

The Realm of Afterschool... A World of Diversity

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Introduction

Growing public awareness that afterschool program participation can benefit all children and youth in their communities, as well as relieve parental concerns about safety, coupled with the increasing realization that schools alone are insufficient to close our nation's achievement gaps, all together shine the spotlight on afterschool as a place to support and complement learning and development. But what is afterschool and what are the potential benefits of participating in afterschool programs?

This working brief on the *Realm of Afterschool* provides a working definition of afterschool and highlights current research on its potential benefits to children and youth.

What...

Afterschool is the general term used to describe an array of safe, structured programs that provide children and youth with a range of supervised activities intentionally designed to encourage learning and development outside of the typical school day. The terms "school-age care," "out-of-school time," and "expanded learning opportunities" are sometimes used interchangeably with the term "afterschool." Afterschool programs can support working families by keeping children and youth engaged and safe while parents work.

Afterschool as we know it today has grown out of three inter-related traditions of school-age child care, youth development, and school-based afterschool programs. These three traditions carry critical concepts in afterschool—safety, positive youth development, and academic enrichment and support. These converging traditions are responsible for a diverse range of afterschool program goals such as improved self-image and self confidence, improved academic performance, and improved engagement in learning.

Given the broad range of program goals, it follows that activities offered in afterschool programs across Massachusetts vary widely. They include academic enrichment, tutoring, mentoring, homework help, arts (music, theater, and drama), technology, science, reading, math, civic engagement and involvement, and activities to support and promote healthy social/emotional development. (Other briefs in this series examine programs that specifically focus on arts and on sports.)

Where...

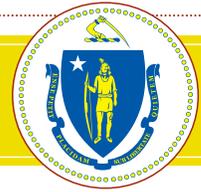
Afterschool programs occur in a variety of settings: schools, museums, libraries, parks districts, faith-based organizations, youth service agencies, county health agencies, and community-based organizations.

The Massachusetts Special Commission on After School and Out of School Time has been created by the Massachusetts Legislature to help define what is needed to support the healthy development of children and youth in and out of school.

These briefs were made possible through a generous grant by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

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¹ See, for example, Harvard Family Research Project. (2006). Building and evaluating out-of-school time connections. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 12(1-2). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. <www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue33/index.html>



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When...

Afterschool programs occur before and after school, on the weekends, during school holidays, and in the summer. With the exception of weekend, holiday, and summer programming, most afterschool programs run for approximately 2-3 hours per day, 4-5 days per week. It is important to note that participation in afterschool programs is less consistent, with many students attending only 2-3 days per week on average. (Other briefs in this series examine participation more closely, and explore summer programming.)

Who...

Afterschool programs are designed for students in kindergarten through high school. Many programs serve a broad range of students, while others are targeted to specific age groups. (One brief in this series spotlights the issues of afterschool for older youth.)

Why...

Decades of research and evaluation studies, both from Massachusetts and the rest of the nation, as well as from large-scale, rigorously conducted syntheses looking across many research and evaluation studies, confirm that students who participate in afterschool programs can reap a host of positive benefits in a number of areas—academic, social/emotional, prevention, health and wellness, and community engagement. Below are highlights from key research studies.

Academic

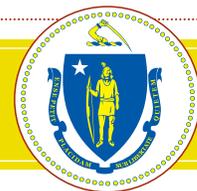
Afterschool programs are in a unique position to support in-school academic learning, and are poised to do so without replicating the school day. Dozens of studies of afterschool programs point to the opportunity they afford children and youth to learn and practice new skills through hands-on, experientially-based learning. Quality afterschool programs that offer direct academic support such as tutoring and homework help, do so in an environment that fosters inquiry, critical thinking, and engagement in learning.

While it is true that many afterschool programs can support academic learning, this does not equate to holding programs accountable for moving the needle on academic performance measures such as standardized tests and grades. Across research and evaluation studies, academic impact is defined broadly to include a range of outcomes, not simply improvements on standardized testing and grades. Positive outcomes associated with participation include better attitudes toward school and higher educational aspirations; higher school attendance and less tardiness; less disciplinary action (e.g., suspension); better performance in school, as measured by achievement test scores and grades; greater on-time promotion; improved homework completion; and engagement in learning.

Social/emotional

Beyond academics, numerous afterschool programs are focused on improving youth social and developmental outcomes, such as social skills, self-esteem and self-concept, initiative and leadership skills, and a host of other outcomes. Here again, high-quality experimental research demonstrates significant improvements for children and youth on a variety of developmental outcomes.

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Across a number of studies, potential outcomes associated with participation include decreased behavioral problems; improved social and communication skills and/or relationships with others (peers, parents, and/or teachers); increased community involvement and broadened world view; increased self-confidence and self-esteem; development of initiative; and improved feelings and attitudes toward self and school.

