PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

Policy Report

July 2004

After-School Programs

Expanding Access and Ensuring Quality

Chrisanne L. Gayl

Afternoon is a dangerous time for American teenagers. Research has found that the after-school hours—from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.—are the peak period for experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and sex. It is also the peak period for juvenile crime. It should come as no surprise, then, that other research has found that adult-supervised after-school programs can dramatically cut those risks. That alone would be a powerful argument in favor of after-school programs, even if it were the only one. But it is far from the only argument in their favor. In fact, it is just one of many examples of why after-school programs deserve robust national support—not just for the benefit of at-risk teenagers, but also for children in need of academic enrichment and extracurricular opportunities, and (not least) for their working parents.

Not all of the research on after-school programs is so glowing, but policymakers debating this issue should remember that our national commitment to after-school programs is only 10 years old. Now is the time to study these programs and build on what works. We should not be discouraged with the uneven outcomes to date, or use those outcomes as justification to shut down funding.

Elected officials should recognize that the public firmly supports after-school programs. Arnold Schwarzenegger earned his political credibility in California by championing an after-school ballot initiative, after all. And similar programs have won widespread popularity in Boston and elsewhere. A recent survey found that Americans, across all demographic and party lines, view after-school programs as a vital part of their communities. Voters also want government to provide more funding and support for them.[1]

This widespread expectation that children should have the opportunity to participate in after-school programs coincides with growing concerns among middle-class parents about the precarious balance between work and family, and an increasingly intense society-wide focus on boosting academic achievement for all K-12 students. Struggling students often need extra help to master challenging material in school, and educators have been developing promising after-school programs that can help them. The passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which rightly holds schools accountable for ensuring that students meet high standards, makes providing additional learning opportunities all the more important.

Yet, despite the obvious promise of after-school programs on all of these fronts, funding and support for them remains tenuous—particularly with the Bush administration. In fact, despite the multiple benefits of after-school programs, the president's fiscal 2004 budget proposed a 40 percent cut in their funding, and his current fiscal 2005 budget request freezes funding for after-school programs even as states, school districts, and schools are in the midst of implementing NCLB.

This paper examines the federal government's role in after-school programs, surveys current research on them, and offers recommendations to expand access and improve the quality of after-school programs. Those recommendations include:

- Providing the resources to meet the growing demand for after-school services from parents and struggling schools;
- Rigorously assessing the quality of after-school programs;
- Using research to ensure that after-school programs are effective; and
- Targeting resources to the highest need communities first.

The History of After-School Programs

Structured activities and services for children outside of school have been around for more than a century, as Robert Halpern chronicles in his book *Making Play Work*.[2] But until the mid-1990s, the federal government had little formal involvement in after-school programs. Some local school districts and schools used a portion of their Title I dollars to support extended learning opportunities for low-income children, but the federal government was not directly involved in these activities.[3] At the time, many thought responsibility for after-school programs was best left to community organizations, such as the YMCA and Boy Scouts of America.

A confluence of factors changed all of this in the mid-nineties. First, the reality of more parents entering the workforce created a greater need for adult-supervised activities after-school, and the need for childcare to support welfare reform heightened the saliency of these issues for policymakers. In addition, a budding field of research on the benefits of programs to deter youth crime and increase children's social skills led to greater public interest in after-school programs.

Finally, the growing educational standards and accountability movement in many states favored the development of extra learning supports to help children achieve. For example, legislators in California established the first statewide after-school program in 1998, the After-School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program, to provide literacy, academic enrichment support, and safe, constructive alternatives for students in kindergarten through ninth grade.[4] Georgia also created a statewide after-school initiative for middle school students in 1994 called the 3:00 Project.[5] The program was designed to provide safety for children, encourage collaboration of community resources, and improve the academic success of participating students. And in Delaware in 1996, then-Gov. Tom Carper invested $20 million in extra instructional time for low-performing students to improve their academic performance in math, science, English, and social studies.[6]

Initial steps to involve the federal government in after-school activities came from Sen. James Jeffords (I-Vt.) and Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-Wis.).[7] In 1994, they introduced the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Act (21st CCLC) to provide grants to rural and inner-city public schools for "projects that benefit the educational, health, social service, cultural, and recreational needs of a rural or inner city community."[8] The idea was to open up schools for broader use by their communities. The legislation authorized $25 million for a variety of activities including, among others, literacy education programs, day care services, weekend school programs and expanded library hours. Ultimately, the bill was folded into the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and received a $750,000 budget appropriation in Fiscal Year 95.

