Expanding minds and Opportunities

Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, *Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success.* This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- promote student success and college and career readiness;

- build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;

- foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and

- engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit **www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds.**

About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at www.expandinglearning.org.

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Using Research to Continuously Improve Afterschool Programs: Helping Students to Become 21st Century Lifelong Learners

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The challenges of the 21st century—the explosion of knowledge, the rapid advances in technology, the globalization of the economy, and the need for a creative, adaptable workforce— have profound implications for education. They have put a premium on students' ability to learn continuously, apply their knowledge to new situations, and solve complex problems.

A New Day for Learning (Time, Learning, and Afterschool Task Force, 2007) emphasized that children learn *all day*, not just during normal school hours. To meet the many challenges of the 21st century, the report urged schools and their associated afterschool and summer learning programs to develop comprehensive, integrated learning approaches that value the distinct experiences provided for children by diverse community stakeholders and at different times of the day and year.

Simultaneously, researchers and policymakers are increasing an emphasis on the inclusion of youth development principles within afterschool and summer learning program settings (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). They believe that these programs have the potential to provide students with opportunities to develop the skills, knowledge, resiliency, and self-esteem that will help them succeed in 21st century society (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008; Pittman, 2003).

They also believe that high quality afterschool and summer learning programs, when effectively aligned with learning opportunities provided during the school day and year, can provide an ideal setting to support successful youth development.

This article will lay out a set of research-based principles and practices for developing, implementing, and maintaining high-quality afterschool and summer learning programs that can create productive citizens and lifelong learners of the 21st century.

Indicators of Program Quality

In 2003, prominent afterschool practitioners, political supporters, and research experts gathered at a national Afterschool Summit in Washington and identified five general performance indicators of successful afterschool programs. Such programs promote students'

- **academic achievement** *by fostering enthusiasm for learning;*

- **social attitudes and behaviors** *by emphasizing better school attendance and willingness to take personal responsibility and by providing them with leadership experiences;*

- **skill-building** *by providing activities that are outside of their comfort zones ;*

- **health (physical, mental, emotional)** *by ensuring students' safety and building resiliency ; and*

- **sense of community** *by encouraging family involvement and structuring opportunities for civic engagement (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).*

These indicators of effective afterschool and summer learning programs can be framed under three broad domains: program structure, program implementation, and program content. Table 1 identifies the core indicators of quality under each domain.

Table 1. Quality indicators for afterschool programs.

Program Structure	Program Content	Program Implementation
Goals clearly defined	Connects with school learning	Strong leadership
Program structures aligned with goals	Has a youth development approach	Quality staff
Program mission and vision designed to motivate staff	Relates to 21st century	Clear communication and support to all stakeholders
	Engages students	Positive relationships*
		Built in assessment and continuous improvement loop

*According to the National Partnership of Quality Afterschool Learning Study (Huang, 2010), this is found to be the common core element among quality programs.

Program structure. Afterschool and summer learning programs can powerfully communicate their program goals through clear mission and vision statements. Such statements can also motivate program staff and guide program functioning. A "theory of change" should be clearly specified to spell out what the program wants to achieve (goals and detailed objectives), then link program objectives and student outcomes to indicators of program effectiveness and quality (Anderson, 2004). These strategic procedures require intentional alignment of program activities to each program goal; alignment of goals for learning during the school day, after school, and during the summertime; and alignment of activities that promote students' interests and meet students' specific needs.

Program content. With the program structure secured, afterschool and summer learning leaders must then ensure that students have sufficient access to efficient learning tools, relevant content, and staff who are skilled in instructional content. New 21st-century curricula, including global awareness, financial and civic literacy, and creativity and the arts, can be incorporated within the framework of the new Common Core State Standards. It is also equally important for students to practice "how-to-learn skills," including (1) communication skills, (2) thinking and problem-solving skills, and (3) interpersonal and self-directional skills.

To motivate students to focus, "learning must effectively connect to students' questions, concerns, and personal experiences, thereby capturing their intrinsic motivation and making the value of what they learn readily apparent to them" (Learning First Alliance, 2001, p. 4). Afterschool and summer learning programs should therefore feature a variety of high-quality activities and provide academic content through real world examples, applications, and experiences, both inside and outside of school (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; C. S. Mott Foundation Committee on After-School Research and Practice, 2005; Westmoreland & Little, 2006).

