

# Holding California Afterschool Programs Accountable

Written by Sam Piha, Community Network for Youth Development, in Partnership with the California Committee on Afterschool Accountability



## A Statement of the California Committee on Afterschool Accountability

The *California Committee on Afterschool Accountability* is an informal coalition of organizations interested in working toward ensuring that afterschool programs are held accountable for appropriate outcomes. Members include:

**Bay Area Partnership for Children and Youth**

**California School-Age Consortium**

**California Tomorrow**

**Children Now**

**Community Network for Youth Development**

**San Francisco Department of Children, Youth & Families**

**Silver Giving Foundation**

**Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center**

**Youth Service California**



**Summary:** To ensure that the growing number of afterschool programs successfully contributes to the learning and healthy development of California's young people, our state needs to agree on what we can appropriately expect from these programs and on how best to measure their effectiveness. In California, a

key measure being used to judge afterschool programs is standardized test scores. It is becoming increasingly clear that test scores are not the most useful measurement to assess the effectiveness of afterschool programs. In emphasizing the improvement in standardized test scores, we risk masking the effectiveness of these programs and missing the significant contributions they make to young people's learning and development. This paper considers what expectations we can hold for these programs, and considers the consequences of limiting the view of success to the improvement of test scores. It also suggests other measures that could

reliably provide accountability in these programs and that we can use to gauge the overall effectiveness of afterschool programs, ensuring that we capture their contributions to young people's school success and broader development. ■

## Introduction

The number of afterschool programs in this country has grown significantly over the past ten years due to burgeoning demand and strong support from the public as well as policy makers. According to polls, the general public, business leaders, family advocates, educators and law enforcement officers all agree that young people need access to safe havens in the afterschool hours—places that provide the support of caring adults and an enticing menu of productive activities.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of Proposition 49, California investments in afterschool programs are scheduled to dramatically increase to \$550 million dollars a year. To ensure that afterschool programs successfully contribute to young people’s learning and healthy development, we need to agree on what we can appropriately expect from such programs and on how best to measure their effectiveness.

Currently a key measure being used to judge afterschool programs is standardized test scores. For example, California’s state-funded afterschool grantees are required to submit annual scores from mandatory statewide tests that measure literacy and math skills with the expectation that afterschool participants will improve faster than those who do not participate. Many other programs using public and

private funds have followed the state’s lead in relying on test scores to gauge the effectiveness of afterschool programs.

It is becoming increasingly clear that relying on annual standardized test scores as the primary criterion for assessing the effectiveness of

multi-dimensional afterschool programs is limiting our ability to recognize their significant contributions to young people’s learning and development. In fact, when such measures are used, high-quality, innovative programs can even appear ineffective.

This paper considers what expectations we can hold for afterschool programs and considers the consequences of using ineffective measurements. It suggests reliable accountability measures that can be used to gauge the effectiveness of afterschool programs—measures that capture contributions to young people’s school success along with measures of program quality.

## Confusing Afterschool and School Accountability

The rising number of working parents, coupled with voter beliefs that children should have access to safe and productive activities after school, fueled tremendous growth in the funding of California afterschool programs. From 1997 to 2004, state funding of afterschool programs grew from \$3.6 million to \$121 million. This increase came at a time when policy makers also sought to boost the performance of public schools by increasing education funding and introducing new school accountability measures, many of which relied on students’ performance on standardized tests.

