ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME EVALUATION
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MOVING BEYOND THE BARRIERS

Attracting and Sustaining Youth Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs

Harvard Family Research Project's (HFRP) Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation *briefs highlight current research and evaluation work in the out-of-school time field. These documents draw on HFRP's research work in out-of-school time in order to provide practitioners, funders, evaluators, and policymakers with information to help them in their work. This latest brief culls information from several implementation and impact evaluations to develop a set of promising strategies to attract and sustain youth participation in OST programs.*

When youth participate in high quality school- or community-based out-of-school time (OST) programs, they are likely to benefit in a myriad of ways: They receive personal attention from caring adults, explore new interests, receive academic support, develop a sense of belonging to a group, develop new friendships with their peers, take on challenging leadership roles, and build a sense of self-esteem independent of their academic talent.[1] Youth's constructive use of their out-of-school time is a protective factor that has been associated with: (1) academic achievement (higher grades and grade point average), recovery from low academic performance, and an interest in furthering their education; (2) a stronger self-image; (3) positive social development; (4) reductions in risk-taking behavior; and (5) better school behavior and fewer absences.[2]

There is correlational evidence to suggest that children who attend OST programs more frequently demonstrate greater benefits from them as a result.[3] Higher levels of attendance in OST programs have been significantly correlated to scholastic achievement, higher school attendance, more time spent on homework and on positive extracurricular activities, enjoyment and effort in school, and better teacher reports of student behavior.[4]

The potential benefits of OST programs cannot be achieved if youth do not attend. Unfortunately, low attendance is the norm in many OST programs for middle and high school youth due to busy schedules and family lives, claims of boredom, or the desire for freedom. Participation dwindles during the critical transition from elementary to middle school, when youth continue to need caring adult role models and interesting out-of-school activities, and several of the program evaluations reviewed for this brief cited a need for more active recruitment and regular attendance.[5] As a result of this trend, Hollister asserts that "a major contribution that can be made through evaluation studies *not* aimed at measuring the impact on long-term outcomes is to isolate better strategies for boosting and sustaining participation during this transition [from elementary to middle school] and continuing into the middle school years."[6]

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This *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation* brief culls important information from several implementation and impact evaluations to develop a set of promising strategies to attract and sustain youth participation in OST programs. It begins with an examination of the typical levels of participation in many programs and the reasons youth give for staying or leaving these programs. Next, it describes common incentives and barriers to participation. Finally, the brief proposes a set of promising strategies for attracting and sustaining participation in OST programs.

A Note on Our Sample and Methodology for Review

This analysis involved a thorough review of the OST evaluation literature as well as structured phone interviews with the directors of two project-oriented, academically based after school programs.[7] Evaluation research available in our Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database[8] was reviewed to offer information on youth recruitment and sustainability in OST programs. Of the 64 evaluation summaries available in the database at the time of writing this brief, more than half of the studies reported at least some information or analysis of participation in OST programs. See the appendix for a listing of the evaluations included in the review.

Youth Participation in OST Programs Is Lower Than Expected

One of the most important findings in recent program evaluations is the low youth utilization of OST programs.[9] If participants vote with their feet, then most of these programs are not appealing enough to keep them coming back. The evaluation of the national 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program revealed that youth's average participation was 1.9 days a week for elementary students and 0.9 days a week for middle school students.[10] At the San Francisco Beacons Initiative (SFBI) youth participated, on average, between 1 and 2 days a week.[11] The weekly attendance of participants in the various programs involved in the Extended-Service Schools Initiative (ESS) averaged between 1.2 and 2.4 days, depending on the age of the child.[12] Similar levels of participation have been observed in several other programs, including the After School Education and Safety Program (formerly the After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program) and the Maryland After School Community Grant Program (MASCGP).[13] Assuming that a typical program operates about 2.5 hours each afternoon, the average participating middle school student in the 21st CCLC program received only 32 days, or about 80 additional hours of enriching activity during the school year.[14]

An analysis of the more than 40 evaluations reviewed for this report shows that youth participation is measured in various ways. It is not an easy task to make direct comparisons among different measurements. In a review of 82 evaluations of OST programs, Simpkins found that the most common method of describing program participation is through a simple number count of youth who ever participated or did not participate during an academic semester or year.[15] This method can be insufficient for stakeholders who wish to know how often youth participate, how many years they participate, and in which types of activities they participate.

Participation rates are also affected by program goals. Some programs prefer to keep the doors open to as many youth as possible, especially youth who are most vulnerable. Other programs may prefer to serve a consistent group of youth as frequently as possible, in the hope that it will maximize the positive impacts. Despite these disparate objectives, many of the program evaluation reports do not specifically state their participation goals and the means used to achieve them.

