CityWorks: Building Strong Citywide Afterschool Initiatives

CityWorks is an initiative of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) working in collaboration with communities that provide high quality out-of-school time programming to youth and children. CityWorks builds on the successful foundation of the "Cross-Cities Network for Leaders of Citywide After-School Initiatives" (CCN), which brings together leaders of after-school initiatives from 21 major cities across the United States. In bringing the experiences of stakeholders, service providers, schools, and community organizations together, NIOST can learn and share strategies for strengthening the infrastructure for out-of-school time activity. By sharing best practices of the CCN, CItyWorks seeks to strengthen and enhance citywide afterschool initiatives and the communities they serve.

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DISCUSSION PAPER

The Challenge of System-Building in the After-School Field: Lessons From Experience

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> **sys tem. *n.* 1** a set or arrangement of things so related or connected as to form a unity or organic whole . . .
>
> "Thank God we have personal relationships because there is nothing that makes us collaborate."
> > *Chicago after-school leader at the outset of the MOST Initiative*
>
> "There's starting to be that coming together, that pulling together."
> > *A different Chicago after-school leader after three years of MOST activity*

The heterogeneous, decentralized, and fragmented nature of the afterschool field has long been a mixed blessing. It has allowed a variety of community institutions to find a role as providers, and other institutions, such as cultural and arts organizations, to feel welcome in contributing to children's experiences. It has kept bureaucracy to a minimum, allowing after-school programs to remain community oriented and rooted, and to serve all interested children without having to label or categorize. Yet, as societal interest and investment in after-school programs have grown, these same defining qualities have complicated efforts to develop the after-school field in a coherent way, especially in addressing common challenges facing the field. Thus, for instance, the tasks of increasing supply and strengthening program quality are often complicated by lack of city wide capacity for collecting and analyzing information, planning, and priority setting. Providers cannot find, and are sometimes unaware of, resources that would be helpful for their work. Potential funders may not be sure where or how to focus their investments.

If the world of after-school programs is to be made more coherent, that process will occur mostly (and is being attempted mostly) at the city level. In this paper, I analyze the tasks, questions, and challenges associated with what can be described as system-building in the after-school field, focusing on city level efforts.

My basic arguments are that:

(1) System-building has to be understood as a long-term process, tied to broader field building;

(2) Though concerted efforts at system-building are needed in the after-school field, such efforts have to be respectful of the qualities that make after-school programs a distinctive developmental resource for low-income children (for instance, diversity of sponsorship, large numbers of modest size programs, strong community roots);

(3) No single institution or group can claim authority (or legitimacy) to govern a local after-school system; rather, governance has to be more or less democratic and consensual in nature; and

(4) In general, the attributes of well functioning after-school systems need much more debate than they have received to the present.

The paper draws on my personal experience studying system-building in four cities—Boston, Chicago, Seattle, and Baltimore—on my familiarity with efforts in other cities, and on the limited literature. In Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, Julie Spielberger, Sylan Robb, and I studied system-building efforts that were part of the Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund's MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) initiative. In Baltimore, Carol Horton and I studied the systemic dimensions of an after-school initiative that was part of the Safe and Sound Campaign, itself part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Urban Health Initiative.

The Concept of an After-School System

Over the years I have asked many people what the concept of an after-school system meant to them, and what they thought of the after-school system in their city. It was clear from the responses that the concept—both with respect to after-school programming *per se*, and with respect to the idea of service systems in general—evokes varying images. Some thought of particular clusters or types of providers, assumed the after-school system was an extension of the school

system, said there was no after-school system in their city, equated the after-school system with particular initiatives or approaches, and some equated the concept of "system" with large public bureaucracies like education or child welfare.

I will discuss the challenge of conceptualizing after-school systems as a central system-building task. For the moment, the after-school system can be understood as all the institutions that have a stake in after-school programming within some defined geographic boundary (providers, funders, regulators, resource organizations, and families themselves); the policies, procedures, regulations, initiatives, and norms shaping the behavior, interactions, and relationships among these institutions; and, perhaps, the resource base for providing and supporting after-school programming.

> **Cities embody most of the key elements of after-school systems.**

While one can consider the elements and functioning of after-school systems at any level, from neighborhood to nation, the city level makes particular sense, for a number of reasons. Cities embody most of the key elements of after-school systems. Different stakeholders, for example after-school providers and cultural/arts institutions, interact most regularly within the boundaries of a city. Cities tend to have high concentrations of low- and moderate-income families, whose children comprise the majority of participants in after-school programs. And each city has a distinct after-school history and infrastructure, political and institutional culture, and neighborhood structure.

Download the PDF file of Robert Halpern's new paper: "The Challenge of System-Building in the After-School Field: Lessons From Experience."