Increased attention to after-school issues in the private sector helped to generate greater support. In 1997, the Mott Foundation partnered with the U.S. Department of Education to provide training and technical assistance to 21st CCLC program grant recipients. This move was instrumental in helping secure $40 million for the program in FY 98. The Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund also launched their own initiative to support the creation of 60 after-school programs in 20 communities around the country.

As momentum grew to expand child care and development services outside of school, officials in the Clinton administration seized upon the 21st CCLC program as a vehicle to promote their out-of-school time agenda. In his FY 99 budget proposal, President Clinton proposed an $800 million increase to the program over five years as part of a historic initiative to improve childcare services. Pressure from the White House, a very active grassroots movement, and tremendous flow of grant applications in response to the initial Request for Proposals helped the program grow rapidly in the late 1990s. The budget surpluses also made it easier to finance the expansion. By FY 01, the federal budget for 21st CLCC was $845.6 million.

The NCLB Act continued the momentum to increase the federal investment in after-school

programs by authorizing $250 million increases in the 21st CCLC program each year during the next six years to reach a level of $2.5 billion in FY 07. The legislation also made significant changes to the program, such as:

- Converting from a competitive grant awarded directly from the federal government to local school districts to a state formula grant based on states' shares of Title I funds.

- Changing the allowable length of grants from three years to five years to help these programs become more sustainable.

- Opening up the grant process within states to include community-based and faith-based organizations.

- Placing greater emphasis on improving student achievement.

These changes helped the 21st CCLC program become more manageable and self-sustaining, and broadened the number of stakeholders involved in after-school programs. The devolution of the 21st CCLC program to the states provided easier oversight and a more efficient grant review process. It also enabled states to incorporate after-school programs into their larger systems of education and to develop an infrastructure to sustain these programs. In addition, communities became more engaged since more organizations could compete for funding.

The emphasis on student achievement in NCLB changed the focus of the 21st CCLC program from its original broader goals of providing educational and social services to expanding "academic enrichment opportunities for children attending low-performing schools."[9] The Bush administration's interest in promoting high-quality reading instruction played a large part in this change, but many lawmakers agree that a more academically focused program would be a helpful tool for states as they work toward achieving the accountability goals in NCLB.

In less than one decade, the 21st CCLC program grew from small pilot project to an integral part of the nation's largest federal education reform law since 1965. Currently, the U.S. Department of Education reports that 6,800 schools in 1,420 communities—in collaboration with other public and nonprofit agencies, organization, local businesses, post-secondary institutions, and scientific/cultural and other community entities—are participating in the program.

What the Research Shows

During the last 10 years, a large body of research has emerged that analyzes the landscape of after-school programs in America and offers some evidence on the impacts they have on children. Research is catching up with the commonsense notion that structured after-school programs can provide positive environments for young people to develop. A variety of program evaluations suggest that participation can lead to increased engagement in learning, social skills development, decreased deviancy, and a range of other positive outcomes.[10]

But children who enroll in these programs often tend to be "joiners" who would otherwise be engaged in adult-supervised activities.[11] As the Forum for Youth Investment suggests, "many programs struggle to reach those children and youth who by other standards (socio-economic status, school success) may be most in need of, and most likely to benefit from, involvement."[12]

Attendance in after-school programs also tends to be sporadic. Children have other activities such as sports, clubs, and household chores that often take precedence over their participation in an after-school program. Given this reality, the duration, structure, and intensity of these programs can be influential factors in their efficacy. The age or grade level of participants can also be a significant determinant of a program's effect on student achievement. For example, studies have found that after-school programs produce the strongest reading achievement results among students in grades K-2, while the strongest results in math were found among high school students.[13]

Research findings on after-school programs can be broken down as follows.

Safety and Decreased Deviant Behavior

The activity patterns of youth reveal that the peak hours for juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and sex are between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.[14] Teens who do not participate in after-school programs are nearly three times more likely to use marijuana or other drugs. They are also more likely to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and engage in sexual activity than those who participate.[15] Some targeted programs have been shown to reduce the risk of pregnancy and gang-related activity. Beyond keeping kids safe and out of trouble, the adult supervision inherent in after-school programs helps children develop more meaningful ties with responsible adults, which research has shown to be beneficial for young people.