Incentives and Barriers to Participation in OST Programs

Youth report that they participate in OST programs to: have fun with friends; learn new skills in sports, arts, community service, and recreational activities; be around caring adult role models; and feel safe.[16] In fact, almost 40% of elementary and middle school youth become involved in some type of peer-centered organized activity, whether it be a club, lessons, or an after school program.[17]

The most common incentives and barriers to participation in OST programs are listed in the table on page 3. As the table reflects, the most common barriers to recruitment and retention cited include: a student's desire to relax and "hang out" with friends, work, family responsibilities, boredom or disinterest, and transportation/safety. Each of these barriers is described below.

A desire to relax and hang out with friends after school. In the national evaluation of the 21st CCLC programs, 65% of nonparticipants stated that they preferred to hang out after school. The school day has become more demanding for students as districts, states, and the federal government have raised achievement standards and made schools accountable to meet those standards. For other students, simply leaving school grounds helps them to unwind. For this reason, OST partnerships between schools and community-based organizations and flexible "drop-in" programs may interest youth who need the break from school.[18] Walker and Arbreton and others stress the importance of social relationships and providing time and space for youth to hang out during the nonschool hours.[19]

Work. Approximately 40% of 16 and 17 year olds work during the school year, and one-quarter of these work 20 or more hours a week.[20] Youth in low-income households are slightly less likely to work than their more advantaged peers—between 31% and 35% are employed. In general, a reasonable amount of paid work does not seem to negatively affect teens' school-related outcomes, but will reduce the time they have to spend on other activities. However, teen employment is a reality for many low-income families who rely on that income. OST programs for older teens (Quantum Opportunities

Program, the Children's Aid Society Carrera-Model Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program [CASCM], and Upward Bound) have consistently cited teens' employment as a significant factor affecting both their attendance levels and their decisions to drop out of programs.[21] Programs that can provide some work experience or compensation for work in the program may be able to attract low-income teens who would like to benefit from participation in an OST program, but need to contribute to their family's income.

Family responsibilities. In several of the program evaluations we reviewed, at least 20% of nonparticipating youth indicated that family responsibilities, such as chores or caring for siblings, interfered with their participation in OST programs. Each of these activities demands more of a youth's time as he or she reaches adolescence.[22] When the parents in disadvantaged families work, adolescents can end up having to take care of their younger siblings during the after school hours. In some evaluations of welfare-to-work programs, the only group of adolescents who experienced gains in participation in formal after school activities were those *without* younger siblings. This indicates that when parents get paid employment, many adolescents can no longer participate in after school programs because they need to take care of their younger siblings.[23]

Boredom or disinterest. Many youth "try out" OST programs, but become bored with them. Weisman and Gottfredson's evaluation of 14 different after school programs involved in MASCGP demonstrated that one-third of the registered participants withdrew because they found the programs boring.[24] Evidence from the evaluation of the national 21st CCLC program supports this, with 25% of the after school participants dropping out after two months.[25] Teens can be especially difficult to engage in activities; in one study of several Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), a significant proportion of teens stated that a lack of interesting activities kept them

COMMON BARRIERS TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PARTICIPATION AND POSSIBLE INCENTIVES TO COUNTERACT THEM

Barriers	Incentives
Desire to relax and "hang out" with friends after school	• Provide both space and time at the center for recreation, snacks, and talking with friends • Offer field trips earned from attendance • Situate the program in a community center for students who need a "change of scenery" after school
Desire or need to work	• Provide structured employment preparation, résumé writing, and volunteer or paid work experience for high school students
Family responsibilities	• Offer a 2/3/5 program enrollment schedule* • Remind families of homework assistance and opportunities for students to learn new skills • Accept younger siblings of participants
Boredom or disinterest	• Conduct an assessment of both participants and nonparticipants' activity interests • Engage participants with a rich variety of experiences, activities, and opportunities to develop new relationships with peers and adults • Allow students some choice of activities on a daily basis • Staff the program with charismatic adults who want to engage young people • Offer older students leadership opportunities
Transportation/Safety	• Target children and youth who live close by and can participate most easily • Organize "buddy systems" of walkers • Pay responsible high school students to accompany groups of younger students home

* A 2/3/5 program allows students to enroll in the program 2, 3, or 5 days per week, offering both staff and students consistency and routine as well as some flexibility.

from participating more often.[26] This phenomenon is all too common, with most programs experiencing attrition of 20% to 40% of their registered students early in the program year.[27]

Transportation/Safety. Across programs, transportation and safety are barriers to student participation.[28] In addition to other competing demands, roughly one-fifth of nonparticipants cite transportation problems as a reason not to attend OST programs.[29] Programs struggle to provide safe transportation for students due to the additional costs.[30] Many parents do not feel that their children can travel safely to and from their OST programs unless they are provided transportation. Programs that find ways to provide transportation, whether by bus or by "buddy systems" of student walkers, discover it is worth the extra effort. These programs often cite safe forms of transportation as essential to their success as well as to their high attendance rates.[31]

