



Young Adolescents Learn and Thrive in After-School Programs

Results of a Three-Year Evaluation in Six New York City Middle Schools

Results from a new longitudinal evaluation of after-school programming at six Children's Aid Society community middle schools show that students achieved significant gains in math and reading, and that those gains were statistically significantly greater than gains made by students who did not take part in Children's Aid's after-school programs. Students in these programs also demonstrated more positive behaviors than non-participants in some pertinent developmental areas, and respondents reported increased positive behaviors over time. Finally, the evaluation noted that The Children's Aid Society's comprehensive community school model contributed to a positive school climate and support structure not usually found in stand-alone after-school programs. These findings highlight the potential for quality after-school programming to effectively address complex developmental needs of young adolescents as well as endorsing the efficacy of holistic models of student support.

The key findings emerge from a rigorous three-year evaluation conducted by ActKnowledge, a research firm housed within the Center for Human Environments at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The study specifically focused on whether, and to what extent, participation in Children's Aid's after-school programs produced measurable results in academic achievement and positive youth development.

The Importance and Challenge of Middle School Achievement

The Challenge. As research consistently reveals significant declines in middle schoolers' academic achievement, motivation and behavior, educators continue to search for methods to better support students through these critical and sensitive years. Children face major adjustments during middle school as they experience pubertal changes—characterized by heightened emotionality, conflict and defiance of adults—in addition to the environmental changes associated with the transition from elementary school. In fact, children at this age undergo more changes than at any other life stage, except early childhood. Navigating this new social, emotional and physical territory takes its toll; research highlights a significant increase in psychological distress for both middle school boys and girls. *Problems in peer relationships, conflict with authority and academic pressures* are identified as primary stressors.

When students' achievement in middle school declines, it is often an indication that their complex socio-emotional needs are not being addressed. New York State's grade-by-grade testing, for example, demonstrates a startling drop in reading performance from the 5th to 6th grade, with poor performance through the 8th grade. Research also documents corresponding decreases in motivation to learn and in school engagement, as well as increases in negative behavior. This adolescent slump can be found across wealthy suburban school districts and inner-city schools alike.

Middle School Matters. Middle school can provide a critical foundation for academic achievement and positive self-development. Improving middle school education is, in fact, considered a pre-condition to lowering the nation's staggering high school dropout rate, closing the achievement gap for socially and economically disadvantaged students, and ensuring that high school students are ready for college and careers. As the vigorous search for best practices continues, the need for methods that produce measurable and demonstrable outcomes is clear.

Measurable Results: The Children's Aid Society's After-School Programming

Framework. ActKnowledge conducted a three-year (2004–2007) evaluation of after-school programs in six community middle schools in Manhattan and the Bronx, all of which primarily serve

African-American and Latino children living in economically disadvantaged communities. Children’s Aid’s after-school programming served a large population of recent immigrants and students whose immediate families emigrated from Latin America. The after-school program and the evaluation received financial support from the New York State Education Department’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

The evaluation was designed to test how well Children’s Aid’s after-school programs produced specific, long-term results for academic improvement and positive youth development. The academic performance and school behaviors of a comparison group of non-participants were examined in order to provide a valid measure of Children’s Aid’s efficacy.¹ Data were also compared across years and by varying levels of participation. Multiple data collection sources were utilized, including: New York standardized test scores; school attendance records; after-school program attendance figures supplied by Community School Information Systems (CSIS); surveys, interviews and focus groups with youth, staff and parents/guardians; the New York State Afterschool Network (NYSAN) Program Quality Self-Assessment instrument; and researchers’ site visits and observations.

Demographics. The tables below describe the total demographic of the six schools selected for this study (Table 1) and the demographic served by Children’s Aid’s after-school programming (Table 2):

Total Student Population of Community Schools Observed			
Ethnicity/Race	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
White	0.5%	0.6%	0.6%
Latino	77.4%	77.3%	75.9%
African American	20.6%	20.3%	21.3%
Native American	0.2%	0.4%	0.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.5%	1.3%	1.4%
Immigration Status			
Born Outside US	41.9%	25.1%	23.4%
Recent Immigrants	1.8%	3.9%	8.3%

Table 1

Students Attending Children’s Aid After-School Programs Within These Schools			
Ethnicity/Race	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
White	0.2%	0.6%	0.7%
Latino	78.7%	74.4%	70.6%
African American	19.7%	23.6%	26.5%
Native American	0.1%	0.4%	0.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.9%	0.9%	1.7%
Immigration Status			
Born Outside US	57.4%	23.7%	21.5%
Recent Immigrants	4.6%	3.9%	7.6%

Table 2

Results. ActKnowledge found significant differences in positive academic performance and behavior among young adolescents who participated in Children’s Aid’s after-school programs versus those that did not. Students who had higher levels of participation demonstrated higher levels of achievement in target areas such as *math and reading test scores and school attendance*, and teachers reported an increase in their *motivation to learn*. Thus, data from testing, student and teacher surveys indicate that the program achieved its stated goals in fostering positive long-term outcomes across pertinent development areas for middle school youth, including:

- Increased academic achievement in reading and math
- Increased self-esteem
- Improved interpersonal relationships with peers
- Increased motivation to learn
- Increased school attendance and engagement

Key Findings. Positive outcomes were identified in three key areas: (1) academic performance, measured through standardized reading and math test scores²; (2) school attendance; and

¹ “Non-participant” is defined as a student who was not enrolled in Children’s Aid’s after-school programming. Many “non-participants” were enrolled in some after-school activities through other service providers, most of which fell under the rubric of New York’s Supplemental Education Services (SES).

