

**The Cross-Cities  
Network  
for Leaders  
of Citywide  
After-School  
Initiatives**

The Cross-Cities Network is composed of 25 leaders of citywide after-school initiatives in major cities across the United States.

The Network brings leaders together on a regular basis to explore common issues, improve citywide initiatives, and build the field. The project is staffed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and funded in part by the C. S. Mott Foundation.

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# Getting the Most From Afterschool: The Role of Afterschool Programs in a High-Stakes Learning Environment

## A Statement of the Cross-Cities Network of Leaders of Citywide Afterschool Initiatives

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### Summary

Increasing interest in afterschool programs as a strategy for building academic success has brought a great deal of attention and support to the field, but also created conditions that can limit programs from meeting their true potential to develop the skills, attitudes, and engagement of young people over the long term. In this statement, the Cross-Cities Network of Leaders of Citywide Afterschool Initiatives discuss their vision of the field, its unique contributions, and appropriate accountability approaches. The statement concludes with a series of recommendations.

### Introduction

Over the past five years, we have witnessed overwhelming public support for afterschool programs. This support has been fueled by public belief that young people should have safe places to be in the out-of-school hours—places that provide the supervision of caring adults and productive activities that can promote young people's success in school and in other parts of their lives.

The growth of the afterschool movement has achieved a scale few people could have imagined five years ago. In many parts of the country, we are seeing young people spending as many as 15 hours a week in these programs, often returning to the same program over several years. Given the depth and breadth of participation, it is critical that afterschool programs provide diverse learning experiences that help children and youth to develop a broad range of skills. We believe that programs should offer engaging learning opportunities that can attract and sustain the positive participation of all children, including those who may not be achieving to their potential in the classroom. We believe that limiting afterschool programs to traditional instructional strategies can reduce the unique contributions that our programs can make to young people's learning and positive development. Finally, we believe that accountability and evaluation systems designed for afterschool programs should reflect this broad reach by including process features that promote effective programs, and youth outcomes that encompass both academic and non-academic domains.

## Promoting Success in School

The research is clear: if young people are to succeed as adults, they must succeed in school. As a result, many afterschool programs position themselves as partners with families and teachers by providing direct support to young people's academic studies. These efforts include homework assistance, academic tutoring, and mentoring, as well as enrichment activities linked to school standards. Many parents and guardians especially those who are non-English speaking or have had limited formal education, rely on afterschool programs to offer assistance that they may themselves not feel qualified to provide.

Afterschool programs can increase young people's engagement in school learning through activities directly linked to school goals as well as through the promotion of a broad range of skills that children and adolescents need in order to succeed. They also support classroom learning by providing participants with opportunities to practice skills they have learned in the classroom and apply them in real-life situations, increasing their motivation through experiential learning, and building positive expectations for the future by exposing them to places, people, and ideas beyond their usual experience. As a number of studies have documented, these program strategies can increase participant's positive attachment to school and school attendance.

## Promoting Success in Life

According to a two-year study by the National Research Council (NRC), young people must acquire personal and social assets in multiple domains if they are to succeed in later years. Schools focus their efforts on building skills in the intellectual domain. Afterschool programs have a role to play in supporting these efforts, and ensuring that children have skills in problem-solving, analysis, and other higher-order skills as well as math and English literacy skills. However, afterschool programs should not limit themselves

solely to promoting the intellectual development of their participants. The NRC report cites three other areas that are also critical to healthy development—social, emotional, and physical domains. Who will young people rely on to promote the learning of skills in these areas? According to the NRC report, skills must be promoted across settings and across time: in classrooms, schools, afterschool programs, and the community.

The NRC report goes on to identify critical features of settings that appear to successfully promote positive development in children. They also state that the *absence* of these features can actually impede young people's development. Features include:

- **Physical and Emotional Safety:** Safe facilities, safe peer group interactions
- **Supportive Relationships:** Relationships providing warmth, guidance and support
- **Opportunities to Belong:** Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, acceptance and support for cultural competence
- **Support for Efficacy and Matter:** Practices that promote youth empowerment, autonomy, responsibility and meaningful challenge
- **Opportunities for Skill Building:** Exposure to intentional learning experiences and to learn physical, emotional, cultural, intellectual, and social skills.