Recruiting and Retaining Youth in OST Programs

Student recruitment is best viewed as a process driven by "visibility, accessibility, and appeal."[32] Advertising through flyers, signs, and announcements on a school's public address system or on the radio are the most common recruitment strategies used by OST programs nationwide.[33] In several programs, OST staff members participate in back-to-school nights or other open house events. Many students and families find out about programs by word of mouth, whether by happenstance or because the participants recruit new members. These recruitment methods are most useful for reaching less needy children and families, who are more assertive and interested in school or other activities.[34] Yet several of the program evaluations cite a need to reach even more youth, particularly those at high risk. In this case program directors can ask principals, teachers, and other student support staff to refer students to the program.

Sometimes these recruitment strategies do not work as effectively as program directors would like. Some parents never even hear about the program. Providing middle and high school students with flyers about OST programs does not guarantee that their parents will see them. Given their possible safety concerns or distrust of the school system, parents in inner-city neighborhoods may want to isolate their children from the school or community, including its OST programs.[35] Some parents are not English literate and cannot read program flyers. Finally, some parents in low-income neighborhoods are so preoccupied with meeting their basic needs that there is little time left to help their children structure their nonschool hours in positive ways. Our review revealed 10 promising strategies that OST programs have used to successfully recruit youth and maintain participation in OST programs, including participation by youth most in need of OST support.

Strategy 1: Help Youth Understand the Value of Participation

Establishing a connection between frequent participation and a "brighter future" is a critical first step to recruiting and engaging youth in OST programs.[36] Specifically, programs should make connections between participation in the program and possible program outcomes, such as better educational and employment opportunities. For example, three-quarters or more of the teens involved in BGCA in Boston and New York City reported that their grades improved and that they received assistance with college applications and help learning how to find and obtain a job while participating in the after school program.[37]

The field is rapidly responding to teens' lack of interest of after school programs. The directors of the After School Matters (ASM) program in Chicago learned that teens desire opportunities to learn marketable skills, learn about careers, and contribute to the community and, with that knowledge, they designed a program to meet those needs. Based originally on an after school arts program, they reinvented teen after school programs through a citywide venture that provides teens, ages 14 and older, with an apprenticeship with a working professional in one of four careers (arts, sports, technology, or communications). The apprenticeships include a stipend for participation. Teens also have the option to participate in a choice of "club activities," such as sports and fitness, a book club, and martial arts. Teens participate three afternoons a week for three hours. While there has been no formal evaluation of the initiative since it began in 2000, it now involves 20,000 teens.[38] The program uses a creative marketing strategy—a colorful, hands-on, and engaging website where teens can learn more about the program and their choices and can complete an online application for the apprenticeship.[39]

Giving teens real choices is likely to be one of the strongest selling points for a program. The Community Network for Youth Development in San Francisco finds that youth feel more involved in a program when they can participate in the planning of activities or have a choice of interesting "real world" activities in which to participate.[40]

Strategy 2: Show Families the Opportunities Associated With Participation

A recent national survey of 30,000 families by the Afterschool Alliance found that parents make their decisions about after school program enrollments based on cost, convenience, and their child's enjoyment of a pro-

gram.[41] In several evaluations of elementary and middle school programs, children and youth indicated that they attend an after school program because their parents want them to attend.[42] While the demand for after school programs often exceeds the supply, programs still need to make a strong case to parents of the benefits of children's regular involvement.[43] The potential benefits of such programs—such as homework help and tutoring, socialization and forming new friendships, involvement in physical fitness activities, exposure to the arts, and associations with positive peers and caring adults—foster a child's positive development. In many urban communities, the only place where children have exposure to the arts and a chance to be physically active are in after school programs.

Strategy 3: Reach out Directly to Youth and Their Families in Their Homes and Communities

Phone calls and visiting youth and their families in their homes or communities are effective means of increasing local interest in OST programs. SFBI staff report that both word-of-mouth and one-on-one conversations are the best forms of program advertising. Several of the sites involved in the ESS evaluation used recruitment strategies that were intended to be less stigmatizing to students than referrals. For example, they visited public housing complexes to introduce themselves to youth and parents.[44] Other program staff members reached out to students in the halls, before and after school on school grounds, and in the school lunchrooms to raise interest in the program.[45] Other programs offer picnics or pizza parties at the beginning of the year for interested students.

McLaughlin observed that youth participants in OST programs are often the most effective recruiters or ambassadors and can take on new leadership responsibilities through this role. She observes that many youth shun OST programs because they believe that the activities will not interest them, that they will be treated like children, or that programs are places for troubled youth and students who are not doing well in school.[46] If the lack of program participation is due to youth's misperceptions, then current program participants may offer an honest account of program activities and what is to be expected.

