

Promising Practices in Afterschool

NIOST is one of six national organizations across the country that has been funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to collect promising practices in afterschool. Each organization collects practices from different geographic areas and program auspices.

NIOST's focus is identifying system building and infrastructure practices from the 20 cities across the country participating in the Cross-Cities Network. Practices are collected on an ongoing basis and are submitted to the AED Center for Youth Development and Policy Research where a review team evaluates the practices to ensure they are valid. Once practices pass successfully through the review process, they are posted to the www.afterschool.org web site so that others may learn from them.

To learn more about the Promising Practices Initiative or to submit your own practice, please visit www.afterschool.org

Or

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Promising Practices in Citywide Afterschool Initiatives

Promoting Caring and Supportive Relationships Between Adults and High School Age Youth

Teens gain a sense of responsibility and self-worth through healthy expectations and guidance from adults. Establishing trust and connections with adults not only gives young people a place to turn when facing problems, but also encourages them to build similar relationships with other adults and peers (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2004).

The After School Program in Lincoln Square

The After School Program in Lincoln Square at the MLK Jr. High School Campus is one of several high school afterschool programs funded by The After-School Corporation (TASC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the quality and availability of in-school afterschool programs in New York City and New York state. TASC presently funds afterschool programs in 143 public schools in New York City and 75 schools in 51 other New York State school districts. The goals of The After School Program in Lincoln Square are to improve the social, academic, and vocational competencies of school-aged youth; prevent out of wedlock pregnancies; reduce negative behaviors; and provide parents with a safe space for their children after school. The Lincoln Square Business Management Association, a non-profit organization, manages this program.

Since 1999, over 1,500 students have participated in The After School Program in Lincoln Square, with approximately 120 youth attending each day. Over 200 students have benefited from internships with local cultural organizations and businesses to date. Enrollment in this afterschool program is open to all youth at the school with the expectation that they will attend a minimum of three days a week.

This afterschool program provides students with critical academic support, including tutoring, homework assistance, study skills, SAT and college preparation, computer and writing support, drama and music clubs, quality recreational activities, and real career and job opportunities through valuable

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internships in the community. Program activities also include the publication of a professional-caliber school newspaper and monthly student poetry readings at a local café.

About the Program

Centered in the heart of a major urban area, The After School Program in Lincoln Square makes its home within the doors of MLK Jr. High School. Operating five days a week throughout the school year with occasional weekend activities, The After School Program in Lincoln Square boasts an enrollment of 262 youth, 110-120 attending daily and 75-80 attending Monday through Friday. Program participants range in age from fourteen to eighteen and come mostly from low income families.

The staff at The After School Program in Lincoln Square, whose primary focus is developing caring and trusting relationships with program participants, vary in educational experience from high school diplomas to Ph.D.s. With two full-time staff and thirteen part-time staff, this program greatly values their ten volunteers; many of which have been with the program for three to five years.

The program makes an effort to hire school teachers in the afterschool program so that youth are able to get to know their teachers on a more personal level. The After School Program in Lincoln Square also hires young adults who are former students of the MLK Jr. High School Campus and former participants in the afterschool program. This ensures that current students have role models who have successfully transitioned from school to work and access to young staff members who have an authentic understanding of the youths' experiences.

Unlike many programs, The After School Program in Lincoln Square has its own dedicated program space within the school facility. This has allowed the program to create a youth-friendly space where youth feel welcomed and respected. Youth always know where they can find an interested adult who

will listen to them or simply provide access to a phone or copy machine.

Constant Focus on Relationship Building

The degree to which young people can depend on supportive adults is a leading predictor of young people's ability to successfully transition from adolescence into early adulthood. Promoting the presence of caring and supportive relationships between adults and youth is a fundamental practice of programs that successfully promote young people's learning and healthy development.

The staff at Lincoln Square place a very high value on the development of supportive, caring relationships between adult staff and program participants. These relationships are viewed as critical doorways for engaging youth and promoting their learning of academic and practical life skills. The program actively seeks to leverage the positive influence that adults can have on older youth when youth offer their trust and respect. Staff members are very savvy about the importance of informal learning opportunities—taking advantage of “teachable moments”—as well as how to engage youth in formal learning activities.