> Effective program implementation starts with strong, knowledgeable leaders who can create a positive organizational climate.

Moreover, when instructional content, staff, and resources reinforce students' positive self-perceptions, there will be a resulting increase in positive social behaviors and academic achievement, along with fewer behavioral problems (Durlak et al., 2010).

Program implementation. Effective program implementation starts with strong, knowledgeable leaders who can create a positive organizational climate. These leaders hire quality staff and keep them updated with relevant knowledge and skills. They also create open communication among afterschool, summer learning, day school, parent, and community stakeholders. This relationship-building among adult stakeholders is critical to program success.

Moreover, the one key element that consistently stands out in research on high-quality afterschool and summer learning programs is the positive relationship between staff and students. This relationship is a key determinant of student engagement in school and often leads to increased student motivation, higher academic competence, and increased valuing of school (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007).

Benefits of Positive Staff-Student Relationships

Afterschool and summer learning programs have a number of distinct advantages over schools that can foster deeper staff-student relationships. In particular, with fewer curricular demands, more time is available in afterschool and summer settings for students and staff to form positive relationships. Furthermore, afterschool and summer learning programs provide students with access to an expanded network of adults and mentors in the community (Rhodes, 2004).

A study of the LA's BEST program reveals some of the key benefits of these deeper relationships with caring adults (Huang et al., 2007). Students perceived their relationships with LA's BEST staff as encouraging, positive, and supportive. In turn, students perceived themselves as behaving well, working hard, and feeling good about the experience of learning in school and at LA's BEST. Students who held positive relationships with afterschool staff were more likely to be actively engaged in the program and, in turn, were more engaged in their school during the day. Similarly, students who felt supported and encouraged by staff were more likely to place a higher value on education and have greater aspirations for their futures.

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Bridging School, Afterschool, Summer Learning, and Communities to Improve Student Impact

According to the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2003), "After school programs need a strong connection to the learning objectives of the school day in order to increase student achievement." This continuity of learning between the school and afterschool and summer learning programs is supported theoretically in the work of Noam, Biancarosa, and Dechausay (2002). They posit that the "bridging" of school and afterschool helps to promote more meaningful academic learning. They find that congruity of environments, including congruity of learning goals and teaching styles, is associated with increased academic performance in literacy and other academic areas. They recommend that program staff communicate with day school teachers about homework and other student needs.

Since family and neighborhood factors are also strong forces in the students' lives, this "connectedness" can be further expanded into students' families and neighborhood communities through family events, internships, and community services. This would help students develop civic awareness, a stronger sense of belonging, and the characteristics of good citizenship. The Harlem Children's Zone project exemplifies the success of such practices (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011).

Being a Role Model for Learning and Improving

Finally, to promote lifelong learning for students, afterschool and summer learning programs can demonstrate that adults are willing to learn and improve as well. Effective programs employ a continuous monitoring system to determine whether they are meeting their program goals and to continuously fine-tune program implementation.

Such evaluations are simple and easy to administer. They generally involve gathering data from students, parents, teachers, school administrators, staff, and volunteers (or a sample thereof); measuring instructional and implementation adherence to program goals; providing feedback to all stakeholders for program improvement; and identifying the needs for additional implementation procedures or resources, such as increased collaboration, staff, or materials. Figure 1 illustrates the continuous nature of program monitoring and evaluation procedures.