Street outreach has been reported as particularly effective for higher-risk teens and some programs hire an outreach worker specifically for this task. Successfully reaching out to teens means finding out where their typical after school hangouts are and connecting with them there. Program staff need to relate well to teens and to collaborate with parents, other agencies, and schools to recruit and serve higher-risk youth. Moreover, Herrera and Arbreton recommend also finding out whether teens are really interested in participating and want to make positive life choices through their involvement.[47]

Effective outreach also means finding methods to retain students for long periods of time. Programs involved in the BCGA teen programs in New York City made improvements to their program by offering an orientation for new participants, many of whom are nervous about participating for the first time in a new program with older teens. BCGA programs increase retention by helping new enrollees to feel comfortable in their new environment by establishing relationships with the program's staff. Staff checked in with these new participants regularly, checked on them when their attendance waned, and conducted outreach to find out why they were no longer interested when they left the program.[48]

Strategy 4: Match the Program's Attendance Goals to Participant Needs

A critical challenge for most OST programs is to determine appropriate goals for student participation—whether it is flexible or mandatory. Program practitioners must be realistic about the commitment most students can make to an OST program. Several of the program evaluations suggest that five-day-a-week registrations may work if the expectations are clear and attendance is enforced. However, they appear to work best for elementary students. For example, one mandatory-five-day elementary program in the ESS evaluation had a strong academic emphasis and high expectations for attendance. It was able to maintain an average attendance rate of 72%.[49]

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While many programs do not enforce participation, those that do seem to increase youth's daily attendance. The After-School Corporation (TASC) strongly encourages regular, daily participation, based on the assumption that high levels of participation are necessary to support youth's academic and developmental achievements. TASC reports that by its third year of operation (2000–2001), the average daily attendance rates were 78% for elementary students and 57% for middle school students, which is much higher than many after school programs.[50] At one of the SFBI centers the voluntary after school program was instituted as an "eighth period" and the middle school students attended at high rates (greater than 90%). An investigation into this high attendance showed that students believed

NO TIME FOR GIRL SCOUTS AND BOY SCOUTS?

Community-based organizations may be an excellent resource for the promotion of a set of unique and important skills otherwise not offered by more traditional after school programs. However, elementary student participants in 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs were significantly less likely to participate in Girl and Boy Scouts or Boys & Girls Clubs than their peers in the comparison group.[1] Thus, some OST programs may "supplant, rather than supplement" other opportunities that are possibly more stable in lower-income communities.[2]

The mission of these community-based organizations is to offer youth experiences in citizenship, leadership, and character development. While schools are recognized for the academic assistance, libraries, and technology they can provide, community-based organizations may offer greater access to summer adventure programs, service-learning activities, or other unique skill-based activities. At community-based organizations youth can separate from their school identity and feel free to explore other interests and talents. In many communities, organizations such as Boy or Girl Scouts or 4-H may be interested in partnering with public schools to provide their programs within the existing after school daily program so that youth still have the option to participate in these organizations. Walker and Arbreton suggest that children and youth may be best served by a "mix of school- and community-based after school location options" to draw in the largest population of youth.[3]

[1] U.S. Department of Education. (2003). *When schools stay open late: The national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program*. Washington, DC: Author. Available at www.ed.gov/pubs/21cent/firstyear/index.html.

[2] Zief, S., Lauver, S., & Maynard, R. M. (2004). *Impacts of after-school programs on student outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials for the Campbell Collaboration* (p. 18). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

[3] Walker, K. E., & Arbreton, A. J. A. (with the Stanford University School of Education Research Team). (2004). *After-school pursuits: An examination of outcomes in the San Francisco Beacon Initiative* (p. 55). San Francisco: Public/Private Ventures. Available at www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/168_publication.pdf (Acrobat file).

that the program was mandatory.[51]

While mandatory-five-day-a-week programs may increase the overall number of days a youth attends, it may inadvertently restrict the number of participants who are interested in attending at all.[52] Youth most in need of the programs may not be able to participate five days a week if they need to work, take care of younger siblings, or are already participating in another activity. When the schedule is fixed, youth need to understand the expectations for their attendance in an OST program. In the context of second-chance programs, Wright maintains that "attendance and retention rates are high when there is a strong culture that places high importance on being present each day."[53] Other programs reduce program attrition by asking participants to attend an orientation session where they make the decision whether they can commit to the program.[54]

It is especially important for programs reaching out to older youth (ages 11–18) to carefully consider the various schedules available. Greater numbers of older youth in underserved communities may participate only when they are offered a flexible schedule and can sign up for particular days or times or can drop in for certain activities. Programs such as TASC have responded to teens' desire for flexibility; they allow them to just "check in" with the after school program on the days when they are participating in a TASC-approved internship.[55] A choice of various activities, organized into 8-week blocks, may also increase youth's participation because it allows them to participate on a periodic basis. Thus, they have the time for other endeavors, such as sports or a church youth group. Other programs, including the Beacons Initiative and BGCA, extend center hours to late evenings.[56] Some providers also avoid activities during certain times of year, such as the December holidays or the end of the school year, when participation plummets.[57] Others suggest a 2/3/5 schedule, where participants can choose their level of involvement: 2 days a week (Tuesday and Thursday), 3 days a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday), or the entire school week.

