

Successful After-school Programs



Nancy Protheroe

Growing evidence shows that well-designed after-school programs help many students.

IN BRIEF

Academically oriented after-school programs can be an effective way to provide extra help to students who need it. Research points to the importance of well-designed programs established to meet specific goals. The report lists and describes the elements of successful after-school programs.

After-school programs have long been an option for principals seeking to give students some extra help. However, since such programs generally require additional funding and staffing, most principals want to know if they are worth the effort. Can after-school programs really address the need to speed student progress? What are the characteristics of effective programs?

What Does the Research Say?

As with much research in education, these questions are difficult to answer. After-school programs look very different from site to site, and most focus on child care, not academics. Consistent evaluation is rare. For example, a study of 138 published research articles found only 15 after-school programs that were both well-designed and included data on student outcomes. The authors of the

study characterized the synthesis of data as yielding “encouraging, but certainly not conclusive, evidence for the effectiveness of after-school programs” (Scott-Little, Hamann, and Jurs 2002).

More attention has been paid recently to developing better-designed evaluations of after-school programs, which are starting to indicate their impact on student learning. For example, an evaluation of San Diego’s “6 to 6” extended school

day program showed that 57 percent of participating students increased their reading scores and 44 percent increased their SAT-9 math scores over the course of the studied year. Similar studies of academic extended learning programs in Ohio, Massachusetts, and California offer similar results (After-school Alliance 2003; Poggi 2003). In addition, studies suggest that disadvantaged students benefit the most from participation in academically oriented after-school programs (Mahoney, Lord, and Carryl 2005; Harris 2004; Miller 2003; Welsh *et al.* 2002).

Designing Effective Programs

Lauer (2003) points out the difficulty in designing effective after-school programs: "Planning two or more hours of high-quality, content-rich, and enjoyable learning time is no easy task." Students already experiencing little success in school may have low morale, little motivation, and lack of engagement. Both students and staff will be tired after a full school day, and budgets to support after-school programs will almost certainly be limited.

Miller (2003) suggests planning constructivist activities that teach both new skills and provide students with time to apply content taught during the school day. In addition, hands-on activities are more likely to engage students' interest—a particularly important consideration for students who may be discouraged and "turned off" by school.

Much of the research highlights one point in designing an effective program: establish a clear mission. Poggi (2003) suggests schools ask themselves: Is the goal of the program to improve the school day performance of the participating students? To provide academic enrichment? To increase individual students' learning? To meet minimum competency requirements or repeat failed courses?

One elementary school in California made closing the achievement gap its primary mission. The after-school program was specifically designed to "support daily classroom lessons, reinforce skills, expand the vocabulary of their

limited-English-proficient speakers, and offer enrichment opportunities" (Owens and Vallercamp 2003).

Another decision in designing a program—and one obviously driven at least in part by the program's goal—is who will be permitted to participate. Obviously, allowing only students with the greatest academic need ensures that the program can be better targeted to their needs. However, the designers of the program must then also address the challenge of ensuring that the program is not viewed as a punishment for poor performance or something only "dummies" must attend.

Elements of Effective Programs

While much of the literature on effective after-school programs has focused on programs operated by organizations other than schools, the characteristics of these programs provide logical guidance for schools as they develop their own programs.

The North Central Regional

Educational Laboratory has had a long history of developing effective after-school programs and Poggi (2003) summarizes the lessons learned from this experience:

- Program design needs to be based on individual students' academic needs as revealed by the school's assessments and teacher reports. Individual student data can also be used to evaluate whether the program is working. Classroom teachers should regularly share the specific needs of individual students with after-school staff.

- The after-school staff need specific content knowledge and instructional strategies to facilitate learning. This does not mean that all staff must be certified teachers. It does mean that if the goal is to improve reading comprehension, then staff members need to know specific strategies that will help students comprehend what they read. It is not enough to have them simply supervise homework completion.

- Class sizes need to be small.

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Generally, a 1-15 ratio or lower for younger students seems to be ideal.

■ There should be consistent, formal, and specific communication between school day and after-school staffs, perhaps through daily planners or academic communication logs.

■ Programs need to be evaluated. This means collecting pre- and post-assessment data and conducting longitudinal studies for their effect on raising student achievement.

Owens and Vallercamp (2003) describe one effective program operated by an elementary school. Designed to both support and expand the curriculum provided in regular classrooms, it included:

- Homework assistance;
- Literacy and math instruction based on state and district standards and benchmarks;
- Accelerated learning opportunities

for specific at-risk students;

- Healthy snacks; and
- Enrichment activities intended to be both broadening and fun.

This program provided monthly training in areas such as classroom management for program leaders, encouraged linking the after-school curriculum to the school day through monthly discussions with teaching staff, and measured program indicators such as attendance, grades, and academic growth of participants.

The idea of establishing an after-school program—or even substantially modifying an existing program—may seem overwhelming to school leaders already concerned about tight resources. However, it is clear that many children need additional time and attention if they are to thrive in school. A well-designed after-school program may be an effec-

tive—as well as cost-efficient—way to address these children's needs. ■

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WEB RESOURCES

Findings from a research study are described in *The Effectiveness of Out-of-School Time Strategies in Assisting Low-Achieving Students in Reading and Mathematics: A Research Synthesis*. Both the full report and a brief are posted. www.mcrel.org/topics/productDetail.asp?productID=151

Although the emphasis in *Afterschool Programs and Educational Success* is on programs for early adolescents, it includes an excellent and more general overview of key issues. For example, one chapter discusses engagement and learning. [www.nmeffd.org/uimages/documents/Critical_Hours\(4\).pdf](http://www.nmeffd.org/uimages/documents/Critical_Hours(4).pdf)

Several organizations, including the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, are collaborating in the development of a Web-based resource, the *Afterschool Training Toolkit*. Some resources are already posted with more planned. www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/

The Web-based *Resource Guide for Planning and Operating After-School Programs* includes links to other Web sites and documents organized under areas such as "Integrating K–12 and After-school Programs" and "Evaluation." www.sedl.org/pubs/fam95/



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