Improved Social Skills and Self-Confidence

After-school programs help children develop social skills by providing opportunities to interact with a more diverse group of their peers. For children who feel socially isolated in school, these programs can offer a less threatening environment in which to make friends and get along with others. Additionally, these activities can help to boost a child's self-confidence.[16]

School Attitudes and Behaviors

Numerous studies indicate that participants in after-school programs are less tardy and have fewer absences from school. Programs have also been shown to have a positive effect on students' level of effort, increase their sense of belonging in school, and increase their rate of homework completion.[17] A study of the Extended-Service Schools (ESS) Initiative revealed that youth who attended ESS programs reported more often that they paid attention in class and were proud to belong to their school.[18]

Academic Achievement

The evidence of how after-school programs improve individual student achievement is less clear-cut. Since after-school programs are voluntary, it can be difficult for researchers to determine whether student achievement differences reflect program impacts or the type of students who choose to participate in these programs—or how fully students actually participated in the program. A meta-analysis by Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) of 56 out-of-school-time program studies (i.e., after-school, weekend, and summer) revealed small positive effects on student achievement in both reading and math.[19] Conversely, other large-scale program evaluations, such as the 21st CCLC study by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. and The After-School Corporation (TASC) report, do not reveal any statistically significant impacts on test scores in the first year of attendance.[20]

There is some evidence to suggest that certain types of students may be making targeted gains. For example, a study by the University of California at Irvine and Research Report Services found that students in the YS-CARE program (aimed at children from families on welfare in Los Angeles) had higher reading and math gains on the Stanford-9 test than children who were not participating in the program.[21] The second year evaluation of the TASC program also found significant differences among participants and non-participants in the lowest math proficiency level.

Researchers caution policymakers not to expect too much given the overall time devoted to academic activities and the share of resources devoted to after-school programs. As Thomas Kane suggests in his book, *The Impact of After-School Programs: Interpreting the Results of Four Recent Evaluations*, "it seems unrealistic to expect large impacts on academic achievement."[22] Unless time spent in an after-school program is extraordinarily more beneficial that time spent in the classroom, dramatic impact is unlikely. Because after-school programs have demonstrated effects on conditions that contribute to student achievement, however, participation in these programs can support improvements in student achievement even if the programs themselves have limited academic impacts.

The Bush Administration and Research

In 2003, the Bush administration cited "disappointing initial findings from a rigorous evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program" conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. as rationale for a proposed $400 million—or 40 percent—cut to the program in the president's FY 04 budget.[23] As Secretary of Education Rod Paige later explained in a *Washington Post* editorial:

> "It is irresponsible to continue funding increases unless they improve academic achievement or foster positive behavior. According to an independent study done for the Clinton administration, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program fails on both counts. It has not reduced the number of latchkey children or increased reading scores. And participants were actually more likely to sell or use drugs than nonparticipants."[24]

Indeed, contradicting other research, this study concluded that 21st CCLCs had no impact on academic performance, no influence on safety or behavior, and negligible impact on developmental outcomes.[25] Although the report's findings demand the attention of policymakers, this single, relatively small study is hardly definitive. The administration's efforts to use this report to justify a proposed 40 percent cut to after-school funding was both an overreaction to and an inappropriate political use of the research. Moreover, there is no plausible reason to believe the requested funding cuts would in any way address the problems identified by the report.

Essentially, the administration's actions ignored the larger question of how to improve after-school programs in order to better provide for children. Scientifically based research should be used to identify effective practices. As the Forum for Youth Investment suggests, "This [Mathematica study] and other studies should serve as a platform for much needed conversations about how to augment program quality and encourage longer and more intense participation. By using the study to justify cuts, the administration curtailed conversation about a range of responsible strategies for improving the program, given these and other findings."[26]

The findings of the Mathematica study reflect many of the challenges that school-based after-school programs face in improving student outcomes. For example, the study concludes that the "lack of academic improvement may be due to the low attendance rates and the length of the follow-up period … In addition, too few participants may have received sustained, substantive academic support."[27] As a result, variables such as participation rates and program content should be explored in more detail. Policymakers should be asking questions such as: What level of participation has the most positive impact on children? What types of programs stimulate the most interest among students? How can we provide the richest program content in order to generate the best outcomes? And, how can we reach the students who need these programs most?

The Mathematica study also revealed some positive findings. For example, researchers found increased school involvement among parents of children in the program, and children in the program spent more time supervised by adults. Among middle school students, participation increased homework completion and decreased absences and tardiness.

On Capitol Hill, strong bipartisan support for the 21st CLCC program protected it from the proposed Bush cuts. This year, the president has proposed only a freeze in his FY 05 budget request. While this is an improvement over last year's draconian cut, it would appropriate only one-half of the funds authorized for the program under NCLB.