Drop-in programs, where there are no expectations or commitments, are often blamed for low participation levels in OST programs. However, Halpern argues that children and youth "need times and places in their lives where the adult agenda is modest, if not held at bay."[58] Drop-in programs or rolling admission policies (which mean there are no fixed start and end dates) are two additional options for increasing youth interest in OST programs. ESS has found rolling admission to be a successful method for recruiting at-risk families.[59] Both rolling admissions and drop-in programs may also prevent a program from unwittingly "creaming" more motivated or advantaged youth off the top of the potential pool to join the program. BGCA provides both drop-in rec-

reation centers and structured prevention and educational programs to attract youth.[60]

Drop-in programs that offer a choice of several activities are popular and have higher participation rates, on average, than other kinds of programs.[61] Beacon Centers in New York City also offer some drop-in style programs beginning at the middle school level.[62] However, drop-in programs may not be able to offer participants a high-intensity environment with hands-on, experiential learning, and certainly cannot offer youth the chance to learn about responsibility to a group that works together regularly. Yet offering a more modest and very flexible schedule may appeal to some youth who have busy schedules or who would otherwise not participate at all.

In conclusion, programs may need to consider multiple factors, such as program goals and youth's level of need, age, and interest when setting programmatic attendance goals. As youth grow older, they need increasing flexibility in participation requirements. Certainly, youth should be asked to register for and make a commitment to OST activities that require a skilled instructor or facilitator and expensive equipment. If participants must register for these activities, limited program funds will not be wasted and instructors can properly prepare for their activities.

Strategy 5: Consider At-Risk Youth in Recruitment Efforts

At-risk youth are those with a higher likelihood of school failure, who live in socially disorganized communities or have troubled family lives, who use drugs or alcohol or who have peer drug models, and who have higher levels of school absences.[63] Certainly, the youth most in need of OST programs may not be "joiners" and may have had a negative experience at school.[64] It is the youth considered most at risk who are least likely to sign up for OST programs and are significantly more likely than others to drop out of programs.[65] Despite the concerns about recruiting and retaining severely at-risk youth, they may benefit most from OST programs. Studies of the neediest participants in Upward Bound and Los Angeles' Better Educated Students for Tomorrow (LA's BEST) Program revealed that these youth made significantly greater academic gains than both other participants and youth not participating in the evaluation.[66]

School-based after school programs have successfully involved at-risk youth by: (1) working closely with teachers to identify and encourage them to participate, (2) earmarking a certain number of program slots for hard-to-reach children, and (3) hiring staff members who demonstrate an ability to relate well to these youth.[67]

Because at-risk youth do demonstrate a greater need for OST programs, some communities strive to recruit all youth while placing special emphasis on the neediest youth. SFBI has shown success in reaching at-risk youth; participants are more likely to be of lower socioeconomic status and demonstrate lower academic achievement than their nonparticipating counterparts.[68] SFBI attributes its success to program staff who make efforts to build relationships with existing school staff who can refer the neediest students to them. In fact, Beacon Centers are provided specific funds to hire case managers who will work closely with the youth referred by schools for their poor behavior or other problems.

Strategy 6: Recruit Friends to Join Together

In a study of promising practices in after school programs, researchers identified supportive relationships among participants as one of the key factors common across successful after school programs.[69] Many youth do not want to attend an after school program unless their friends attend too. In a recent sample of 150 youth attending BGCA, friendships significantly predicted one's attendance in the program.[70] In other words, when a youth's friends attended BGCA, both that youth and his or her friends attended more often. Youth involved in the New York City Beacons Initiative (NYCBI) reported that having friends at the Beacon Centers keeps them involved, and roughly half of the participants stated that all or most of their friends attend Beacon Centers.[71] The evaluation of SFBI and a report on YouthBuild USA graduates also stressed that friendships are important motivators of participation.[72] In the 21st CCLC evaluation, almost 80% of the nonparticipating youth reported that they would be more likely to attend an after school program if their friends were going too.[73] In an evaluation of teen programs in BGCA, Herrera and Arbreton found teen recruitment to be more successful when youth were recruited in pairs or small groups. However, they caution against recruiting large groups because all the members tend to quit together if one member stops attending.[74]

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Program evaluators often overlook friendships as a potential strategy for recruitment and retention. There is little information in the program evaluation literature about ways to increase participation rates by recruiting groups of friends or helping youth who do not know each other to become friendly. Yet it may be an effective way

to increase youth's attendance in OST programs. Program directors may increase the number of interested youth by determining from teachers or focus groups who the key student leaders are. Student leaders are typically well liked by students and are positive role models. It may be worthwhile to spend time recruiting these "popular" students, as their friends may follow. Additionally, it might also be fruitful to offer student leaders an incentive to participate, such as opportunities to help in the decision-making processes about program activities and operations.

