator for their monthly training session. The exuberance of the gathering warms the chilly room as each person enters, offers hugs and high-fives to colleagues and friends, and grabs a sandwich, drink, and seat. Site-based staff are distinguished from other leaders by their "LA's BEST STAFF" t-shirts.

After 15 minutes of informal conversation and dinner, professional development consultant Paul Heckman from the University of Washington encourages the group to form a large circle, with program supervisors and managers distributed among the youthful staff. Heckman asks, "What were your feelings after our last meetings?" (at which participants discussed the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack). His question prompts a hesitant exchange of ideas about the difficulties of responding appropriately to youth when tragedy strikes. Through skillfully measured, open-ended questions Heckman prods the uncertain youth leaders to reflect on their confusion as they tried to support the children in their charge without clear direction from experienced leaders. Their job was further complicated when they reported that the school district had issued a policy prohibiting them from talking with youth about the day's events, despite the after-school program's policy of being candid and responsive to children's questions.

"I didn't want the kids to take my feelings into their own," says one staff member. "I've never taken a class in how to deal with kids' emotions, so I didn't want to do anything wrong." Other staff recall the chaos of the day: children and staff were misinformed, and crying parents made their children even more frightened.

After listening carefully to the staff, program leaders share their own feelings and intuitions about how they might have handled the situation. They also ask brief questions to encourage staff reflection. They respond to questions with new questions rather than answers, asking, for example, "Could you say to kids, 'I don't think *anyone* understands this. We're faced with a lot of crises now,' and ask them to talk about some of the crises around them?"

Heckman keeps the conversation directed toward staff while managers diplomatically resist offering answers. "What's the difference between talking with kids about something and asking kids to talk with us?" he asks. A staff member replies, "It's better to understand the kids first because you want to deal with each person [according to their needs.] One kid feels anger, another one feels scared; you're not going to deal with them the same way."

The conversation shifts to homework help, focusing on staff's efforts to make learning fun. Heckman guides the discussion to ways that the leaders can learn from participants, emphasizing that engaging students' questions is a way of helping them learn. "If you don't ask kids what they're thinking and what they want to know, who does?" he asks.

LA's BEST President Carla Sanger, addressing the site staff, acknowledges that the process isn't easy. "How do we help build their imaginations? What questions can we ask? What can we do to give them permission to let their minds wander?" she asks. Staff begin to share ideas—write a story; go to the library; exchange ideas verbally; act out a play—and the team-building continues.



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## Collaborating and Coordinating with Community Stakeholders

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Collaboration and coordination with an after-school program's host or partner school, school system, or other community organizations may not be as formal as other external partnerships (described in *Leadership and Sustainability*), but it does increase general awareness of the after-school program, which in turn attracts funding, in-kind contributions, and other sustaining resources.

### Defining Collaboration and Coordination

After-school programs promote *collaboration* when their curricula, content, and instruction incorporate, reflect, expand, or otherwise complement those used by other stakeholders. This occurs when school-based after-school programs work with school-day teachers to synchronize their activities, offering field trips, reading stories, or putting on plays that reinforce skills taught during the school day.

After-school programs are *coordinated* with schools and other organizations when each stakeholder's program accommodates the other's needs and interests, through responsive scheduling, enrollment, or transportation arrangements, for instance.

Collaborations with schools are especially important to sustainability. When after-school directors and staff work with principals and classroom teachers to develop shared themes and activities, or to help students with assignments, it sends a clear message that the program is valued and should be incorporated into students', parents', and teachers' routines.

Collaborations with other community organizations often yield in-kind or low-cost recreational resources, health and human services, and enrichment opportunities, supports that stable after-school programs rely on to become more responsive, appealing, and cost-effective.

### Collaboration and Coordination Foster Mutual Support

At the **School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century** program in Independence, Missouri, teachers from the school day work as tutors in the after-school program. The after-school director also coordinates field trips to include institutions featured in the school-day curriculum.