² Standardized test scores included two different measures of student performance: (1) scale scores that are based on the number of correct responses, and (2) performance levels that are based on cut-off points on scale scores.

(3) positive youth development, including strong psychological-social development assessed through indicators such as reported self-esteem, civic engagement, out-of-school activities and peer relationships. In most cases, the research showed that the greater the level of participation, the stronger the outcomes.

1. Academic Performance

- Participants who engaged in all three years of programming were *more likely to increase in math performance levels* than non-participants.³
- Participants who engaged in all three years of programming attained *steadily rising and significantly higher scale-scores on both math and reading tests* than non-participants.⁴
- Frequent and long-term after-school participants had even greater increases in test scores than infrequent or non-participants.

2. School Attendance

- Students who participated in more years of Children's Aid's after-school programs had *higher levels of school attendance* than non-participants during all three years of the evaluation.
- Students with three years of participation (grades five through eight) had the *highest levels of attendance overall*.

3. Positive Youth Development

- All surveyed participants reported *significant increases in self-esteem, school engagement and career and other aspirations* (Year 1–3).
- Participants were more likely to spend *two or more hours per week reading*, and less likely to spend *two or more hours per week watching TV or playing video games* than non-participants (Year 1).
- A higher percentage of participants felt they *learned new things and acquired new skills* during after-school hours (Year 2).
- A higher percentage of participants utilized *learning resources* (including the library, the Internet and computer programs) to help with school or research projects and reported *involvement with sports or other exercise activities* (Year 3).

4. Level of Program Attendance and Positive Results⁵

- Teachers reported that students with high levels of participation demonstrated *improved academic performance* more than students with lower levels of participation (Year 2).
- Teachers reported that 6th graders with high levels of participation were *more motivated to come to school to learn and more likely to volunteer for extra credit or other responsibilities* than students with lower levels of participation (Year 2).
- Teachers reported that students with high levels of participation (60% or higher attendance) showed greater improvement in *interpersonal relationships with peers and motivation to learn in school* than students with lower levels of participation (Year 3).

What Makes The Children's Aid Approach Distinctive?

The Strength of the Community Schools Model. ActKnowledge identified the integrated, holistic quality of the Community Schools model as an important contributor to the after-school program's efficacy and successful implementation. Researchers stated that the Community School setting provided

³ Performance levels are used to track progress on state standards and were compared across years. New York State and New York City define four performance levels: Level 1 (not meeting learning standards); Level 2 (partially meeting learning standards); Level 3 (meeting learning standards); and Level 4 (meeting learning standards with distinction).

⁴ New York State introduced and administered a new standardized test in 2006; therefore, scale scores could not be compared before or after Year 3 of the evaluation (2006-2007).

⁵ Results were drawn from Annual Performance Report teacher surveys conducted at the end of the school year; questions pertained only to Children's Aid's after-school participants with high and low levels of participation.

a more supportive environment both for students and faculty. Similarly, after-school programming was more integrated into the school's "life" than stand-alone programs. Faculty reported that Children's Aid provided effective resources for professional staff development. Furthermore, youth development results indicated that all students experienced some significant benefits over the course of the evaluation. ActKnowledge specifically highlighted *education*, *curriculum development* and *youth development* as Children's Aid's strengths in supporting school development.

Extended Services and a Commitment to Program Quality. ActKnowledge found that Children's Aid effectively monitored and evaluated programs to ensure their quality. The research team also noted Children's Aid's seamless integration of agency-wide services (such as juvenile justice programs) as an important component in bolstering student and family support.

Stability Amidst Sweeping Changes. New York City's Department of Education undertook a vast Middle School Restructuring initiative that coincided with the timeframe of ActKnowledge's evaluation. This effort produced many sweeping changes, such as the division of large schools into several smaller ones and the resignation of numerous principals and staff. Although the restructuring's goal was to create smaller and more effective learning communities, the process of change produced disruptions that at times created a climate of confusion and uncertainty.


During this time of transition, Children's Aid made special efforts to help students and families understand the new changes and to ease stress for all school community members. The agency's after-school programs provided stability at a demoralizing juncture and bolstered school attendance levels during a time of decreasing school engagement.

Moving Forward

Summary. In a service area characterized by a high poverty rate—and during a period of stress caused by system-wide restructuring—Children's Aid's programming achieved positive outcomes in both academic achievement and youth development among middle school youth. The results of the ActKnowledge evaluation underline the immense potential of quality after-school programming to effectively address middle school challenges. They further point toward the benefits achievable through the comprehensive and integrated framework of the Community Schools model.

Implications for the Future. The intent of the federal funding source (21st Century Community Learning Centers) that underwrote this program implementation in six New York City middle schools was to produce the very kinds of results documented here. Policymakers at all levels—federal, state and local—are interested in understanding the return on investment of public dollars. This evaluation adds to the growing body of knowledge about how to implement high quality after-school programs that generate high levels of participation and produce positive results, both around academic achievement and other aspects of youth development. In addition, after-school investments can be further leveraged by programs that remove documented barriers to student learning, such as medical, dental, mental health and social services. In this context, supporting initiatives like the Full-Service Community Schools Act, the Federal Youth Coordination Act and Medicaid reimbursement for school-based health services is an important step to improving outcomes for our nation's youth at every stage of their journey toward productive adulthood.

The Children's Aid Society has worked for over 150 years to enrich children's lives while targeting the roots of social, educational, familial, and health issues that hold children back and keep families in a vicious cycle of poverty. Learn more about Children's Aid and our award-winning Community Schools strategy at: <http://childrensaidsociety.org/communityschools>.

Research conducted by  **ActKnowledge**. View the full report at <http://www.actknowledge.org>.