Strategy 7: Hire Program Staff Who Develop Real Connections With Participants

When youth are happy with their OST program, they describe it as a family. They develop a trusting relationship with the OST staff members and feel that they care about them.[75] At YouthBuild USA, program staff are encouraged to form strong relationships with new members within the first two or three months because it improves the youth's likelihood of program completion.[76] In school-based after school programs, staff are likely to be mixture of teachers and other community members, while community-based programs generally hire community members, college students, and other adults who enjoy working with children and teens.[77] Successful programs employ staff members who enjoy participating in activities rather than simply supervising them, and who are representative of the youth's background and ethnicity.[78]

A key finding of the SFBI evaluation was the importance of staffing in OST programs. The analysis, which controlled for youth's age, gender, and site location, showed the two statistically significant factors associated with youth's long-term program participation were positive relationships with OST staff members and a variety of interesting activities. Thus, an OST program's staff cannot be overlooked as an extremely important factor in recruitment and retention of participants. Walker and Arbreton found that staff should be responsive and connected to youth and engage them early on in the program to support long-term participation.[79]

Strategy 8: Hook Youth With Both Fun and Relaxing Times

The majority of OST programs offer a diverse set of activities, and youth often participate in more than one activity a day.[80] A variety of activities—such as sports, homework help, the arts, or community service—may attract a diverse group of participants.[81] In neighborhoods where there are few alternatives, choices among activities offering unique skill sets are even more important.[82]

There are several activities available to youth that promote their academic achievement, physical and mental health, and overall positive development, while offering them a break from traditional classroom instruction. Some youth are drawn to less structured activities, such as pick-up basketball, while others prefer an organized group activity with clear goals (e.g., a theater production or a baseball team).

Several successful programs try to offer students what they feel is missing in their school day.[83] Several successful inner-city after school programs emphasize the arts (drama, musical instruction, orchestra, and the visual arts) because these activities have been eliminated from the traditional school curriculum. In her study of community-based organizations for youth in three urban communities, Milbrey McLaughlin observed, "The community organizations that encourage and enable these positive outcomes are environments deliberately created to engage youth in ambitious tasks, to stretch their skills, experiences, and imaginations."[84]

Strategy 9: Link Academics to an Engaging Project

Academically based OST programs have some difficulty recruiting and retaining youth, especially middle and high school youth, whose parents have greater difficulty mandating where they spend their out-of-school time.[85] In the evaluation of participation in various activities at SFBI, educational activities tended to have lower rates of attendance than did arts, recreation, or leadership activities.[86]

The U.S. Department of Education has responded to the lack of observed academic benefits in the 21st CCLC evaluation with a $12.5 million initiative to develop, implement, and evaluate two promising academic enhancement interventions in school-based after school programs for elementary students, where attendance in academic programs is consistently higher than in programs serving older students.[87] In addition, efforts such as the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning are currently underway to ensure that these academic interventions will appeal to youth, many of whom are already disillusioned with school.[88]

Yet many urban schools serving older youth hope to walk the fine line between becoming more "school-like" and still providing for participants' other developmental needs and interests.[89] In an evaluation of low-income children's participation in after school literacy programs, Halpern offers several methods to keep youth engaged in academic materials in after school programs: (1) sufficient choice of high-interest materials, which are displayed in an attractive and organized manner; (2) encouraging participation among older youth with reading and writing activities focused on students' individual experiences and their relationships to texts; (3) linking reading activities with related field trips; and (4) involving games and group-oriented activities that introduce more

ARE FINANCIAL INCENTIVES THE ANSWER TO THE PARTICIPATION PROBLEM?

