



# Strengthening Afterschool for Older Youth through Policy and Practice: A Policy Brief

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## Why Afterschool?

Afterschool and other out-of-school time (OST) programs for older youth (such as before-school, summer, and weekend programs) provide them with opportunities to enrich their lives with diverse, valuable activities that go beyond their classroom experiences. Here are the four most significant reasons why afterschool programs matter.



- ◆ Afterschool and OST programs provide **extended learning opportunities** to help youth meet and exceed academic standards and develop important social, personal, civic, and employability skills. They can help “level the playing field” for youth who are academically or developmentally behind while providing an opportunity for at-level students to broaden their skill sets.
- ◆ Afterschool programs have the opportunity to offer a **comprehensive, holistic approach** to serving youth by providing specialized services such as parent workshops and English-language classes; physical, dental, and eye exams; mental health counseling; and teen parent programs.
- ◆ Afterschool programs provide youth with a **safe and positive environment** during the afterschool hours, when juvenile crime and “risky behavior” rates are at their peaks, and when many parents are at work.
- ◆ Afterschool programs both **supplement the school day** by offering much-needed activities like college and career counseling and character education, and also provide activities that are decreasingly available in schools, such as art, physical education, music, and civics. They also offer a unique opportunity to provide less traditional learning experiences such as hands-on learning, group projects, and service-learning.

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## Policies & Practices That Can Strengthen Afterschool

Currently, the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) **21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC)** program is the primary federal program funding afterschool programs. But various other federal funding sources support afterschool and OST programs as well. These include ED programs such as Supplemental Educational Services under the No Child Left Behind Act, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act, Comprehensive School Reform, and GEAR UP, as well as non-ED programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Workforce Investment Act, and AmeriCorps, among others. These federal programs can serve as vehicles for improving many afterschool policies.

There are **five key areas** in which strategic policy efforts could greatly enhance afterschool programming:

- ◆ **Developing the capacity of the afterschool system**
- ◆ **Defining, building, measuring, and improving program quality**
- ◆ **Ensuring access for disadvantaged youth, especially older youth**
- ◆ **Determining desired outcomes and collecting data for program evaluation**
- ◆ **Connecting afterschool to the broader education reform discussion**

## Developing the Capacity of the Afterschool System

While federal funds have greatly helped expand the number of afterschool programs, the *capacity* of the afterschool system has not kept pace with the demand for high quality programs. Enhanced capacity translates into not only more afterschool and OST programs, but more qualified and knowledgeable staff, improved processes, and more dynamic curricula. Recommendations to improve capacity are as follows:

- ◆ **Increase funding set-asides for capacity building.** Currently, the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC program allows states to devote up to three percent of funding to activities such as training, technical assistance, and program evaluation. Many afterschool advocates argue that three percent is not enough to enable programs to improve and thrive.
- ◆ **Expand and enhance professional development.** Funding should always be set aside to enhance the professional development field for afterschool workers, and OST programs should be held accountable for ensuring that their staff is properly trained, on an ongoing basis, with the skills needed specifically for the positions held. For example, staff members who work with teens with substance abuse problems should be trained in working with substance abuse issues.
- ◆ **Assist with the provision of high quality technical assistance (TA).** Local programs should have access to TA resources to ensure that they have the help they need to provide services effectively. A relatively new initiative in the TA arena is the Statewide Afterschool Networks, seed-funded by the Charles S. Mott Foundation. These statewide groups are made up of stakeholders such as policymakers, educators, youth development workers, advocates, and parents who are interested in enhancing afterschool programming in their state. Some of their functions include forging community partnerships, raising awareness for the positive impacts of afterschool, and providing TA to local programs.
- ◆ **Disseminate best practices.** When research and program evaluations uncover effective practices, this information should be disseminated widely to the OST field. Federal funds can support the dissemination of such information at the national and state levels.



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## Defining, Building, Measuring, and Improving Program Quality

*High quality* afterschool programs are more effective at reaching their goals, whether they are to increase academic achievement levels, lower youth obesity rates, or develop marketable skill sets. High quality programming takes into consideration both programmatic inputs, such as qualified staff, as well as youth outcomes, such as increased graduation rates. Recommendations for investments in quality are as follows:

- ◆ **Again, increase funding set-asides for capacity building.** Increasing afterschool program capacity can lead to overall improvements in program quality.
- ◆ **Use research to inform policy and practice.** For example, recent research suggests that four programmatic elements are strongly associated with successful personal, social, and academic outcomes for youth. Afterschool programs were found to be most effective when they offered sequential skill-building activities, promoted active learning methods, were intentionally focused on personal and social skill development, and explicitly identified the skills they were trying to teach. Other recent studies point to specific staff skill sets that are essential for maintaining effective programs.