In the MOST Initiative's **Special Arrangements Regarding Kids (SPARK)** program (Des Plaines, Illinois), after-school staff meet monthly with teachers from the school day to explore links between activities. For example, after-school staff help fifth-graders conduct research for school reports, and they help third-graders practice their multiplication tables.

In the Foundations, Inc., program at the **William Penn (Lansdowne, Pennsylvania) School District**, after-school staff attend meetings of the regular school faculty, and a newsletter keeps school staff informed about after-school activities.

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## **Close ties to principals and teachers help after-school programs find stable niches.**

Good relationships with principals and school-day teachers are essential to successful school-based after-school programming. Often, principals and teachers are either ardent allies of after-school programs or major obstructions to success. Sustainable school-based programs with strong academic components generally develop smooth alliances with school staff, although that is not easy to accomplish. They use newsletters, open houses, and other forms of outreach to keep principals and teachers informed about their services. Classroom teachers, for their part, recommend the after-school program to students who need the opportunity. They also may share program reports, grades, and test data with after-school staff to let them know students' academic strengths and weaknesses. Collaboration with curriculum developers, college faculty, and youth-development experts helps after-school leaders and staff build powerful programs.

Many of the long-lasting programs included in our study collaborated with local technical assistance providers, staff developers, and curriculum designers. Collaborators provided staff handbooks, curriculum guides, explanations of program philosophy, and opportunities for peer learning, either through visits to other programs or joint training with colleagues from the same community or program model. Programs also encouraged collaboration and mentoring between experienced and new staff.

Program leaders especially valued the collaboration of regional and national assistance centers such as The Finance Project, the Institute for Educational Leadership, and the National Institute for Out of School Time, among others. "There's a lot of good experience and practice out there; there's no reason to be re-inventing the wheel," observed one leader.

## **Parents can be important collaborators, but they must be coaxed to participate.**

Although most good after-school programs reach out to parents, program directors consistently report low parent engagement. Children typically attend after-school programs because their parents are not available during after-school hours, so it is usually difficult for parents to find time to participate in the programs. Sustainable programs overcome this problem by offering a limited number of targeted classes, special-interest clubs, or social events that give parents a reason to interact with the program without expecting them to take time away from competing responsibilities.

The **CHAMP** program, for example, holds monthly family nights either to address parents' concerns or to feature children's performances. A parent advisory board also meets monthly to discuss ways that parents can support the program, but the board does not appear to play an

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integral role in developing or governing the program. Most after-school programs also strongly encourage volunteers, but parents are rarely available during the hours the programs are in session.

**Coordinated health and human services fill vital gaps that can interfere with learning.**

A child who is hungry, homeless, or ill, or has family problems, is likely to have educational and social problems that cannot be resolved through after-school activities alone. Long-running after-school programs address these issues by coordinating medical care, counseling, child care, referrals to community resources, parent education or training, and other services. These connections are a central feature of the community schools model, an approach used by many of the programs in our study.

**Coordination Expands a Program’s Menu of Services**

Working with community collaborators, the principal of the **Molly Stark Elementary School** secured federal and state Community Development Block Grant funds to attach a community center to the school. The center, which serves students from the school day and after-school program, offers free health care to children and their families. Service providers include a dentist, pediatrician, psychologist, family outreach worker, and clinical social worker.

The **CHAMP** program coordinates with county mental health services to provide after-school anger management classes and to identify students who need family services or therapeutic intervention.

At the **New Horizons/SUCCESS** program (Des Moines), case managers make home visits and service referrals for the program’s neediest families. “We may be working with the parents on employment [or] education as well as... identifying whatever goals the family has for the child,” reports program director Margaret Connet. “We are really working with multiple family members in the school setting and out in the community.”

Close coordination with health and human services helps after-school programs attract and retain participants. Program leaders also report that schools are more willing to host and sustain after-school programs that offer coordinated-based services.