Some programs, especially those geared toward high school students, offer them financial incentives for their participation in OST programs. Presumably, they offer these incentives to offset the costs of the lost opportunity for paid work. The Quantum Opportunities Program paid youth about $1 (in 1989) for each hour of participation in its after school activities and an additional $100 bonus for every 100 hours spent, and the money was placed into an interest-bearing account for approved future use (college, a work-based training program, etc.). Thus, it was a financial aid program, rather than a paycheck for youth. The program evaluators concluded that the financial aid program was "an important, but rarely decisive feature of student behavior in the programs."[1] The average youth participation in the program was 1,286 hours over the four-year time period.[2]

More recently, the Children's Aid Society Carrera-Model Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program offered younger teens $3 per hour and older teens minimum wage for hours spent participating in a job club or on entrepreneurial or community-service projects. The teens' participation averaged 16 hours a month, or 4 hours per week.[3] Perhaps even more important, about 70% of the original program participants followed for the evaluation study were still involved in the program at the end of the third year. The director of the program states that it is difficult to identify a single influence on attendance, but financial issues are important when working with older teens.[4] Perhaps the incentives help youth to learn the important concept of connecting work with money—an especially important lesson in communities where poverty, unemployment, and crime are commonplace.

Since 2000, the After School Matters program in Chicago has offered paid apprenticeships during the school year and summer for youth ages 14 and older. The stipends are based on the youth's experience in the program: For example, youth participating in their first summer program are paid $400 and the following summer receive $675. By the age of 16, youth receive an hourly wage of $5.15. Moreover, these youth are working with professionals in fields such as technology, the arts, and communication. The executive director of the program notes that stipend programs are expensive, but very important because they imply that youth's work is valued and important.[5]

The use of financial incentives deserves greater attention as a strategy for improving youth's OST program participation. Given the costs, it may be worthwhile to evaluate this strategy as an enhancement to an existing program for high school students prior to implementing it on a larger scale.

[1] Hahn, A., Leavitt, T., & Aaron, P. (1994). *Evaluation of the Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP): Did the program work? A report on the post-secondary outcomes and cost-effectiveness of the QOP program (1989–1993)* (p. 14). Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Heller Graduate School, Center for Human Resources.

[2] Hahn cautions that this number is a rough estimate, depending on which activities are counted as "participation" in various sites. Some youth received credit for doing homework, reading *TIME* magazine, visiting a museum, or attending a ball game (p. 4).

[3] This program has been demonstrated through rigorous evaluation to have a positive impact on teen pregnancy and birth rates.

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socialization and fun into activities.[90]

Two examples of academic after school programs using these strategies are a theater-based program and a documentary film program. A Company of Girls offers at-risk girls, ages 9–18, living in Portland, Maine, the chance to participate in several creative writing and visual arts projects within the context of theater production. Girls involved in the program perform several plays, including those they write themselves. The program attributes its success to fun, enriching activities, caring adult role models, high expectations for participation, and the chance to be in the touring group. The program director reports daily participation at 90% or greater, and is currently undergoing a process and impact evaluation involving interviews and focus groups with the girls and their parents and an analysis of several social, academic, and behavioral outcomes.[91]

High school OST programs must compete with jobs for teens' time. Older teens want greater independence by making money and taking on adult responsibility, or may have the very real burden of contributing to their family's income.

Youth Document Durham is another good example of a project-based academic after school environment. Participants are involved in the analysis of social problems through the documentary arts, including photography, audio interviewing/radio production, film/video, and narrative writing. Similar to a Company of Girls, this program has dual appeal: Parents like its focus on academic enrichment activities, while teens enjoy the project-centered, community-based fieldwork.

Strategy 10: Give High School Youth Extra Opportunities

More than two-thirds of teens in a nationally representative survey by the YMCA stated that they would be interested in participating in academic, leadership, and community service activities after school if they were available. Yet OST programs struggle to keep teens interested and involved. Although teens continue to express interest in programs, participation typically plummets when teens reach the age of 15 or 16.[92] For example, participants in Upward Bound are most likely to drop out of the program during the eleventh grade, prior to the start of their summer program activities, presumably to obtain paid employment. Not surprisingly, the Upward Bound programs with year-round work-experience programs subsequently have the lowest dropout rates.[93]

Teen programs that sustain student interest and have positive effects for teens often include employment or service learning (community service).[94] About one-third of teens (16 and 17 year olds) in low-income communities work for pay, and many more are interested in paid employment. High school OST programs must compete with jobs for teens' time. Older teens want greater independence by making money and taking on adult responsibility, or may have the very real burden of contributing to their family's income.