Afterschool programs differ from schools in significant ways, and as such face limitations in providing focused direct assistance to students in the areas that are assessed with standardized tests. Afterschool programs are not funded at the level of schools, are not staffed by credentialed teachers, and do not offer hourly wages and benefits paid to school personnel. Instead, they rely on part-time

*“Our city overwhelmingly supports a range of afterschool programs. We know that high quality programs play an important role in young people’s growth and learning through social, physical, artistic, civic and academic development. If we were to put too much emphasis on any one area only, then our city would surely lose out on the full potential these programs have to offer.”*

—City afterschool coordinator,  
large metropolitan area



**Afterschool learning experiences appeal to children with a wide range of abilities and interests, including those who struggle in traditional classrooms.**

scores, to gauge the effectiveness of afterschool programs.<sup>2</sup>

Another important difference is that, unlike school, attendance in afterschool programs is not compulsory; it is fully voluntary. In order to attract and sustain the participation of young people who have already spent six hours in a traditional classroom setting, afterschool programs must distinguish themselves from school. This is especially true for programs serving older youth. Afterschool programs are well equipped to support and complement the learning children do in school, but they should not be expected to look like, or be held accountable for, the same outcomes as our public schools.

Rather than using test scores, we propose using measurements focused on indicators of student achievement that we can reasonably expect afterschool programs to affect.

## **What Advantages Do Afterschool Programs Offer?**

A distinguishing advantage of afterschool programs is their ability to provide valuable learning experiences that appeal to children with a wide range of abilities and interests. Because afterschool programs are not subject to the same demands as schools, they can

workers and volunteers, many without advanced degrees or credentials. Thus, researchers are increasingly advising afterschool programs against using school performance measures, such as test

offer children opportunities to learn new things and in new ways—ways not always offered in school. These programs are able to re-engage and motivate young learners who are struggling in the traditional classroom setting. Below are some of the benefits and advantages that are unique to afterschool programs:

- *Topics of Interest:* Afterschool programs have the flexibility to pursue topic areas that young people find personally interesting and relevant. These topics include the sciences, visual and performing arts, civic engagement and community service, and physical activity—all of which can easily be aligned with school standards. In many communities, the ability of schools to offer these subjects is adversely affected by budget shortfalls and the need to shore up student performance in language arts and mathematics. Publicly-funded afterschool programs ensure that children who cannot afford fee-based enrichment programs have access to these important learning opportunities.
- *Learning in Small Groups:* Afterschool programs have child-to-adult ratios that are lower than most classrooms. Small group settings enable adults to focus on the individual needs of young people, form personal supportive relationships, and engage young people in hands-on, experiential learning.



- *Time to Learn:* Some kinds of learning require more time than can be allowed in a classroom setting, especially in middle school, where youth move from class to class. This learning involves projects that require extra time to plan, to work with in a larger team, to analyze problems and persevere until solutions are found. Some learning requires reflection on important lessons that were gained and the opportunity to share and be recognized for one's accomplishments. This sharing may come in the form of a presentation, a play or a recital, an art exhibition or service project, which may allow children to be acknowledged in ways they never experienced during the school day. Afterschool programs have flexible schedules that can allow young people to immerse themselves in a single program activity for the entire afternoon, if needed. In other cases, young people can participate in projects that build over several weeks or more. These kinds of projects promote important skills such as goal setting, project planning, teamwork, time management, and self-assessment.
- *Beyond Place:* Afterschool programs have the flexibility to go outside, beyond the walls of their facilities, using the surrounding neighborhood as a classroom. They are also able to bring the community into the school, by enlisting the talents and resources

of individuals and surrounding businesses. Connecting to the local community broadens the variety of activities and experiences available to young people, honors the value of their own communities, provides young people with opportunities to contribute to others, and allows community members to see the learning and positive development of their children in action.

- *Active Learning:* The learning environment in afterschool is often less formal than in school. Children are allowed to learn by doing and learn as part of a larger team. This approach is very attractive and motivating to young people who may be struggling in the traditional classroom setting.
- *Parental Access and Involvement:* Because programs extend into the late afternoon and early evening, afterschool staff can often engage young people's family members in ways most schools find difficult. Afterschool programs can serve as a communications bridge between the school and parents, thereby promoting a stronger partnership between them, especially when the afterschool staff live in the same community and share the language and culture of the parents and guardians. Afterschool workers are in a position to use parents as resources to better understand the experiences and needs of participants and to provide input on programming.
- *Diverse Teachers and Resources:* Afterschool programs rely on a wide variety of workers, including certified teachers, paraprofessionals, youth workers, college students, and community members. This flexibility allows afterschool programs to engage a diverse pool of workers that reflects the cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds of the young people in the program. These workers often present ideas, activities and



resources that make education and learning feel relevant and compelling to young people, and thus inspire greater interest and motivation during the school day.