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The Lincoln Square program is very clear about what it takes to build meaningful relationships with youth. It has intentionally configured their program space, operating hours, hiring practices, and expectations of how staff should spend their time to ensure that these relationships are established.

The afterschool program ensures that staff members have “unstructured time” to interact with the youth, free from the responsibilities of leading formal activities. Staff are expected to be accessible for youth-initiated conversations or requests for assistance and support. Sometimes this means accepting a challenge to a game of scrabble or checkers. The staff at The After School Program in Lincoln Square take time at every staff meeting to reflect on their youth participants —perhaps voicing a

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concern about a young person who has not participated recently, an individual who has made a positive breakthrough relative to their goals, or others that may be experiencing difficult personal challenges outside of the program. In this way, staff members build their knowledge of their participants, agree on how best to support them, and are reminded that youth belong at the center of the program's work.

In addition to operating in the after school hours, the program offers some services throughout the school day when the campus is brimming with students. Serving as an all-day resource to students provides opportunities for youth to have greater access to program staff when youth have specific needs. The program also offers lunchtime activities and opportunities to meet with afterschool staff. For example, during lunchtime, program staff engage youth in meaningful activities such as "Chat and Chew," a book discussion club. Program staff are also available for informal lunchtime discussions.

There are numerous advantages to being open during the school day. For instance, program staff can: (1) maintain on-going communications with school-day teachers; (2) sponsor school wide "spirit events" or alternative learning events; and (3) conduct outreach to recruit new students into the program. By sponsoring school-wide events, such as the annual "teachers vs. students basketball game," the afterschool program contributes to a positive school climate that is felt across the boundaries of school and afterschool.

Valuing Participants and Promoting Positive Development

The program's focus on building personal relationships with youth results in a greater willingness on the part of youth to take positive risks, such as accepting help and feedback from others and openly risking failure in order to learn new skills. Youth in the program appear very comfortable in their interactions with adults and openly draw on the

adults for assistance and guidance. This climate of mutual respect reduces behavior issues in the program, allowing staff to more easily facilitate group-learning activities and address the needs of individual students. Furthermore, these positive adult/youth relationships raise young people's own expectations of what they can accomplish while challenging them to stretch their capabilities.

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The After School Program in Lincoln Square regularly acknowledges young people's positive behaviors and

contributions through public pronouncements and small give-aways. The program also sponsors large, year-end recognition events where youth are publicly acknowledged for their accomplishments in personal growth, leadership, academic achievement, and contributions to others. In order to showcase the skills of young writers, the afterschool program sponsors a monthly evening poetry reading at a neighborhood Barnes & Noble, one of its many community partners.

Promoting Youth Ownership in the Program

As a result of the strong bonds between youth and adults and the program culture of respect for self and others, there is a strong sense of joint ownership in the program. The program is structured in a way that requires everyone to work together. Further impressing upon youth the level of trust staff have for them and their importance in the program, the afterschool program office is a shared workspace, used by staff and program participants alike. There are worktables, computer stations, phones, and office supplies available. The adults do not work behind closed office doors. The afterschool office is a place where adults and youth work side-by-side to accomplish their individual and group goals. This arrangement allows for informal interactions between youth and adults which is important for

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building trust and personal knowledge of each other, and promoting “real-time, real-life” learning experiences.

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The After School Program in Lincoln Square seeks to hire adults who can demonstrate a strong mastery of their specialized content area and who are very comfortable in relating authentically with high school youth. In order to ensure they hire the right people, the program involves youth participants in the screening of resumes and hiring interviews for all staff. Youth also serve as a “test audience” for prospective candidates to demonstrate their skills in a live “mini-lesson,” which is sometimes part of the hiring process. New hires begin their employment knowing they have the support of youth who participated in their selection.

This Promising Practice was adapted from an original paper written by Sam Piha, Community Schools Directors, Community Network for Youth Development, San Francisco Beacon Initiative, sam@cnyd.org.

The After School Program in Lincoln Square works very hard to build trusting, caring, and mutually respectful relationships between participating youth and program staff. Its success in doing this is illustrated both in the number of youth who regularly attend and the number of staff who have been with the program for several years. Through these affirming relationships, youth are able to achieve positive outcomes which will assist in their transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

References:

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. (2004). California’s next after school challenge: Keeping high school teens off the street and on the right track. Oakland, CA: Author.

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