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## Demonstrating Program Success

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An emphasis on results keeps staff focused on the program's mission and core goals, and the self-evaluation process encourages fruitful reflection and redirection by staff and collaborators. When evaluation results are positive, they can help sustain the program by establishing a program's credibility, keeping funders on board, and attracting new supporters. When they reveal weaknesses, they can be the source of constructive changes.

As a result, most sustainable programs are enthusiastic advocates of program-specific, large-scale evaluations. Most of those in our study measured the effectiveness of implementation, or youth opinions about their services, rather than academic outcomes, however. Few programs have the flexibility, time, or resources to design formal comparison studies, although some use data collections and statistical methods to assess outcomes among non-randomly selected contrast groups. For example, both **LA's BEST** and **The After-School Corporation (TASC)** are conducting continuing formal comparison studies, which track progress of youth participants against comparison groups with little or no after-school program participation.

Many experts argue that it is difficult to pinpoint the added value of after-school programming without formal evaluation designs using randomized groups, pre- and post-tests, or comparison analyses, methods that can be too costly or logistically complex for an after-school program to use. Thus, as an evaluator of one long-running program lamented, "We get the effects here and there, but they are not consistent or convincing" to some outside funders.

Most of the outcome reports reviewed for this study were either comparison group or pre- and post-test studies which, irrespective of their designs, revealed small or inconsistent achievement improvements over two or three years. **LA's BEST** is a contrasting case. It has carefully documented outcomes spanning 12 years, and it has demonstrated notable effects for participating youth, including better attendance, improvement on standardized tests, and higher rates of English-language learning among active program participants. Other outcome evaluations showed occasional evidence of increased safety and reduced substance abuse and delinquency among youth between 3 and 6 p.m. One program also found clear reductions in court involvement among after-school participants.

Our review of after-school evaluations demonstrated the following common links between sustainability and evidence of success.

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## **Leaders and staff of sustainable programs use self-evaluation as a tool for continuous improvement.**

Effective program leaders understand that evaluation serves them and their staffs as well as their funders. They embrace evaluation as an essential part of program operations, building in structured time for staff to describe, analyze, and reshape their work with students. Program leaders and site directors consider data analysis “a rethinking process” that helps them clarify goals, priorities, and action plans.

Programs’ self-evaluations, often viewed as year-to-year “snapshots,” tend to focus on participants’ perceptions of program quality and satisfaction rather than on quantitative analysis of outcomes. These evaluations derive their findings from interviews, observation, and anecdotal evidence. For example, the **Jamestown Community Center** conducts periodic youth surveys and revises practices based on the responses. Such information is credible to staff, and many site leaders consider self-evaluations more useful than large-scale external evaluations precisely because they are geared to the program’s process. As one program director explained:

We’re not learning anything from [formal] data collection that we haven’t learned from other routes. Last year we did our own observations and reporting. We met once a month with the program staff, both supervisors and site-based staff. Through individual site visits and surveys, the data we collect are more specific than are the formal evaluation data...telling us more about the impact of our training and our program design.

## **Outcome evaluations help funders and policy makers make program and policy priorities.**

National evaluations (or large local ones with national visibility) typically measure participants’ academic and social outcomes. The after-school programs sponsored or operated by the federal **21<sup>st</sup> CCLC** program, **LA’s BEST**, **The After School Corporation**, **Save the Children**, the **MOST Initiative** (Wallace-Reader’s Digest Funds), and **Foundations, Inc.**, all have outcome evaluations that guide program advisory boards, sponsors, and national policy leaders.

The academic outcomes examined by such evaluations sometimes help program advisors and funders decide whether to continue or terminate specific programs. But it is a source of frustration for many program staff that the youth-development outcomes they see as crucial to children’s development do not exert similar influence or decision making. In addition, time and resource limitations mean that data produced by large-scale outcome studies too rarely go back to site-based staff in a way that can shape operations or planning at individual sites. One program

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director noted, “We have a closet full of focus group and interview information and extensive student attendance data that we’ve never had the time to analyze.”