Some perceptive OST programs attract teens and meet their needs by offering job clubs for résumé writing, tips on jobs, and practice interviews.[95] To reduce attrition in their program, the CASCM staff actually helps teens look for jobs in the nearby vicinity and even offers some teens jobs within the agency. TASC offers older youth internships with local employers and recognizes participation in internships as participation in the after school program.[96] NYCBI also employs participating youth as activity staff members, offers them career preparation activities, and invites them to participate on a youth council.[97] Other programs, such as the Louisiana State Youth Opportunities Unlimited Summer Program and the Summer Training and Employment Program successfully blend academic activities and employment into intensive summer programs while maintaining high participation levels.[98] ASM, by offering paid apprenticeships, has revitalized youth involvement in after school programs.[99]

Service-learning activities are another option to keep youth inspired and interested and are popular with older youth.[100] Youth at the 17 schools participating in a national evaluation of Learn and Serve America, a school-based initiative, spent on average 70 hours per year participating in volunteer service, and youth in some sites spent more than 200 hours in these activities. More than 90% of the participants state that they were satisfied with their service-learning experience. Moreover, the program showed positive short-term impacts on their civic attitudes, involvement in other volunteer service, teenage parenting, and arrests.[101]

Some programs have found that leadership opportunities help teens to know that their contributions are important to the organization. Rewards for effective leadership, such as opportunities to travel to teen conferences or other places are especially effective.[102] Several community-based organizations have developed leadership-training programs to enhance youth interest and participation. In a study of three national organizations serving youth (BGCA, Girls Incorporated, and the YMCA) program evaluators found that all three organizations offered leadership activities that included: exposure to service, advocacy, or the political process; involvement in governance, such as representation on the board; and access to numerous jobs and volunteer positions, such as junior staff, peer tutors, or assistant coaches. If attendance can be used as some approximation of youth interest and engagement, then the attendance data

from these programs demonstrate that adolescents were interested in participating in programs that had a leadership component—on average participants spent 5 hours a week at these programs, while some spent as many as 32 hours a week.[103]

Conclusion

Participation remains dependent on engaging children and youth to stay involved in programs long enough to reap the many benefits from them. If children who attend out-of-school time programs more frequently demonstrate greater benefits from them, then practitioners, families, schools, and communities will want to encourage youth to attend regularly. Appropriately, among OST programs nationwide, recruitment and retention strategies vary depending on the age of the children involved, the choice of programs available to youth in the neighborhood, program goals for the schedule and the target population, and the specific activities offered. While it is unlikely that every OST program would employ all the recruitment and retention strategies suggested in our review, some strategies, such as helping youth and their families understand the benefits of participation, are critical first steps to attracting and sustaining youth participation in OST programs. Further, it is clear from the evaluation literature that employing a range of recruitment and retention strategies as described above shows promise in boosting participation in a variety of OST programs. Granger and Kane suggest that we "build on examples that are demonstrable winners."[104] One way to do this is to continue to harvest implementation data from OST evaluations to better understand the relationship between attendance in OST programs and the key features of programs that make them attractive to youth and sustain their engagement for a sufficient length of time to reap positive benefits from participation.

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APPENDIX:
OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS INCLUDED IN THE REVIEW

- 21st Century Community Learning Centers – District of Columbia (DC 21st CCLC)
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers – national (21st CCLC)
- 4-H Youth Development Program – Cornell Cooperative Extension
- A Company of Girls
- After School Achievement Program (ASAP)
- After School Education and Safety Program – California (previously known as After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program)
- After School Matters (ASM)
- Austin Eastside Story After-School Program (AES)
- Baltimore's After School Strategy – YouthPlaces Initiative
- Bayview Safe Haven Program (BVSH)
- Beacons Initiative – New York, New York (NYCBI)
- Beacons Initiative – San Francisco, California (SFBI)
- BELL After-School Instructional Curriculum (BASICs)
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBS)
- Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) – Project Connect (PC)
- Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) – Project Learn/Educational Enhancement Program
- Cap City Kids (CCK)
- Children's Aid Society Carrera-Model Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program (CASCM)
- Cooke Middle School After School Recreation Program (CASP)
- Cooperative Extension Service Youth-at-Risk School-Age Child Care Initiative
- Core Arts Program (CAP)
- Extended-Day Tutoring Program
- Extended-Service Schools Initiative (ESS)
- Fifth Dimension/University-Community Links
- Fort Worth After School Program (FWAS)
- Hawaii After-School Plus Program (A+)
- Howard Street Tutoring Program
- Kids on the Move Program (KOTM)
- Learn and Serve America
- Los Angeles' Better Educated Students for Tomorrow Program (LA's BEST)
- Louisiana State Youth Opportunities Unlimited Summer Program (LSYOU)
- Maryland After School Community Grant Program (MASCGP)
- New Orleans ADEPT Drug and Alcohol Community Prevention Project (ADACPP)
- North Carolina Support Our Students Initiative (SOS)
- Ohio Urban School Initiative School Age Child Care Project
- Project for Neighborhood Aftercare (PNA)
- Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP)
- School-to-Jobs Programme (STJ)
- Summer Training and Education Program (STEP)
- Teen Outreach Program (TOP)
- The 3:00 Project®
- The After-School Corporation (TASC)
- Thunderbirds Teen Center Program
- Upward Bound
- Virtual Y
- Youth Document Durham (YDD)
- Youth Education for Tomorrow Centers (YET)
- YouthBuild USA

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