

# Afterschool in Action:

## Innovative Afterschool Programs Supporting Middle School Youth



Photo provided by Kevin P. Casey

2013



# Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Arts Enrichment in Afterschool	8
An In-depth Look: The Wooden Floor	14
An In-depth Look: Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program	17
Afterschool: A Key to Successful Parent Engagement	20
An In-depth Look: Kid Power Inc. - The VeggieTime Project	25
Afterschool: An Ally in Promoting Middle School Improvement	28
An In-depth Look: Parma Learning Center	34
Digital Media & Learning in Afterschool	37
An In-depth Look: Green Energy Technologies in the City (GET City)	43
Highlights: MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award Past Winners	46
Endnotes	49



*The Afterschool Alliance and MetLife Foundation are proud to celebrate a fifth round of the MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Awards. For the past five years, we have collaborated to highlight the work of quality afterschool programs that support children, families and communities across the nation. Our goal is to ensure all children have access to quality afterschool programs, and the MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Awards are helping raise awareness of the many ways having access to such programs is making a positive difference in the lives of young people.*



Green Energy Technologies in the City (GET City), Lansing, MI

*The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs.*

*For more information visit us at [www.afterschoolalliance.org](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org)*

*MetLife Foundation was established in 1976 to continue MetLife's longstanding tradition of corporate contributions and community involvement. The Foundation's commitment to building a secure future for individuals and communities worldwide is reflected in its dedication to empowering older adults, preparing young people and building livable communities. Since it was established, MetLife Foundation has provided more than \$570 million in grants to nonprofit organizations addressing issues that have a positive impact in their communities.*

*For more information visit us at [www.metlife.org](http://www.metlife.org)*

# Introduction

Afterschool programs offer endless possibilities for children—encouraging them to explore new enrichment activities, inspiring personal growth, and fostering a culture of creativity and discovery—in a safe and nurturing environment.

This shared recognition of the value of afterschool brought together the Afterschool Alliance and MetLife Foundation five years ago. Through a joint effort and competitive awards process, our collaboration has identified and recognized stellar afterschool programs across the country and, in the process, educated elected officials, community leaders, the media and the public about the many benefits afterschool programs have to offer.

Over the course of the past five years, we have spotlighted 26 exemplary programs in 17 states and 24 cities. In our search, we often selected programs doing good work in their communities, but largely unknown outside of their immediate neighborhoods. Through the years, the MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award has evolved and developed a more specific focus. At the start, the awards were broad in scope—an open call to all promising and high-quality afterschool programs. The concentration of our efforts was then narrowed through a thoughtful and deliberate move to bring attention to afterschool programs

*“Middle school is a pivotal time for young people. Afterschool programs are a proven strategy for putting them on the path to success; however, far too many middle school youth lack access to high quality afterschool programs. MetLife Foundation is pleased to join the Afterschool Alliance in recognizing and sharing exemplary models of afterschool programs that help put middle school youth on the path to success.”*

*— Dennis White, President and CEO,  
MetLife Foundation*

that serve older youth—a group that faces unique challenges, presents enormous opportunities and is largely uninvolved in afterschool programs.

For the past few years, our focus has been on afterschool programs that serve middle school youth who are navigating a critical transition, discovering who they are, what their interests are and how to make the best decisions for themselves. Sandwiched in between the early and developmental years of elementary school and the independent high school years, middle school is the time in children’s lives when they are experiencing rapid growth physically, emotionally and mentally. It is when youth begin to develop the skills, attitudes and behaviors that will shepherd them through their high school careers and into their adult lives, and it is the point in time when youth can greatly benefit from the guidance, support and resources that quality afterschool programs have to offer.

## MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award Categories

**Afterschool and Digital Learning** — Programs that have demonstrated success with leveraging digital technology to facilitate engaging learning experiences, enhance technical skills and strengthen critical thinking across core subject areas.

**Afterschool and the Arts** — Programs that have demonstrated success using the arts as means to strengthen self-confidence and self-expression, to build community, and to improve academic and skills development.

**Afterschool and Parent Involvement/Engagement** — Programs that have demonstrated success in creatively engaging parents to help them become more involved in students’ learning both in and outside of school.

**Afterschool and School Improvement** — Programs that have successfully utilized School Improvement Grant funding to help promote positive change and improved academic outcomes in partnering schools.

This year, we received more than 300 nominations from programs across the country—from cities, towns and rural areas—responding to our call for exemplary and innovative afterschool programs successfully engaging middle school students in the areas of school improvement, arts enrichment, parent engagement and digital learning.

It was both exciting and inspirational to read about the great variety and accomplishments of afterschool programs working in these areas. After much debate and deliberation, and with great difficulty due to the high caliber of the programs nominated, 17 programs were selected to be featured in our MetLife Foundation issue brief series. From this group, five were selected as MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovators—receiving a \$10,000 award to support their work and lift up their program as an exemplary model. The 2012 MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award winners are:

### **School Improvement**

- Parma Learning Center – Parma, ID

### **Arts Enrichment**

- The Wooden Floor – Santa Ana, CA
- Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program – Milwaukee, WI

### **Parent Engagement**

- Kid Power, Inc., The VeggieTime Project – Washington, D.C.