Notable exceptions include program-focused evaluations such as those sponsored by **Foundations, Inc.**, and “empowerment evaluations,” such as those conducted by Aguirre International for **Save the Children**, which incorporate into large studies program-specific evaluation that frontline staff can use for self-assessment and planning.

### **The expectation of achieving measurable outcomes relies on sustaining programs long enough for them to produce effects.**

Outcome studies indicate that after-school programs can improve participants’ personal development and school attendance, reduce or prevent delinquency, and improve safety. Those are all changes that typically occur ahead of academic progress. School effects are much harder to confirm, because it is difficult to obtain reliable longitudinal achievement data on students who remain in after-school programs continuously or long enough to produce changes and because youth resist after-school programs that duplicate the formal academic learning of the school day. In the meantime, too few after-school programs have the convincing evidence they want to show their successes to their funders.

### **Program quality and effects vary widely, and the link between them is not well understood.**

The evaluation reports viewed for this study rarely examined relationships between outcomes and the quality of activities, staffing, collaboration, and other program components, so they could not draw conclusions about these relationships. Again, without “proof” that high-quality after-school programs produce tangible outcomes, it is a constant challenge to attract sustained program support.

Several practical issues limit evaluations of program quality. First, program staff are “on duty” as soon as the school day ends, and they find it difficult to collect and maintain reliable attendance data for participants while also managing fast-paced activities. This is especially true in large and active programs in which participants come and go within the program informally. Second, many students and their parents do not recognize the value of regular day participation and therefore do not feel obligated to attend program activities every day. The subsequent low rate of consistent attendance limits the impact that staff can have on youth. Thus, projects’ evaluations focus on whether students continue their affiliation over time, even if daily attendance is irregular.

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Third, it is hard to differentiate the effects of the school day from the after-school impact on students' achievement. As **Molly Stark's** principal, Sue Maguire, points out, "You just can't separate out the after-school component from other components. It all works together." Finally, since it is difficult to secure funding and staff to support comprehensive, experimental, or longitudinal studies, it is rare to find evidence of progress by the same students over time. Despite these limitations, program directors say they are satisfied by the assessments that come from supportive parent letters, positive comments from students, and the return of the same participants year after year.

## **Implications for Research, Policy, and Funding**

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### **Program quality is not the only factor responsible for long-term, sustainable funding.**

The challenge of maintaining quality while constantly searching for resources stymies many program leaders and advocates, so few school-based after-school programs have attained long-term funding, even when they are solidly established and valued. Policy makers can help by committing to funding programs in cycles of five years or more, which would help stabilize program priorities and staffing, and by supporting long-term technical assistance regarding youth opportunities that contribute to positive outcomes.

### **Peer relationships, new experiences, and youth choices—not traditional classroom academics—are the program features that attract most participants and hold the interest of youth.**

High-quality programs develop youth's cognitive capacities and skills indirectly, through interdisciplinary and project-based learning opportunities (such as arts, recreational, cultural, and literacy activities) in addition to academic tutoring or homework help. Tension exists among program directors, some funders, and youth development advocates over the appropriate mixture of academic and non-academic content, however, and program leaders are challenged to sustain efforts that appeal to all stakeholders.

Programs that balance meaningful learning enrichment, aesthetic and artistic development, community engagement, and recreation need the encouragement of communities and after-school advocates. Youth need a broad spectrum of learning opportunities to achieve academic and life goals. As schools become increasingly focused on accountability, after-school programs may be

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the only place where youth have the opportunity to develop and deepen non-academic dimensions of their lives.

**Although many after-school programs have documented good effects, the evidence of academic impact is just beginning to emerge, as more comprehensive assessments of long-term program effects are conducted.**

The paucity of academic outcomes undermines efforts to sustain funding for even those programs with much to offer. As one evaluator observed, “I wish our board could understand that...the social effect is much stronger; [participants’] attitudes change before scores change. Moving from attitudes to scores may take years.”

