The Promise and the Challenge of After-School Programs

During the past decade in the United States, the increasing number of families with parents working outside the home has elevated the need for after-school programs. Understandably, much of the focus of educators, lawmakers, and those in the growing after-school movement has been on elementary school students. Indeed, that is where most federal funding for after-school programs goes. About two-thirds of programs that receive federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grants serve elementary students; just one-third serve middle school youngsters.

Without diminishing the emphasis we place on after-school programs for elementary school students, it is time to focus additional attention and resources on after-school programs at the middle school level.

An Unmet Need

The numbers tell the tale. Every weekday afternoon, more than one-third of middle school students are released from school and left to their own devices. At this critical age, when many children either commit to their education or begin to experiment with risky behaviors that can lead to dropping out, 4 million middle school students have no adult who makes sure they get a healthy snack, help with homework, or access to sports, exercise, and other enriching activities each afternoon.

It is not that their parents are lazy or unwilling to find an alternative to the latchkey model. Nor have parents decided that their adolescents are ready to be on their own. The problem is more straightforward: Parents lack good alternatives for care after the school day ends.

While some communities and a few states have made it a priority to create after-school programs to meet the needs of working families, the sad but indisputable truth is that there are not nearly enough after-school programs to meet the need nationwide. Despite the demonstrated value of after-school programs to children, families, and communities, we have not made the creation and expansion of such programs a sufficient priority. That is why just 6 percent of middle school students are enrolled in an after-school program, representing less than one-fifth the number of students who are unsupervised each afternoon. To make an impact on middle school students, we need to develop more middle-level after-school programs and acknowledge their unique challenges.

Programs That Work

In the after-school world, middle school students vote with their feet. Build a program that captures their attention and they will attend. That means programs for adolescents must connect with students by providing engaging academic support and including activities that will drive enrollment and attendance.

Because middle school students are at a critical stage in their social and psychological development, they are less likely than their younger siblings to show up and sit still for an after-school program that feels like an extension of the school day. During middle school, youngsters begin to imagine the contours of their adult lives, moving beyond elementary school daydreams of becoming star athletes and movie stars to more realistic expectations and plans. Middle-level after-school programs must give students the chance to interact with adults whose work and life experiences help create a context as they consider which disciplines interest them and how they will earn a living.

Efforts to expand the universe of possibilities for middle school students also help to improve students’ academic outcomes. Studies such as “Afterschool Learning: A Study of Academically Focused Afterschool Programs in New Hampshire” (Frankel et al., 2005) have proved that after-school programs help youngsters achieve academically. The study concludes, “More than half the [elementary and middle-level] students who attended regularly improved both academically and behaviorally,” and middle school participants developed improved learning skills such as homework completion, classroom behavior, and class participation.

The Mott Foundation-funded study, “Outcomes Linked to High-Quality Afterschool Programs” (Vandell et al., 2007), found that in addition to generating significant academic gains for middle and elementary students, quality after-school programs reduce middle school students’ use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.

A similar study by The After-School Corp. and LA’s BEST after-school program (Goldschmidt & Huang, 2007) shows that after-school program participation can improve attendance and academic achievement, and lower engagement in crime. These findings are particularly significant because juvenile crime peaks during the after-school hours, between 3 and 6 p.m. (Russell et al., 2007; Goldschmidt & Huang, 2007).

Afterschool for All

After-school programs keep middle school students safe, inspire them to
learn, and help resolve working parents’ worries about what their children are doing in the afternoon. So in this year when we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers after-school initiative, we should remember that it is not just elementary-age students who need the safe, stimulating educational activities that quality after-school programs provide. Middle school students need them, too.

It is time to expand our commitment to after-school programs by devoting more—and more reliable—funding to programs that serve students of all ages. But we won’t get there by wishing or even by simply recognizing the need. We need to advocate for an increase of funds for 21st Century Community Learning Centers in the fiscal year 2009 budget, make good on the promise of No Child Left Behind, challenge the corporate and philanthropic communities to step up to the plate, and expand our vision of “Afterschool for All” to include older children and youths.

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References

