

# Easing THE PAIN

Afterschool and summer programs help families affected by the opioid crisis

By Jodi Grant

**T**he impact of the opioid crisis is staggering, and it isn't limited to students of high school age and adults. The rate of opioid-related admissions to pediatric intensive care units increased dramatically between 2004 and 2015, from 24.9 to 35.9 per 10,000 admissions, for example, and foster care systems are inundated with the children of addicted parents.

The problem is so severe that the National Association of School Nurses created the Naloxone in Schools Toolkit in 2016 to educate school communities about the crisis and help school nurses, leaders, and community members identify and react to possible opioid overdoses in school settings.

While public health officials are leading the fight, the problem reaches so far into our communities that no one can stand on the sidelines. Educators have important roles to play, and afterschool and summer learning programs are uniquely suited to take on some of that important work.

## A Crisis Close to Home

Before taking on her current role as assistant director of the West Virginia Statewide Afterschool Network, Nila Cobb witnessed the crisis developing as early as 1997 as a medical social worker. "I saw the damage opioids were causing when patients arrived at the hospitals with drug-seeking behaviors," she says. "And I watched as they were often provided with prescriptions they would either abuse or sell."

Cobb's 19-year-old daughter became addicted to opioids through prescriptions, prompting Cobb to take custody of her grandson. She now leads one of millions of households in the United States where children are raised by grandparents—and that number has grown alongside the spread of opioid addiction.

Cobb credits afterschool programs for helping her recognize the need to step in to "rescue" her grandson. Afterschool program staff get the opportunity to recognize the signs of addiction at times when regular school-day educators and staff can't, she says—when parents come to pick up their children, for example.



Afterschool programs are also able to provide specific support for children and families—hot meals for children who might otherwise go hungry or homework help that likely isn't available at home. And because so many programs partner with community organizations, they can connect families to a variety of support services.

### Social-Emotional Learning Is Key

Afterschool and summer learning programs have a proven record of boosting children's social-emotional learning (SEL), which in turn helps give them the resilience they need to endure the stress of addiction in the family. Their caring support and mentorship help create a safe space for children away from what's often a frightening and chaotic home life.

Development of strong SEL skills is a vital defense against substance abuse by children, too. A meta-analysis of 68 afterschool programs from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) found that students participating in SEL programs fared better than peers who weren't in programs, with participants exhibiting less drug use, aggression, and other behavioral issues.


Afterschool and summer learning programs are particularly well-suited to SEL because they provide an opportunity for students to connect to positive adult mentors and master new skills. Quality programs provide a safe and positive environment, foster positive relationships between children and adults, and offer engaging, age-appropriate activities.

### Offering Agency

Many afterschool programs engage students in project-based opportunities to foster experiential learning. The Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley, New Hampshire, empowered its middle school students to help reduce opioid overdoses in the state. Participants designed an action plan focusing on drug and alcohol abuse prevention activities and mental health awareness and hosted a Youth Summit on the topic in April 2018.

Students worked together to plan the event, creating the summit agenda, sending invitations, and facilitating sessions. The process of reaching consensus on a topic, collaborating on a campaign, and working together on a statewide event drew students together, taught them important life skills, and boosted their resilience.

The McKinley Afterschool Program in Bronx, New York, took a similar approach. When asked to create a campaign around an issue affecting their community, students chose to educate the community about gun violence. They have so far held performances to raise awareness, created a campaign documentary, and invited students from throughout the country to a virtual town hall. Such activities allow youths to have their voices heard and develop a sense of agency.

"With appropriate supports and intervention, people can overcome traumatic experiences," Cobb says. "Afterschool is perfectly situated to work within the community to help with the recovery efforts for our youth to enjoy a future of prosperity." 

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Jodi Grant is executive director of the Afterschool Alliance.



Principals agree that an increased focus on SEL during the school day can help promote a positive social climate, according to a survey from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. However, 71 percent of principals say time is a problem, 60 percent say that teachers need more training, and 59 percent say that funding is insufficient.

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