

Statewide Perspectives in Expanded Learning: The Role of Statewide Afterschool Networks

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Overview

As communities are beginning to realize the benefits of a coordinated approach to expanded learning opportunities in which afterschool providers from community organizations to youth serving and faith-based groups, schools, intermediaries, and other stakeholders work together to provide high quality programming, states have benefited from the support of Statewide Afterschool Networks . Currently, these networks operate in 41 states and provide a range of coordinated supports in the form of research, resources, and technical assistance to state and local level stakeholders. Statewide Afterschool Networks have developed valuable expertise in both policy and practice issues.

This forum offered an overview of how the Statewide Afterschool Networks support the work of afterschool providers and how they work alongside multiple stakeholders, including state agencies, community-based intermediaries, and program providers. **Dr. Terry Peterson**, Director, After School National Resource Network, and Chairman of the Board, Afterschool Alliance, shared an overview of the work of Statewide Afterschool Networks and discussed their role in supporting effective state-wide policy and practice decisions in afterschool. **Laveta Wills-Hale**, Director of the Arkansas Out of School Network, and **Michelle Doucette Cunningham**, Executive Director of the Connecticut After School Network shared their perspectives on the qualities of a highly functioning afterschool system, the supports Statewide Afterschool Networks have provided, and how federal policy can support or hinder such work.

Presentations

Terry Peterson began the conversation by noting that as of October 1, 2013 Statewide Afterschool Networks will soon exist in 42 states and another 4-5 states will be on board within the next two years. Statewide Afterschool Networks highlighted the changes in afterschool programs and networks within the past three-six years. He offered several points that illustrate the need for afterschool programs and emphasized areas for development within the field of out-of-school time (OST):

1. Time – 75%-80% of students' waking hours are spent outside of school. While more affluent families can provide OST activities to their children regardless of public funding for such activities, many disadvantaged families and even some middle income families do not have the resources to provide afterschool activities for their children.
2. Quality – In order to increase the impact of afterschool programs, quality should be a central focus of OST programs and support systems. Research shows that high quality

programs can impact student success and graduation rates, as well as grades, attendance and behavior.

3. Enrichment – Afterschool programs can capitalize their efforts by focusing on skills such as meta-cognition and “grit.” These skills are especially important for low-income students to develop, as they are critical skills needed to become college-and-career ready.
4. Public support – According to a national survey, approximately 18 million parents cite a need and desire for afterschool programs.¹ There are federal funding streams, and occasionally state and local funding for afterschool, but on average, many communities lack programming despite overwhelming desire for such programming.

Dr. Peterson also highlighted the implications of the existence of Statewide Afterschool Networks. Most notably, these networks help link historically disconnected program providers. For example, an assessment of afterschool programs throughout several states 10 years ago showed 200 programs in operation. Most of these were large, federally-funded programs. Today, those same states have identified close to 1,200 afterschool program providers representing multiple stakeholders from the community, non-profit, and faith-based sectors. Statewide Afterschool Networks help link these providers, develop training opportunities, and identify a common language around afterschool opportunities.

Dr. Peterson further expanded on the role and value of the Statewide Afterschool Networks to build a “third space for learning.” For example, they might engage state and local decision-makers (like State Education Agencies, Local Education Agencies, Mayors, City Councils) to build quality program standards. The Networks also identify funding streams and suggest ways to blend them together. Additionally, they help local afterschool providers respond to community concerns and raise awareness of the role afterschool can play in providing safe spaces and reducing dropout rates. The Networks play an important role in promoting a focus on “non-cognitive,” socio-emotional skills in afterschool programs as well as the basics of school success.

These networks also play a valuable role in assessing program impact and quality for national and state organizations that are developing new policies and programs. They can also potentially roll out and implement new national or state initiatives of other organizations if they are judged to be compatible with their goals and mission, such as STEM, Grade-Level Reading, Career and College Readiness, etc.