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Figure 1. Model of the data-based decision-making process.
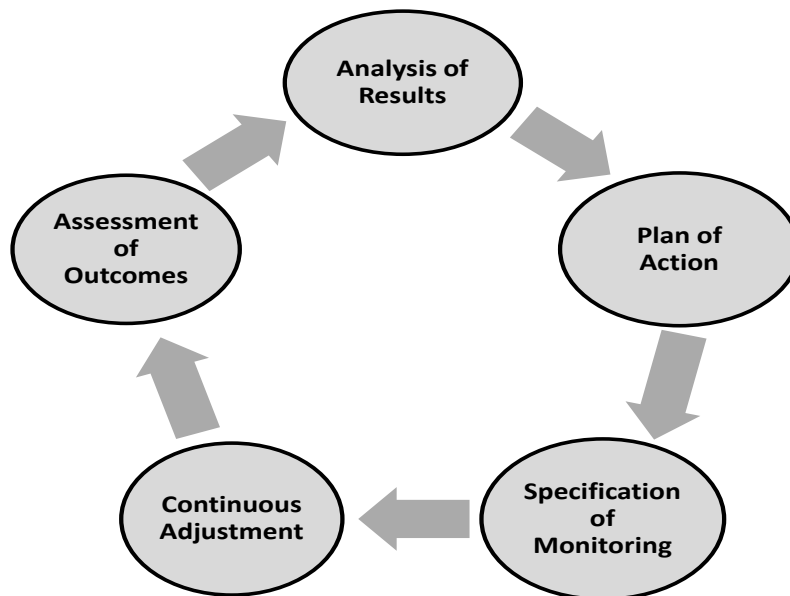
Summary Recommendations for Policies and Sustainability

The following recommendations will help policymakers and afterschool and summer learning program leaders build and sustain high-quality programs.

- **Recruit quality staff and reduce staff turnover.** *Although it seems obvious, recruiting and retaining high-quality staff is essential to afterschool and summer learning program success. In addition to providing equitable salaries, benefits, and career advancement opportunities, policymakers and afterschool program leaders should establish a recognition program to acknowledge the contributions of afterschool staff. Appropriate esteem titles may further help afterschool staff fulfill their intrinsic goals.*

- **Build bridges between school, afterschool, and summer learning programs.** *Programs should include in their goals a specific objective to increase collaboration between school day learning and afterschool and summer learning experiences. Shared professional development between classroom teachers and expanded learning staff may offer opportunities for collaboration. School day, afterschool, and summer learning staff may use such opportunities to align curricula, enhance student engagement, develop common standards for student discipline, and use school data to support curricular decision making. This increased alignment and curricular collaboration, however, should not result by default in the dilution or elimination of hands-on learning and other student engagement, youth development, and relationship-building strategies that are also needed to make afterschool and summer learning programs effective and well attended.*

- **Provide appropriate content, tools, and training.** *To combat the "digital divide" that separates children from low-income families and their more privileged peers, and to prepare students with a broad range of 21st-century skills, appropriate technology and equipment need to be available at the program sites. New 21st-century content, including global awareness as well as financial and civic literacy, also needs to be presented. Meanwhile, staff also need up-to-date training on the delivery of such curricula and the use of the new technologies so that they can fully support students in developing their 21st-century skills.*

- **Establish networking systems.** *The neighborhood community plays a vital role in supporting students' positive development. Afterschool and summer learning programs should be encouraged to recruit and incorporate families, community members, and local services into their programs.*

Conclusion

A nationwide survey of afterschool program staff explored the reasons that they worked in this field. The single most frequent staff response was their desire to make a difference in the students' lives. Because they perceived themselves as having the ability to make a difference, staff felt a high sense of efficacy, demonstrated high expectations for students, and encouraged their students to succeed (Huang, Cho, Mostafavi, & Nam, 2008).

For students coming from disadvantaged environments, having a relationship with adults possessing these personal and professional characteristics is particularly powerful. Not only do staff have the potential to assist students with personal issues, but they also have the power to encourage and instill educational values and high aspirations. The establishment of a strong bond between students and staff directly influences student engagement in afterschool and summer learning programs and also serves as a powerful predictor of student engagement in school. With appropriate administrative and instructional content support, this unique relationship may also serve as the ideal venue for staff to mentor students in developing their 21st-century skills.

When afterschool and summer learning programs provide the context for students to experience these supportive relationships, include engaging up-to-date content, complement and align with but not replicate the school day, and link to families and community, students begin to believe in their own efforts and develop the lifelong learning skills needed to be productive, global citizens of the 21st century.

For More Information

- The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (http://www.p21.org/)

- National Center for Quality Afterschool (http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/)

- The Forum for Youth Investment (http://www.forumfyi.org/)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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