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We concur that afterschool settings are crucial developmental settings for young people, and believe this framework can serve as a guidepost in designing and assessing the quality of afterschool settings. Afterschool programs are well positioned to embody all of the features highlighted in the report. As we develop accountability measures for programs, it is important that we incorporate them into our

expectations of after-school.

### Uniquely Positioned to Offer More

One of the products of the high stakes testing environment within our public schools is the decreased flexibility of schools and teachers to focus on the development of broader social and personal skills of the kind described in the National Research Council report. A distinguishing asset of afterschool programs is their flexibility to focus on the entire breadth of developmental needs of young people. In this way, afterschool programs are uniquely positioned to promote the development of skills in multiple domains. By doing so, afterschool programs support the high hopes that both family members and educators hold for our youth. The following is a description of some of the areas in which afterschool programs can leverage their program flexibility on behalf of the children and youth:

A distinguishing asset of afterschool programs is their flexibility to focus on the entire breadth of developmental needs of young people.

- **Numbers:** 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, the development of supportive relationships with young people, and the ability to engage young people more deeply through active, experiential learning.
- **Time:** Time is on the side of afterschool programs. As children return year after year, program staff can develop strong, supportive bonds with young people. Program schedules are often flexible allowing leaders to engage children in activities that require longer sessions. For instance, children may be engaged in a ninety-minute activity devoted to a single science experiment or an afternoon field trip to a museum exhibit that is linked to classroom studies. Flexibility also allows for projects that build over several weeks. These projects can promote a broad set of important skills that encompass project planning, implementation, self-reflection, and assessment. Opportunities to participate in

community research and service projects, conduct hands-on exploration of the sciences, and demonstrate newly acquired competencies to others through performances and exhibitions are just some of the gifts afforded by flexible time.

- **Topic Areas:** Afterschool programs have the flexibility to pursue topic areas that align with the school day and that young people deem personally interesting and relevant. Promoting topics of interest serves to attract and sustain the participation of young people who might otherwise be reluctant to attend a program. Programs in low-income communities can offer young people exposure to rich learning experiences involving music, the sciences, arts, theater arts, leadership development, and sports that are much less accessible to youth in these neighborhoods. Substantial research documents the importance of such extracurricular experiences to young people's school and life success.
- **Place:** Afterschool programs have the flexibility to go beyond the walls of their facilities, transforming the surrounding neighborhood into a classroom. Community connections serve to strengthen programs by increasing the variety of activities and experiences available to youth, introducing youth to community resources in the form of organizations and individuals, and just as important, demonstrating to the community that the youth are important resources.
- **Diverse Teachers and Resources:** Afterschool programs rely on a wide variety of sources of staff, including certified teachers, paraprofessionals, college students, and community members. This flexibility translates into access to a diverse pool of adults and young adults who can serve as teachers and role models

within the program. Research tells us that staff who reflect the cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds of young people can play an important role in building a positive identity for youth, a key component of adult success. Programs with diverse staff members are more likely to be culturally competent across a broad range of measures, including the connections they build with parents, activities they provide to young people, and role they play in promoting youth contributions to the larger community.

- **Parental Access and Involvement:** Because programs extend into the late afternoon or early evening, afterschool staff often can engage the family members of young participants in ways that schools may find difficult. Afterschool programs can serve as a communications bridge between the school and parents, thereby promoting a stronger partnership between them, especially when staff share the language and culture of parents and guardians. Programs that communicate their positive experiences with young people to parents find that they are able to build strong connections with families, whether through daily check-ins during pickup time, at program performances, celebrations, and presentations, or via telephone calls or visits. Effective programs look to parents as resources to help them understand the experiences and needs of participating youth, enrich the activities and opportunities offered in the program, and share together in supporting young people's successes and helping them with challenges.

### **Afterschool and Outcomes**

We believe that if afterschool programs are to achieve their potential in improving the lives of young people, it is vital that they align their expectations with children's developmental needs and the unique strengths afterschool programs offer. Further, it is vital that we agree on the appropriate measures to judge program success and provide programs with the necessary resources to build their capacity to achieve these expectations over time.