Resources Still Falling Short

Despite a large increase in spending during the last decade, after-school programs still lack the resources to meet the demand from families and struggling schools. The current administration's reluctance to grow the 21st CCLC program will only exacerbate this shortfall, and could also undermine program quality. The Afterschool Alliance estimates that 1.4 million more children could be served in

after-school programs if the 21st CCLC program is funded at authorized levels instead of the president's proposed FY 05 freeze.[28]

In June 2001, the U.S. Department of Education received 2,850 applications for after-school funding, of which it was able to fund only 308. While some applicants were appropriately denied because of quality concerns or other issues, about one-third of the applications were rated as very high quality and approximately half would have been acceptable for funding. In every competition, many high quality programs were denied funding due to a limited amount of resources.[29]

Now that program authority has been turned over to the states, evidence is emerging about the number of children on waiting lists and the extreme needs of local communities. Mayors in 86 cities reported that only one-third of the children needing after-school care received it.[30]

Some states and communities have responded by devoting more of their own resources to extra learning opportunities, demonstrating the extent of parent and voter demand for these initiatives. For example, in California voters took matters into their own hands by passing Proposition 49 in November 2002. The measure provides additional funding of up to $455 million to provide before- and after-school programs for every child in the state.

In Massachusetts, the nonprofit foundation Massachusetts 2020, founded by Chris Gabrieli and Jennifer Davis, works with an array of public, private, and philanthropic organizations to create and expand after-school and summer enrichment programs for students statewide. Massachusetts 2020 played a key role in creating Boston's After-School for All Partnership, a public-private alliance of philanthropic and civic leaders chaired by Gabrieli. The Partnership has raised more than $26 million to expand after-school opportunities in Boston. Both Massachusetts 2020 and Boston's After-School for All Partnership grew out of an initiative launched by Boston Mayor Thomas Menino in 1998. Since 1998, Boston has doubled the number of children in after-school programs, and as a result, more than one-half of all Boston children now participate in after-school activities.

Yet, despite the strength of public support, tight budgets in many states and communities constrain after-school funding below the levels needed to meet parental demand or the needs of low-performing schools. Because federal programs are best targeted to help the most disadvantaged children and communities, increasing investment in the 21st CCLC program is an important step to ensure the children who most need after-school are not left behind.

Policy Recommendations

A review of the federal government's involvement in after-school programs and an analysis of the research in this area suggests there are several ways policymakers should take action as they consider budget requests and look for new ways to improve after-school services:

- **Fund the 21st CCLC program at its authorized level, while also instituting clear quality and outcomes standards for what constitutes a high-quality program, to ensure that federal investments go to programs that work.** There is a strong demand for after-school learning opportunities, as well as a need for more high-quality supplemental reading and math instruction to help meet the goals of NCLB. Well-structured after-school programs can help meet those needs. Offering them to all children who need them will require the substantial increase in investment that has been authorized. But Congress and the administration should also verify that the programs that are funded actually work.

- **Evaluate the effectiveness of after-school programs based on the *entire* range of benefits to children, families, and communities, while maintaining a strong emphasis on student learning.** Specifically, program evaluations should take into account decreased deviant behavior, improved attitudes toward school, increased self-confidence, and improved social skills. Programs can also provide value to parents by helping them balance work and family

life, save time, and miss less work. Improving student learning is a key goal of after-school programs, but all of these benefits deserve consideration in funding and accountability decisions.

- **Target resources toward children in low-achieving schools, welfare recipients, and other at-risk populations.** Children who participate in after-school programs are often those who are already the most likely to participate in organized activities. Policy mechanisms must ensure that after-school providers focus on attracting students who stand to see the largest benefits from extra learning opportunities.

- **Support additional rigorous and scientifically based studies to assess the impact of after-school programs started after NCLB on students' academic achievement, broadly disseminate findings, and modify the federal after-school program accordingly.** Research is mixed on how effective after-school programs are at increasing individual student achievement (i.e., test scores). In addition, much of this research focuses on programs that predate NCLB's stronger focus on academics. New, rigorous research is essential to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of after-school programs.

Conclusion

High quality after-school programs provide numerous social, family, and community benefits. In addition to helping parents balance work and life responsibilities, these programs offer prime opportunities to enhance learning—particularly for struggling students. After-school programs also help to promote equity among students by providing additional services for low-performing students and creating supportive environments for all children.

Policymakers must move past false choices pitting funding against quality or an academic focus against a positive social environment, and instead ensure that all federally funded after-school programs are high quality and effective in meeting their goals. In an environment where policy is rightly focused on increasing student learning, particularly among underserved students, after-school programs are an important tool for school districts and schools and they demand the support and attention of federal policymakers.

Chrisanne L. Gayl is a social policy consultant in Washington, D.C., and a former education and workforce aide to California Governor Gray Davis.

For more information about this or any other PPI publication, please contact the Publications Department at: (202) 547-0001, write Progressive Policy Institute, 600 Pennsylvania Avenue SE, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20003, or visit our site on the Web at http://www.ppionline.org.