## What Should We Expect of Afterschool Programs and What Can We Use to Measure Their Quality and Effectiveness?

As public investments in afterschool programs have surged, children across the state are spending an increasing number of their discretionary (non-school) hours in these programs and they are returning to them year after year. As a result, these programs are becoming the third most important developmental influence in young people's lives, after home and school.<sup>3</sup> It is important that we hold high expectations for afterschool programs—expectations that are clear, realistic and achievable.

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It is equally important that we select the right measures to assess their success. Our expectations of afterschool programs should align with our knowledge of what young people need in order to succeed and on what these programs are best designed to deliver. Thus, afterschool programs should be expected to support young people's success in school, promote their broader, healthy development, and offer enriching learning opportunities not found in school.

### Support School Success:

In order to be fully prepared for adulthood, it is essential that young people succeed in school. Research has shown that afterschool programs can support young people's educational success in a number of ways, and there are reliable school-related measures outside of test scores to capture the contributions of these programs.<sup>4</sup> One area is homework completion. Many afterschool programs provide homework assistance, and their success can be measured by tracking the successful completion of homework.

When children participate in a positive afterschool learning environment, we can expect to see increases in young people's attendance in the classroom, especially among those with the highest rates of absenteeism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, school attendance can serve as an important measure to gauge the impact of afterschool programs. Another good measure is the program's influence on young people's positive attachment to school itself. This can be reliably captured through youth surveys. Any teacher and school principal will agree that increases in homework completion, school attendance and positive attachment to school are critical contributors to improved academic performance.

While the above contributions are significant, they alone cannot improve young people's performance on standardized test scores. Schools must effectively leverage the increased homework completion, school attendance and school attachment through their classroom activities.



*“Kids who participate in afterschool programs experience the thrill of knowing that when they get to school the next day, their homework is done, and they've got the right answers. They soon find themselves participating more actively in the classroom and sharing what they are learning in school and in the afterschool program. I know this because teachers stop me in the hallway to tell me how the afterschool program has transformed their students.”*

*—Director of multi-site urban afterschool program*

### Offer Quality Developmental Learning Experiences:

We know from research that programs that successfully contribute to young people’s learning and healthy development offer a critical set of supports and opportunities.<sup>6</sup> These supports and opportunities include:

- a physically and emotionally safe environment;
- caring relationships with adults and peers who can provide guidance and support;
- learning activities that are new and challenging;
- responsible decision-making and leadership; and
- increased understanding of, and positive involvement in, their own communities.

In many communities, program leaders are claiming these supports and opportunities as “essential elements of quality programs” and putting them at the center of efforts to improve program quality. They are using them to develop program standards and identify best practices. They make sense to afterschool practitioners because they align with the strengths and resources that providers can bring to this work. They also match with what young people say they want from afterschool programs.

There are now practical observation and survey tools to help program leaders measure the presence of these qualities within their programs. These tools offer relevant, real-time data to inform program improvement efforts in a way that is much more useful than year-end test scores.

### Offer Opportunities Not Found in School:

As school budgets have tightened and the requirements of No Child Left Behind have increased pressure to improve test scores, learning opportunities that come with involvement in the arts, music, drama, community services, media technology and other areas have decreased dramatically. Low-income families that cannot afford fee-based enrichment activities will miss out on opportunities that research has shown to be important in supporting learning and healthy development. Afterschool programs have

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traditionally filled this gap with innovative programming in all of these areas. Their effectiveness in providing young people with these

expanded learning opportunities not found in school can easily be measured.