### **Digital Learning**

- Green Energy Technologies in the City – Lansing, MI

These winning programs are just a sampling of the numerous afterschool programs across the country keeping children safe, providing an academically enriching learning environment and helping working families. Nationwide, there are 8.4 million children who have access to afterschool programs and the benefits they offer. Of this group, 1.4 million are children in grades 6-8. Despite the strong existing research base that demonstrates the positive outcomes associated with youth participating in afterschool programs, including gains in academics and improvements in behavior, there are still 15.1 million children who are alone and unsupervised during the hours out of school. 3.7 million of these children are middle schoolers.

This compendium is the culmination of the 2012 MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovators Awards process and features the following four issue briefs:

- Afterschool: An Ally in Promoting Middle School Improvement
- Arts Enrichment in Afterschool
- Afterschool: A Key to Successful Parent Engagement
- Digital Media and Learning in Afterschool.

A case study on each Afterschool Innovator is also included in this year's compendium. The program spotlight on this year's award winners gives readers an in-depth look at each program's mission, theory of change, curriculum, and institutional growth and development.

Additionally, in celebration of five years of MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Awards, this year's compendium includes an infographic featuring all past award winners and updates on a few past winners.

Our country has experienced a difficult few years. It has been a challenging economic climate for families and communities around the U.S., and the afterschool field has not been spared. A survey of afterschool providers found that although they primarily serve children from economically disadvantaged households—those who have the most to gain from afterschool and summer programs—many of them are finding their resource pool shrinking, cutting back on services provided, and struggling to meet the needs of the local children and families who need them most.

The MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Awards shine a spotlight on all that is possible in the afterschool field, and this attention is needed now more than ever. This compendium features research and impressive programs that demonstrate the wide range of positive outcomes supported by afterschool. It is our hope that this work brings awareness to the growing need for more quality afterschool programs so that all children have access to the opportunities that these programs afford.

# Arts Enrichment in Afterschool



*“To succeed today and in the future, America’s children will need to be inventive, resourceful and imaginative. The best way to foster that creativity is through arts education.”*

*—Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education*

*“Students who have arts-rich experiences in school do better across-the-board academically, and they also become more active and engaged citizens, voting, volunteering and generally participating at higher rates than their peers.”*

*—Rocco Landesman, Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts*



In 1999, the Arts Education Partnership and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities wrote, "When young people are involved with the arts, something changes in their lives."<sup>1</sup> More than a decade later, the belief that the arts can profoundly impact children's lives has not diminished. However, as a greater emphasis is placed on English Language Arts and math test scores—and as schools face budget cuts at the federal, state and local levels—providing a robust and comprehensive arts education during the school day becomes increasingly challenging. Afterschool programs are perfectly situated to bolster the efforts of schools and ensure that a wide breadth of arts learning experiences are available to students—offering an environment where students can build on music and art lessons learned during the school day, learn new art forms that may not be available at their schools, and deepen their connection to the art world.

### **A Competition for Time and Resources**

The importance of the arts in a child's development is recognized by policy makers at the federal and state levels and by administrators and teachers at the school level. Earlier this year, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated, "all students—100 percent—should have access to arts instruction. All children should have arts-rich schools."<sup>2</sup> And, in fact, 40 states plus Washington, D.C., require districts or schools to provide arts instruction in at least one of the arts disciplines at the middle-school level.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite overwhelming support for the arts, challenges remain to ensuring that students' school experiences are rich in arts education.

*Schools are struggling to offer an assortment of arts programming.*

One significant challenge schools face today is the ability to offer students a wide variety of arts learning experiences. In the 2009-2010 school year music and visual arts education were available in a majority of elementary schools (94 percent and 83 percent, respectively), but just 4 percent of elementary schools—defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics as "schools with the lowest grade lower than or equal to grade 6 and the highest grade lower than or equal to grade 8"—offered drama/theater and only 3 percent provided dance instruction.<sup>4</sup> In addition, comparing the 1999-2000 school year to the 2009-2010 school year, the availability of dance education dropped 17

points (from 20 percent to 3 percent) and the availability of drama/theater dropped 16 points (from 20 percent to 4 percent).<sup>5</sup>

*Teachers are under pressure to increase their focus on reading and math instruction.*

Classroom time is also at a premium in schools as the focus on English Language Arts and math scores intensifies. A national survey of 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade public school teachers found that approximately half say that both arts instruction and music are getting less attention in school (51 percent and 48 percent, respectively). Sixty-two percent of middle school teachers state that other subjects are "crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts" and 79 percent report that "more and more of teaching time is taken up with paperwork and reporting requirements to meet state standards."<sup>6</sup> A 2007 report examining the effects of the No Child Left Behind law on curriculum and instruction time found that at the middle school level, 81 percent of school districts surveyed reported that curriculum changes were made in math and 79 percent reported changing their English Language Arts curriculum to focus more on tested content and skills.<sup>7</sup>