Prevention

The hours from three to six o'clock present at least two potential hazards to a young person's development. First, those hours are associated with the peak time for juvenile crime and juvenile victimization; second, during those hours, teens are more likely to be having sex. At a minimum, then, participation in an afterschool program gets children and youth off the streets and under supervision, and potentially prevents some risky behaviors.

Specific positive outcomes associated with participation in afterschool programs include avoidance of drug and alcohol use; decreases in delinquency and violent behavior; and, increased knowledge of safe-sex and avoidance of sexual activity.

Health and Wellness

Afterschool programs are viewed as one of many places that can tackle the growing problem of obesity among our Nation's children and youth. Startling new statistics reveal that by 2010 almost 50% of America's children will be obese; further, almost two-thirds of American children get little or no physical activity. Can afterschool programs promise to reduce body mass index (the common measure for obesity)? Probably not, although some evaluations have demonstrated improvements on this measure. As with impacting academic achievement test scores, it takes more than a few hours a week of afterschool participation to move the needle on significant markers of change. But can afterschool programs contribute to healthy lifestyles and increased knowledge about nutrition and exercise? Absolutely.

Specific outcomes associated with participation in afterschool programs include better food choices, increased physical activity, and increased knowledge of nutrition and health practices.

Community Engagement

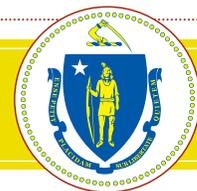
Afterschool programs are in a unique position to provide a bridge between children and youth and their communities. Engagement takes different forms: connecting afterschool program participants to local community-based organizations for community service projects such as neighborhood clean-up day; conducting a community asset-mapping activity to identify community strengths and areas where youth could focus their efforts on improving the community; working in cross-age programs with elderly or preschool neighborhood residents. Regardless of the specific community engagement effort, opportunities to get involved help to establish a spirit of civic engagement and lifelong sense of responsibility for one's community.

Specific outcomes associated with participation in afterschool programs which intentionally promote community engagement include: increased problem solving and conflict resolution skills; increased civic engagement; and increased awareness of community and world issues through attending to media coverage of important events.

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But What Does it Take?

While it is true that afterschool programs have the potential to impact a range of positive learning and developmental outcomes, the reality is that some do not. At least three factors contribute to the overall success of a program's ability to impact student outcomes—(1) access to and sustained participation in the program; (2) program quality, including intentional, explicit programming delivered by well-prepared staff; and (3) the relationship between the program and the other places where students are learning, such as schools, their families, and other community institutions. Other briefs in this series address some of these important topics (like program quality, and bridging school and afterschool), and how they relate to our ultimate goal of promoting afterschool as a means of improving the lives and the future of children and youth in the Commonwealth.

Related Resources

Information referenced in this brief can be found at:

Afterschool Alliance. (2006). *Active hours afterschool: Childhood obesity prevention and afterschool programs*. Washington, DC: Author. http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_briefs/issue_obesity_24.pdf

Harvard Family Research Project. *Out-of-School Time Research and Evaluation Database*. Provides accessible information about research and evaluation work on both large and small OST programs to support the development of high quality evaluations and programs. <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html>

Wimer, C. and Little, P. (in press). *After School Program Research and Evaluation: What We've Learned and Where We Need to Go*. A review of afterschool research and evaluation since 2003, spotlighting what we have learned about what works in afterschool.

Harvard Family Research Project. (2007). *Research Updates: Highlights from the HFRP Out-of-School Time Database*. These short briefs synthesize the latest information posted on the HFRP OST research and evaluation database web site, providing a quick way to stay on top of the latest OST research. <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/index.html#updates>

About the Author

Priscilla Little is Associate Director of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE); is the project manager of HFRP's out-of-school time work; and is a part-time lecturer at HGSE. She is a national expert on research and evaluation of out-of-school time programs and how they can complement in-school learning and development. In addition to her out-of-school time research, Little is also well-versed in issues of early childhood, pre-K, and family involvement, currently evaluating a universal Pre-K initiative in California, conducting a cluster evaluation for Atlantic Philanthropies' integrated learning cluster, and working on a cross-project team to provide technical assistance to the Parental Information Resource Centers. This cross-disciplinary work gives Little a unique perspective on the importance of integrating a range of school and non-school components to support learning and development.

Issue Briefs in This Series:

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Movement Matters: Promoting Health and Well-Being Afterschool
by Beth Beard

ISSUE BRIEF

Learning in 3D: Arts and Cultural Programming in Afterschool
by Dr. Julia Gittleman

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Making the Case: Quality Afterschool Programs Matter
by Dr. Georgia Hall and Diane Gruber (forthcoming)

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Back to the Future: Engaging Older Youth
by Dr. Georgia Hall and Diane Gruber (forthcoming)

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by Priscilla Little

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The Potential of Summer: Closing the Achievement Gap
by Dr. Beth Miller

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Bridging School and Afterschool
by Dr. Gil Noam (forthcoming)