Endnotes

[1] Telephone survey of 800 registered voters conducted for the Afterschool Alliance/Mott Foundation in September 2003 by Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Group. Margin of error +/- 3.5 percent.
[2] Halpern, Robert, *Making Play Work: The Promise of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children*, Teachers College Press, 2003.
[3] Chambers, Jay, et al. "Study of Education Resources and Federal Funding: Final Report," U.S. Department of Education, August 2000, *http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/serff_execsum.pdf.*
[4] "California's Afterschool Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnership Program Fact Sheet," California State Department of Education, *http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/nr/nr/documents/yr02rel08atta.pdf*.
[5] For Georgia: "The 3:00 Project: Georgia," NGA Center for Best Practices, 2001, *http://www.nga.org/eloDetail/1,1348,98,00.html*.
[6] For Delaware: "Delaware Education Reform Timeline," Delaware Department of Education, 2002, *http://www.doe.state.de.us/sbe/timeline%202002.pdf*.
[7] In 1994, Sen. James Jeffords was a Republican.
[8] *21st Century Community Learning Centers Act*, 103rd Congress, S. 1990.
[9] "21st Century Community Learning Centers: Purpose," U.S. Department of Education, *http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html.*
[10] "Participation During Out-of-School Time: Taking a Closer Look," The Forum for Youth Investment, March 2004.
[11] Multiple Choices After School: Findings for the Extended Service School Initiative," Public/Private Venture and Manpower Demonstration Research Group, June 2002, p. iii.
[12] "Participation During Out-of-School Time: Taking a Closer Look," The Forum for Youth Investment, March 2004, p. 5.
[13] "The Effectiveness of Out-of-School-Time Strategies in Assisting Low-Achieving Students in Reading and Mathematics: A Research Synthesis," McREL Research, January 2004, *http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/SchoolImprovementReform/5032RR_RSOSTeffectiveness.pdf*.
[14] America's After-School Choice: The Prime Time for Juvenile Crime, or Youth Enrichment and Achievement," Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2002.
[15] "After School for America's Teens: A National Survey of Teen Attitudes and Behaviors in the Hours After School," YMCA of the USA, March 2001, *http://www.ymca.net/pdf/executiveSummary.PDF.*
[16] Multiple Choices After School: Findings for the Extended Service School Initiative," Public/Private Venture and Manpower Demonstration Research Group, June 2002.
[17] Kane, Thomas J., "The Impact of After-School Programs: Interpreting the Results of Four Recent Evaluations," William T. Grant Foundation, January 2004.
[18] Multiple Choices After School: Findings for the Extended Service School Initiative," Public/Private Venture and Manpower Demonstration Research Group, June 2002.
[19] "The Effectiveness of Out-of-School-Time Strategies in Assisting Low-Achieving Students in Reading and Mathematics: A Research Synthesis," McREL Research, January 2004, *http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/SchoolImprovementReform/5032RR_RSOSTeffectiveness.pdf*.
[20] "When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st-Century Community Learning Centers Program," Mathematica Policy Research, February 2003.
[21] "Evaluation of the YS-CARE After School Program for California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CALWorks): 2002," Department of Education, University of California, Irvine and Research Support Services, 2002, *http://www.gse.uci.edu/asp/aspeval/resources/resources.html*.
[22] Kane, Thomas J. "The Impact of After-School Programs: Interpreting the Results of Four Recent Evaluations," William T. Grant Foundation, January 2004, p. 23.
[23] "Fiscal Year 2004 Education Budget Summary and Background Information," U.S. Department of Education, February 2003.
[24] Paige, Rod. "We Must Spend Our Education Dollars Wisely," *The Washington Post*, A14, April 1, 2003.
[25] Kane, Vandell, and others have pointed out methodological concerns such as the underrepresentation of elementary schools in the study and the reliance on statistical controls for students in middle schools.
[26] "Why, When, and How to Use Evaluation: Experts Speak Out," Harvard Family Research Project, June 2003.
[27] "When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st-Century Community Learning Centers Program," Mathematica Policy Research, February 2003.
[28] "Afterschool Leader Says Failure to Increase Federal Afterschool Budget Will Undermine Children's Safety, Academic Success," Afterschool Alliance Press Release, Feb. 2, 2004, *http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/press_archives/JS_budget_2004_NR.doc*.
[29] Stonehill, Robert, U.S. Department of Education, April 2004.
[30] "After-School Programs in Cities Across the United States," U.S. Conference of Mayors, June 2003, *http://www.usmayors.org/uscm/uscm_projects_services/education/afterschoolreport03.pdf*.