Laveta Wills-Hale began her comments by highlighting the value of out-of-school time for working families and in areas of concentrated poverty. Ms. Wills-Hale cited statistics that show that upper income families are out-spending low-income families at a rate of 9:1 in terms of afterschool activities. This highlights the “opportunity gap” that exists as well as the role afterschool programs can play in creating new pathways for learning to engage young people.

¹ Afterschool Alliance, “America after 3pm” (2010).

The need for afterschool programs in Arkansas requires an infrastructure of quality programs. Statewide Afterschool Networks work to support systems-building and develop an “ecosystem” of after school services.

Of the 470,000 K-12 students in Arkansas, 26% are responsible for taking care of themselves afterschool and 75% are under the care of a parent or guardian after school hours. 12% (60,000) participate consistently in an afterschool program. Simultaneously, parent surveys indicate that of students who do not currently participate in an afterschool or summer program, 60% would participate in these programs if they had access. 90% of voting Arkansans indicate they support public funding to provide afterschool programs.²

In light of the data about afterschool program participation and desired access, the Arkansas Out-of-School Network has led several efforts to help support afterschool programs in the state. A 2008 Governor’s Task Force resulted in definitive recommendations about the goals and framework that should guide afterschool efforts. The Out-of-School Network’s role was to identify leaders to participate in this task force, convene relevant stakeholders, and provide research and background for the conversation. Out of this convening, the taskforce identified two central goals: the development of a common assessment system and common professional development opportunities. Passed in 2011, the Positive Youth Development Act further articulated and codified the goals of the Governor’s Task Force.

The Arkansas Department of Education and the Division of Childcare and Early Childhood Education were essential partners in the efforts to bring afterschool systems together. They represent two funding streams that have been the hallmark of continuous investment. For example, the Division of Childcare and Early Childhood Education received \$500,000 from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). They used this one-time funding source to identify activities that could have the greatest impact and invested in developing a partner’s alliance to offer professional development for OST programs. Today those partners are still engaged, demonstrating the role federal dollars can play in promoting sustainable state/local partnerships.

The Arkansas Out-of-School Network coordinates with a number of programs and service providers, including:

- Grade level reading campaign
- Opportunity to Learn campaign
- No Kid Hungry campaign
- Clinton Foundation – Healthy Communities Initiative
- Alliance for healthier generation
- STEM coalition, STEM authority

² Statewide Afterschool Networks, “Arkansas Out-of-School Network”(2013). Accessed <http://www.statewideafterschoolnetworks.net/node/10>.

- University STEM centers

Ms. Wills-Hale noted that the conversation about Out-of-School Time should include the issues of equity and equitable distribution of resources. In Arkansas, the Opportunity to Learn Campaign has been a valuable partner through their work to identify “missed opportunities” in the state budget.

Ms. Wills-Hale ended by summarizing the strength of Statewide Afterschool Networks – to focus on place-based engagement, identify institutional partners to be an effective conduit for resources, and engagement around policy changes.

Michelle Doucette Cunningham presented an overview of the Connecticut After School Network, and outlined its importance as a convener for providers. The main task of the Connecticut After School Network is to advocate on behalf of children and families, especially in circumstances where these activities might not happen otherwise.

Because there are many federal funding streams represented by afterschool programs in Connecticut, the role of the After School Network is to provide state policy coordination through the different agencies that are involved and communicate about goals that are tied to funding streams. For example, funding through Health and Human Services is meant to support employment for families, while 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) funds are intended to focus on student outcomes regardless of the parent’s employment status. Through an After School Advisory Council, the Connecticut After School Network coordinates the efforts of these agencies and funding streams, as well as the efforts of philanthropy, elected officials, and other program providers to align afterschool services that support youth and parents.

Ms. Doucette Cunningham also underscored the importance of communication between different programs and agencies in order to break down the silos that often exist in this work. “It’s relationship work”, she stated, especially in small states. By convening these different agencies and programs, the After School Network helps to align goals.