### Promote Physical Health and Fitness:

Afterschool programs can also play an important role in promoting the physical activity that young people need and raising awareness about fitness. Again, school budgets and emphasis on test scores have sidelined recess and physical education during the school day. Afterschool programs often provide the only opportunities for young people to be active. This is particularly true in low-income, urban communities where many children live in cramped housing quarters and being outdoors raises safety issues. The importance of these programs and activities is doubly underscored when we consider the rising rates of childhood obesity.

*“The exposure to new places and events is wonderful, especially since many of us parents do not have the means by which to offer them those opportunities.”*

*—Parent of elementary afterschool participant*



## Provide a Safe Haven and Fun Activities:

Voters overwhelmingly support the funding of afterschool programs because they offer children safe havens in the afterschool hours when parents are working and unavailable to provide adult supervision. Many would agree that afterschool programs are successful if they are able to attract large numbers of young people, engage them in fun, productive activities, and ensure their safety in the afterschool hours. As described above, however, afterschool programs can do much more.

## When Afterschool Programs Are Held Accountable for the Wrong Things

There are a number of problems that arise when afterschool programs are held accountable for outcomes that do not match their strengths and capacity. Following the truism, “what gets measured gets done,” programs shift their priorities away from what they do well to priorities that are unrealistic given their capacity and resources. When academic test scores are used to judge these programs, program leaders are compelled to narrowly design their activities to mimic the activities of trained teachers. Yet these programs often do not have the resources to pay trained teachers and cannot require that youth attend, unlike schools. Also, aiming at the “test score target” does not encourage programs to offer rich learning opportunities not found during the school day—the very activities that voters and young people expect. Most people agree that these activities should include homework help, tutoring and other supports for school success. However, programs should also be expected to provide real world learning experiences, exposure to the arts, technology, the sciences, and more.

A misplaced focus on test score improvement can also affect who gets served. Some afterschool leaders are reporting that the focus on test scores results in pressure to give priority to students who are most likely to show test score gains or change in their individual quartile placement over those who require more time and academic attention.

Finally, when afterschool programs are assessed using the wrong outcomes, the results are likely to make them appear ineffectual, raising the possibility of funding cuts, while the positive benefits these programs provide to families and their children go unmeasured and undervalued.

## The Expectations of the Voting Public

While not all families have the same needs for afterschool programs, the vast majority believes that all families and youth should have access to them. What should these programs look like? If afterschool programs fail to raise test scores, will their funding be threatened? This idea seems to contradict the reason the voting public overwhelmingly supports spending on afterschool programs.

According to the 2003 National Voters Poll, the public believes that afterschool programs should maintain a focus on young people’s broader development by offering “hands-on learning opportunities, recreation, community service, and creative activities that inspire them to learn and grow.” While most agree that afterschool programs should offer help with schoolwork, the



majority believes that help with school is only one way in which programs should contribute to young people's growth and progress.<sup>9</sup>

In reference to the use of school accountability measures being applied to afterschool programs, the 2003 National Voters Poll report wrote: "Voters do not want to see afterschool programs become an extension of the school day and do not believe that improving test scores should be the primary goal of the afterschool programs."<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Afterschool programs are a unique institution. They provide young people with the kinds of learning experiences and opportunities that may not be offered to children in their homes or classrooms. They offer young people opportunities to learn new things and develop important skills that are crucial to success in school and in life. They can engage all children, across ages and abilities, regardless of their learning styles and past history of success in the classroom. And they do all of this in the hours "between the school bell and the dinner bell", transforming a time that parents, educators and law enforcement describe as "high risk" to one of learning and opportunity for young people.

Our expectations of afterschool programs, and the outcomes and measures we use to assess their contribution to young people's lives should reflect the unique learning opportunities they can offer. Further, they should be realistic, taking into account the amount of time, the resources and the kinds of workers involved in afterschool programs. As our state's investment in afterschool programs grows, we need to collectively agree on what we expect of these programs and the measures we will use to gauge their success. ■

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## Endnotes

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