In some cases, afterschool programs are being positioned as the key to improving the performance

measures that we use to judge school effectiveness. Afterschool investments are not a substitute for resources needed to promote high academic performance such as well-qualified teachers, small class size, differentiated instruction, ongoing professional trainings, and so on. By expecting afterschool programs to narrowly focus on only school work, we stand to lose the wide range of benefits that afterschool programs can bring to all children, including those who are not succeeding in school.

Afterschool programs can and should be held to high expectations. The level of public investments in programs, the amount of time that children spend in afterschool settings and young people's need for support warrants strong accountability measures. Programs should be expected to form meaningful partnerships with parents and schools to support young people's school success. They can do this most effectively by promoting the development of a broad range of skills and embodying the critical program features that the research tells us supports children's success.

## **Recommendations**

### **For Afterschool Advocates: Build Awareness**

Educate lawmakers, funders, parents and the general public on the broad-based skills which research tells us young people need to succeed in life, and the unique role of afterschool programs in promoting these skills. When making a case for afterschool programs, emphasize the comprehensive support that afterschool provides young people. When preparing data on the progress of afterschool participants, do not showcase only school-related outcomes. To highlight academic outcomes in isolation reinforces a perception that afterschool should simply be "more school."

### **For Program Designers and Developers: Rely on Research**

When designing afterschool programs with

stakeholders, draw from the research on what young people need to succeed and the critical features of settings that promote effective learning and positive youth development. These critical features define the difference between high quality and low quality afterschool programs. Do not forget the existing research or the research you can conduct on your own regarding what young people want from afterschool programs.

### **For Program Designers and Developers: Measuring Quality and Outcomes**

Appropriate accountability systems should be in place for all afterschool programs, whatever their focus. Agree upon and implement assessment tools that measure the critical features of program quality. Such tools should include ways to capture the participant's experience of the program beyond traditional satisfaction surveys. Ensure that programs receive adequate support (training, time to reflect on their practice, ways to retain good staff, etc.) to improve the quality and effectiveness of their programs.

Agree upon desired program outcomes and utilize measurement tools that capture progress in achieving these outcomes. When considering school-related outcomes, consider first those that are most directly related to the program's activities. For instance, if afterschool programs offer homework help, an increased rate of homework completion and teacher perception of increased engagement in class work related to the homework content are more direct and attributable to homework help than the more distant outcomes of increased grades or test scores.

### **For Policymakers and Program Administrators: Promote Quality and Eliminate Barriers**

Ensure that appropriate accountability systems are in place for all afterschool programs, whatever their focus. The time and resources needed to fulfill accountability requirements must be balanced against the need for these resources to be deployed for direct programming and capacity building. Where appropriate, programs may be held accountable for

program-level quality outcomes rather than youth-level outcomes (e.g., "provide project-based learning activities" rather than "improve planning and teamwork skills"). Identify and improve those policies and administrative guidelines that may be barriers to program effectiveness and outcomes.

### **For Researchers and Program Evaluators: Support Appropriate Program Outcomes and Tools to Measure Quality**

Academic progress can be one measure of success, but it should not be the only measure of success for an afterschool program. Outcome measures should be closely aligned with the mission, goals, and activities of the afterschool program. Outcome measures should be closely aligned with the needs and ages of the young people participating in the afterschool program and should be as proximate as possible to the actual curriculum provided.

Further research should be conducted into "intermediary outcomes" tied to school success, especially those linked to engagement in learning. Youth development and educational success are closely linked—we need to be able to define and clarify those connections.

### **For All Afterschool Stakeholders: Engage Youth Voice**

There is no better way to assess the degree to which programs are meeting the needs of young people than asking the young program participants and engaging the voice of young people in decisions that affect their after school experiences. Engaging youth voice increases a program's capacity to attract and retain the participation of children and youth and to develop program opportunities that participants will find meaningful. Young people can participate on program planning committees, can solicit ideas from their peers, and participate in evaluating the quality of the program and activities. In addition to contributing to the organization, these opportunities allow young people to practice citizenship skills and to engage in positive youth-adult partnerships.

## Resources helpful in developing this statement:

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