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- ◆ **Encourage the use of program assessment tools** to measure quality standards and anchor continuous improvement processes. The number of available research-based assessment tools is growing as more programs seek to create, measure, and hone their quality standards. This trend should be noted nationally as a promising practice for improving quality.
- ◆ **Develop rigorous quality standards for federal programs** like the Supplemental Educational Services (SES) program, which provides academic tutoring opportunities for low-performing schools, and whose standards are not yet rigorous enough to effect positive change on students served. Additionally, allow service providers more flexibility in determining what types of activities may be provided to students under federal programs like SES.

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## **Ensuring Access for Disadvantaged Youth, Especially Older Youth**

The 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC program requires states to give “competitive priority” to schools eligible for Title I funding and those identified as “in need of improvement.” Even so, low-income students still have the *least* access to high quality afterschool programs. In fact, at its current funding level, 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC only reaches seven percent of eligible children and youth. Additionally, due to the priority given to Title I schools, and that few middle and high schools receive Title I dollars, elementary schools have a substantial competitive edge on receiving afterschool grant funds. Recommendations on ensuring access are as follows:

- ◆ **Direct federal afterschool funding to where it is needed most.** Federal funding should be directed to and prioritized for high need communities and youth to ensure they have access to these programs.
- ◆ **Encourage the serving of older youth.** In general, only a small percentage of federal and state afterschool funding is used to fund afterschool programs for middle and high school-aged youth, even though research shows that providing these youth with additional development, academic, and job and life skills opportunities can yield positive results at both the personal and community levels.

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## **Determining Desired Outcomes and Collecting Data for Program Evaluation**

There has been much talk about afterschool and OST programs being held accountable for raising test scores and grades. However, two things need to be taken into consideration when assessing program outcomes: first, that all afterschool programs do not strive to reach the same goals, and secondly, that academic achievement is not the only important indicator of a successful adulthood. Even so, with small budgets and staff sizes, many OST programs lack the capacity to perform rigorous evaluations. Recommendations on assessing afterschool programs are as follows:

- ◆ **Develop a common set of desired youth outcomes** across the education and afterschool fields, as well as the community at large, and then work at multiple levels to accomplish them. Some important and relevant youth outcomes include high grades and school achievement levels; high graduation rates; college and/or career entrance and success; low juvenile



crime and delinquency; civic participation; effective social skills; and positive health and well-being.

- ◆ **Provide increased support for data collection and program evaluation.** Encouraging programs to collect data on their programmatic and youth outcomes will help all programs strive to become high quality and to reach meaningful goals. Increasing the capacity building set-aside within the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC program can better enable this important endeavor to be accomplished.



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## Connecting Afterschool to the Broader Education Reform Discussion

Policymakers at all levels are focusing more intently on middle and high school reform to improve academic outcomes and close the achievement gap. But this focus on school reform has not yet taken into serious account the learning and development that occurs during *out-of-school time*. Since many of the skills youth need to be successful are not developed during the school day, it is critical that out-of-school time be viewed as an opportunity to expand learning and development opportunities for youth. Recommendations for including OST programs in the education reform conversation are as follows:

- ◆ **Provide a “vision” at the national level.** Leadership at the national level is needed to provide a new, more comprehensive vision for education reform to states and local OST program providers. The reform discussion should be framed in such a way that incorporates all of the means through which youth are educated, and OST programs are a significant part of that picture. Clearly framing the issue will assist states and communities in their efforts to create integrated youth-serving systems.
- ◆ **Better publicize the diversified sources of afterschool funding.** As previously noted, although 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC is the only federal funding source that is specifically dedicated to afterschool programming, there are many other federal sources that can be used to support them. Stronger, more explicit language that clarifies how funds from these programs can be used to support OST should be added to these programs. Furthermore, the use of these funds should not be limited to the afterschool hours, but should be flexible enough to fund summer, weekend, and before-school programs as well.
- ◆ **Recognize the importance of afterschool programs in the movement toward “extended learning” models.** More and more school districts are investing in extended school days and years to improve student outcomes; but just as important as *how much* learning time is available is *how* that extra time is spent. Afterschool programs have been showcasing proven approaches to enrichment for decades and should be included in the “extended learning” equation.

*The recommendations in this paper were informed by a roundtable discussion regarding afterschool policy that took place on November 9, 2006, in Washington, DC, and was hosted by the American Youth Policy Forum with support from the William T. Grant Foundation. Representatives from the following organizations were in attendance at this meeting: Afterschool Alliance, Council of Chief State School Officers, The Finance Project, Forum for Youth Investment, Loyola University Chicago, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., National Governors Association, National League of Cities, Policy Studies Associates, Inc., Public/Private Ventures, and the William T. Grant Foundation. Meeting participation does not connote endorsement of the policy recommendations in this brief.*