Why After-School?

Providing after-school, weekend, and summer activities for children and youth has been a long tradition in public schools. Two factors have lead to the explosive growth, over the past few years, of after-school programs in many schools. First, the development of challenging standards for all students is creating the need to provide additional time and opportunity for those who may be struggling academically. Second, an increasing number of parents, married and single, are working full time, leaving many young people without adult contact or supervision at home at the end of the regular school day.

Many states and local districts have taken the initiative to establish and fund after-school opportunities for elementary, middle, and high school youth to: provide a safe haven for young people, improve academic achievement, improve student behavior, and reduce risk-taking behaviors and substance abuse. In addition, after-school programs can create a powerful dynamic for crafting collaborative relationships to create great programs among schools, youth, community organizations, cultural institutions, and other entities.

Recent published research by Dr. Robert Blum, stemming from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health Study), showed that race, ethnicity, family income, and family structure cannot predict whether a teen is likely to participate in risky or unhealthy behaviors. This long-term study of 12,000 youth from 137 middle and high schools did show the two strongest predictors of adolescent substance abuse and behavioral issues:
(1) academic difficulties in school and (2) unsupervised time after school. (Blum et al.) In addition, being at academic risk was nearly universally associated with every health risk factor. This extensive study supports the importance of young people having a safe, supervised learning environment during those critical hours after school. High-quality after-school programs can directly address the two strongest risk factors impacting children and youth.

In their original analysis of Add Health data, Resnick et al. showed that students who feel connected to school are less likely to: use alcohol and other drugs, engage in violent or delinquent behavior, become pregnant, and experience emotional distress. School connectedness (a student's feeling of being part of and cared for at school) was identified as the only school-related variable that helped build resilience to eight different health risk outcomes among adolescents. School connectedness plays in significantly reducing risk-taking behavior in adolescents; such was the theme of Dr. Robert Blum's keynote address at a recent Safe and Drug Free Youth Conference. McNeely et al. have recently shown that student participation in after-school activities (extracurricular) and improved school attendance are two of the key factors that lead to improved school connectedness.

There is a growing body of research evidence (National Institute of Out-of-School Time (NIOST) Fact Sheet) indicating that high quality after-school programs can improve: school connectedness, student attendance, student classroom behavior and reduce risk-taking behavior. A recent multi-year study of four different after-school programs (Grossman, et al.) showed a significant reduction in risky behavior in students who participated in the after-school programs. In essence, there is solid research evidence showing that after-school programs reduce youth violence and gang activity, reduce alcohol, tobacco, and drug use, increase school and community connectedness, improve academic achievement and narrow the achievement gap.

After-school opportunities can provide young people with a positive alternative to spending time on the streets or being home alone. Clearly there is great need for sustaining and increasing proven and effective programs that serve the needs of young people during the after school hours.

What does the national data say about risk factors impacting children and youth?

- In 69% of all married-couple families with children ages 6 - 17, both parents work outside the home; in 78% of female-headed families and 84% of male-headed families, the custodial parent works outside the home. (NIOST, 2004)

- The gap between parents' work schedules and children's school schedules is about 22 hours per week. (Annie E. Casey Fdn./ US Dept. of ED, 2000)

- On school days, between 3 pm - 6 pm, violent juvenile crime triples. (FBI, 2003)

- The most common time for youth to engage in sexual activity is between 3 pm and 6 pm. (Howell, 1998)

- Children who are unsupervised for 11+ hours/week are twice as likely to use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs (ATOD). (Mulhall, 1996)

- Middle school students who spend 3+ hours home alone after school are significantly more likely to: use drugs and alcohol, have high levels of stress & anger, experience behavior problems, perform poorly academically. (Center for Prevention Research and Development, 1998)

- The number of overweight teens has tripled in the past 30 years. (Ogden et al., 2002)

What does the local data say about risk factors?

In January 2001, the *Communities That Care* survey was administered to roughly 40% of the 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in the Fairfax County Public Schools. Survey results further support the need for structured programming for youth. For example, 57% of respondents indicated

that they spend time at a friend's house without an adult present; 34% spend time at least once a week when no parents are present; and 50% indicated that they hung out at a mall or parking lot, 3 or more times a month. Key findings related to risk and protective factors identified elevated risk factors in all four domains. Youth in Fairfax County indicated less than average feelings of neighborhood attachment, adequate family supervision and discipline, and commitment, or connectedness, towards school. Specific findings related to substance abuse and violence-related behaviors included the following:

- 10% of 8th graders reported smoking cigarettes in the last 30 days
- 21% of 8th graders reported they currently consume alcohol
- Almost 5% of youth in 8th grade reported current use of inhalants
- 5.1% of youth in 8th grade indicated current use of marijuana
- The number of times respondents indicated they used alcohol in the past 30 days increased for each grade
- 46% of all respondents indicated that they had been bullied, taunted, ridiculed, or teased at least once, with 11.8% reporting ten or more occasions in the past year

The 2003 Virginia Youth survey indicated that these numbers have fallen a small amount, but are still large. There is ample evidence indicating a substantial increase in youth gang activity and gang recruitment in Northern Virginia that was not addressed in any detail in either survey.

The Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board (CSB) completes annual Community-Based Prevention Plans that involves input from the entire community: residents, community organizations, service providers, faith communities, public safety, youth, businesses, and the school system. This plan prioritizes prevention needs and services. Each year, the needs identified by hundreds of stakeholders have consistently related to after-school programming for youth, especially in identified high-risk communities. Identified concerns included unsupervised youth during after-school hours and a lack of positive youth activities at neighborhood levels.

What does the research say about the outcomes of after-school programs?

- In North Carolina (the only state with a publicly-funded after-school program specifically for middle school students), 92% of the after-school programs resulted in increased academic performance. (Johnson & Dooley, 1999)

- Children who attend high quality after-school have better peer relations, emotional adjustment, conflict resolution skills, grades, and conduct in school. (Posner & Vandell, 1994; Huang, et al., 2000)

- Compared to students not participating in after-school programs, those who did showed:
    - stronger motivation to achieve,
    - higher educational aspirations,

- greater capacity to build friendships, and
- a higher level of interaction and communication with adults. (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003)

- Children attending after-school had fewer absences, better conflict management skills, better work habits, higher aspirations for college. (Dryfoos, 1990; Witt, 2001)

- Compared to students spending time in after-school, those who did not were:
    - 49% more likely to use drugs,
    - 37% more likely to be teen parents. (US Dept. of Ed, 1997)

- After-school programs increase engagement in learning by providing middle school students with opportunities to receive personal attention from adults, a positive peer group, and community service activities. (Miller, 2003)

- In San Francisco, participation rates of over 30 days per year in after-school were correlated with significant improvement in math and reading standardized test scores. (Walker & Albreton, 2002).

Much of this research indicates that quality after-school programs can markedly increase engagement in learning and students who are engaged in learning behave better in school, have better work habits, improved attitudes towards school, a greater sense of belonging to the community, and better relationships with parents. Children and youth are not the only ones to benefit. When disruptive behavior in the classroom is reduced, teachers have more time to engage all students in learning. Positive effects extend to families, employers, and the community. Recent research indicates that after-school programs are likely to produce a significant return on the initial investment.

A survey of 1178 police chiefs, sheriffs, and prosecutors, by greater than a 4 to 1 margin, reports that after-school programs have the greatest impact on reducing youth violence and crime (Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, 2002). In a different poll, nearly 9 in 10 police chiefs said that expanding after-school programs will "greatly reduce youth crime and violence." (Poll of Police Chiefs, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 1999)

In a cost-benefit analysis done in Wisconsin, researchers concluded that 64 schools saved over $1,000,000 during a one-year period due to the reduced number of students retained in grade or referred to special services due to the child's participation in after-school programs (Riley, et al., 1994). A California study compared the number of after-school students retained in grade compared to the general school population and projected cost savings of over $11 million in 2001 – 2002 alone. Brown et al, 2002 calculated the benefits associated with California's new after-school initiative and estimated the return to the taxpayers ranges

from $8.90 - $12.90 for every dollar invested in the program.

In addition to savings for the taxpayer, businesses report reduced turnover, lowered absenteeism, and increased productivity where quality after-school programs were available. (Barnett, 2004). In a recent needs assessment conducted by the Fairfax County After-School Network, working parents of middle school students responded to the lack of after-school programs at the following rates:

- 84% worry about their children at home alone.
- 46% have limited their work hours or choice of employment.
- 43% have had to take time off work.
- 48% report negative impact on productivity at work.

A growing concern in Fairfax County is the rapid increase in youth gang activity. The after-school hours (3 to 6 pm) are the prime time for juvenile crime and gang-related crime on school days. In addition, a leading risk factor for joining gangs is unsupervised time spent with friends. Work by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids shows that shutting off the pipeline that delivers youth into gangs can be very effective. After-school programs and anti-bullying programs can protect youth from gang violence and remove some of the pressures to join gangs.

High-quality after-school opportunities can provide young people with a positive alternative to spending time on the streets or being home alone. Participating in positive, goal-directed activities can give all youth an opportunity to develop skills, build character, and partake in challenging, fulfilling opportunities. It can also lessen their chances of engaging in risk-taking behaviors by occupying idle time, strengthening commitment to school and community, and exposure to positive peer and adult influences.

After-school programs are a critical community need for young people. High-quality after-school programs help all youth

- be safe,
- stay drug- and alcohol-free,
- avoid the pressure of gangs,
- succeed in school,
- form positive relationships with adults,
- make new friends,
- contribute to the community, and
- learn new skills.

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