Part of this effort involves establishing criteria for afterschool programs from various funding sources and soliciting support from various stakeholders. For example, Foster Care Title IV money provides support for afterschool programs but there were no consistent quality standards to ensure participant safety and program quality. Through an After School Network convening, program providers worked with each other and the Network to develop guidelines and policies for afterschool programs to align with existing health and safety standards. This allows providers to meet only one set of streamlined criteria while still using funds from various (federal) funding sources.

To close the conversation, Dr. Peterson summarized the potential of Statewide Afterschool Networks and framed several needs. He noted the importance of federal tools to capitalize on the efforts of the Networks. Specifically, the Networks can continue to benefit from 21st Century

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Community Learning Center funds and Child Care Development funding, as those funding streams set a framework for afterschool activities within and across states. Additionally, the language about afterschool that will be included in Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Reauthorization is important and should include a combination of academic, enrichment, and partnership opportunities. A focus on partnerships within ESEA can incentivize state and local program providers to align their goals. Finally he connected the opportunities within afterschool programs with the STEM field, as well developing creativity through the arts by offering course credit in different venues, noting the importance of afterschool programs in providing “hands on” learning opportunities.

Q&A

What are the obstacles to helping federal programs work together in support of afterschool opportunities?

Ms. Wills-Hale: It is increasingly obvious that within federal programs, regardless of the funding stream, more in-depth conversation and awareness about how local afterschool providers can use these funds is needed. In the field of OST, there are partners who are ready, willing, and able to have a conversation about community partnerships and funding streams. For example, summer learning programs across the state are able to use Title I funds, but these programs lack awareness and feel like they need permission to access those funds. Knowing what to advocate for at the local level is important.

Ms. Doucette Cunningham noted the difficulty of this work because of personnel turnover. This makes it hard to know who can answer your question. Building relationships makes a big difference and is the first step towards greater alignment and collaboration.

Dr. Peterson added that in order to work well at the state and local levels, programs should intentionally include points for collaboration like school-community partnerships. Local program officers are afraid of being audited, so collaboration seems like a violation. Allowing funding like 21st CCLC to be used to fund state networks and/or local intermediaries provides greater impact, as they can engage people who are not funded by that program.

How are afterschool stakeholders talking about the implications of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)?

Ms. Doucette Cunningham noted that CCSS include “habits of mind,” which afterschool systems have been developing for years. In afterschool programs, students learn skills like teamwork and discernment and engage in project-based learning.

Ms. Wills-Hale added that the alignment of OST and classroom learning is an important talking point in Arkansas. The Arkansas Out-of-School Network developed an online series that focuses

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on applying project-based learning and linking to the state framework for CCSS. Also in regional academies, there is discussion about validating interaction and link to learning.

Dr. Peterson pointed out that “sometimes we start at the wrong place.” He explained that the pathways from K-12 to postsecondary opportunities require experiences that can be reinforced in the “third space” of afterschool. This includes reinforcing the Common Core in reading and math, as well as strengthening a broader set of skills such as science, the arts, and foreign languages. Further, afterschool programs help students and their families learn about colleges and careers and what it takes to be accepted and to be successful.

Is there a difference between “afterschool” and “out-of-school”?

Ms. Wills-Hale explained that in naming her organization, they wanted to be inclusive of the array of positive youth development supports that exist. In this regard, “out-of-school” speaks to the notion that anytime out of the school day is an opportunity to learn – before/after school, summer, camp, etc.

What are examples of successful community education that take afterschool from perception to enrichment?

In Arkansas, the school boards association played a major role by developing facilitation guides and a strategic process around different models, and now they support local OST coalitions. Framing OST around re-imagining the learning space and engaging young people allows a cross-sector conversation within the community.

Dr. Peterson emphasized the role of arts and cultural organizations. For example, in Dallas 13,000 elementary students and 4,000 middle school students go to a summer arts program. Five hundred teachers work with 500 artists and musicians to integrate these fields.