Program evaluators are beginning to use research to clarify the role of youth leadership, choice, mentoring, and other personal learning in producing cognitive, social/emotional, and academic outcomes. They are also beginning to develop better knowledge about the predictable connections between specific features of after-school program quality and youth learning. The next few years should see more and more research findings on these crucial topics.

**Evaluation can strengthen program quality, but it poses administrative challenges for after-school programs.**

In addition to supporting program operations and research, policy makers and funders should encourage continuous, program-level self-evaluations, quality assessments, and implementation studies. These studies might include customer satisfaction surveys and assessments of short-term outcomes for youth, communities, and programs. Such studies help program leaders and staff fine-tune their work, and they give funders clear signals of accountability by showing that the program is attentive both to the implementation process as well as outcomes.

Most programs need assistance in developing and maintaining data management systems for automating basic participant information, monitoring attendance and participation rates and tracking changes, and linking outcomes to program practices and quality.

In addition, program sponsors should differentiate between process evaluations, which can be conducted by program staff, and outcome evaluations, which should be conducted by experienced researchers. Both types of evaluation are vital to programs’ continued accountability and success. At the program level, staff can more immediately use process information than long-term outcome data, but policy makers and funders rely on outcome evaluations that examine both academic and youth development effects. These studies promote beneficial policies over the long



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term, but they are expensive and complex to undertake, so they are most appropriately funded by large organizations with sizable evaluation budgets.

## **Program Quality and Sustainability Resources: More Information**

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### **Organizations That Help Build After-school Program Quality and Sustainability**

**Afterschool Alliance** (Washington, DC) conducts research, disseminates information, and provides technical assistance to build public awareness of and support for after-school programs. The Alliance coordinates with the **21st CCLC** program and other networks of after-school providers to help communities advocate for and develop after-school programs. Many of its resources are available online at [www.afterschoolalliance.org](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org).

The **Coalition for Community Schools**, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership, brings together local, state, and national organizations engaged in creating and sustaining after-school programs within community schools. Contact the Coalition at 1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036. Phone: 202.822.8405. Email: [ccs@iel.org](mailto:ccs@iel.org).

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The **Finance Project's** Out-of-School Time Project (Washington, DC) publishes studies and provides technical assistance on financing and sustaining after-school programs. Resources include written materials, implementation tools, and targeted technical assistance. Publications are available online at [www.financeproject.org/osthome](http://www.financeproject.org/osthome).

The **Harvard Family Research Project** (Cambridge, Massachusetts) publishes a quarterly newsletter, *The Evaluation Exchange*; each issue includes a guide to selected print- and web-based after-school resources. Within HFRP, the Out-of-School Time Learning and Development Project identifies and researches key issues in out-of-school programs. Visit [www.gse.harvard.edu/projects/afterschool](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/projects/afterschool).

**Foundations, Inc.** (Moorestown, New Jersey) sponsors the Technical Assistance Center for Before and After School Enrichment Programs, which helps individuals and organizations establish content-based after-school enrichment programs for K-12 students. Topics include administrative services, human resources, curriculum and professional development, accountability and assessment, and community development.

The **National Center for Community Education** (Flint, Michigan) promotes community schools and community-based education by improving linkages among youth advocates, institutions, and systems; its technical assistance strengthens leaders' capacity for community and educational change. The center offers workshops with experts and practitioners, visits to exemplary sites, and opportunities for practitioners to learn from peers. Visit [www.nccenet.org](http://www.nccenet.org).

The **National Institute for Out of School Time** (Wellesley, Massachusetts) seeks to improve children's out-of-school opportunities through research, advocacy, and standards development. NIOST provides consultation, research, training, and policy and curriculum development. Visit [www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW](http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW).

The **Smart Library on Urban Poverty Research**, developed by the National Institute for Social Science Information, is an online library for urban poverty issues. It includes many resources on after-school programs and policies. Visit [www.poverty.smartlibrary.org](http://www.poverty.smartlibrary.org).

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