Four in 5 teachers (83 percent) agree that "even when students are struggling, electives are necessary—they give students something to look forward to and are essential to a well-rounded education." However, time dedicated to the arts is lacking in schools.<sup>8</sup> Of elementary schools that offered music education, 7 percent offered it less than once a week and of schools that offered visual arts, 15 percent offered it less than once a week. More than 4 in 10 elementary schools offered dance (47 percent) and drama/theater (42 percent) less than once a week.<sup>9</sup>

*Students in schools serving predominantly low-income households receive less arts instruction than students in schools serving higher-income households.*

Arts learning opportunities are also less likely to be available in elementary schools that predominantly serve students who are from low-income households. For instance, 92 percent of schools with less than 26 percent of their student population qualifying for federal free or reduced price lunch provide visual arts instruction. But among elementary schools whose student population is greater than 75 percent free or reduced price lunch eligible,

80 percent offered visual arts instruction—a 12 point difference or 835,000 more students at schools serving predominantly low-income households who do not receive visual arts instruction. Music education is also less likely to be offered at a school serving a high number of low-income students. Ninety-six percent of elementary schools with the lowest percentage of youth from economically disadvantaged households provide music instruction compared to 89 percent of elementary schools with the highest number of youth from low-income households—a seven point difference or close to 400,000 students.<sup>10</sup>

*“We know that reaching our goal [to provide better arts education for our state’s students] will take many partners; we hope that with increased engagement from education partners and arts partners across the state, we can reach our goal of ongoing, in-depth, and consistent, arts education for every student, at every school, every year.”*

—Washington State Arts Commission

Arts education is competing for schools’ time and resources, but is often coming out second best. The opportunity to leverage the arts and engage students in learning in new ways becomes vulnerable as the school day becomes increasingly focused on reading and math, and limited budgets make it difficult for schools to provide a wide variety of arts programming and dedicate sufficient classroom time to the arts. Cleverly designed and delivered arts education can and should be part of any quality afterschool and summer program but this does not mean that parents, educators and arts organizations should stop advocating for more and better arts enrichment during the school day.

### Why Do Children Need the Arts in Their Lives?

In addition to the intrinsic benefits that they offer, the arts have the ability to influence and shape a child’s development on a number of levels: academically, socially and emotionally. Involvement in the arts allows children to express themselves—tapping into their inventiveness and creativity—and is a fun outlet that helps positively stimulate and motivate students. Evaluation after evaluation demonstrates both the extrinsic and intrinsic benefits that are transferred to children who participate in the arts, such as:<sup>11</sup>

- **Academic gains:** Studies have found that students who participate in arts programs show academic progress<sup>12</sup> and have associated greater levels of engagement in the arts with greater academic gains—students with high levels of participation in the arts received better grades and higher standardized test scores compared to students who had very little involvement in the arts.<sup>13</sup> For example, a long-term study of economically disadvantaged youth participating in community-based afterschool arts programs found that participants had higher rates of academic achievement and were more likely than non-participants to be involved in their school’s student government and participate in a math or science fair.<sup>14</sup>
- **Improved cognitive skills:** The arts also have the ability to help students further develop their cognitive skills—such as memory and the ability to focus—which can benefit them academically and socially. Studies examining the effects of participation in music and theater found that the two art forms helped participants apply strategies learned in rehearsals to improve memorization skills.<sup>15</sup> In addition, behavioral studies of students involved in dance suggest that participation in dance helps students with their focus and attention skills.<sup>16</sup>
- **Positive behaviors:** A number of studies have found positive associations between a student’s behavior and involvement in the arts. For example, arts learning opportunities help encourage students to stay in school.<sup>17</sup> In Pittsburgh, PA, an evaluation of middle school students participating in a collaboration that integrated visual arts into the school curriculum reported that the number of suspensions and discipline referrals decreased and student attendance improved.<sup>18</sup> A separate evaluation of afterschool programs serving middle school students found that students who participated in arts programs reported high levels of interest and motivation and were better able to concentrate.<sup>19</sup>
- **Increased engagement:** Arts have the ability to excite and motivate youth, acting as a gateway to develop their interests in other subjects<sup>20</sup> and improving levels of engagement and lowering levels of indifference among youth. A study examining middle school students in eight afterschool programs focused on arts

enrichment as well as academic enrichment, community service, sports and physical activity found students demonstrated positive engagement and development and exhibited high levels of motivation.<sup>21</sup> A separate evaluation reviewing the 4-H Youth Development Arts and Communication Program in Wisconsin found more than 76 percent of youth stated that their involvement in the afterschool program helped them develop their motivation “quite a bit” or “a great deal” to do their best work.<sup>22</sup>

- **Creativity:** When children are encouraged to think creatively, it lends itself to critical thinking and inventiveness, benefiting them in their adult lives. In fact, a research report found that 97 percent of business leaders and 99 percent of school leaders believe that creativity is increasingly important in U.S. workplaces.<sup>23</sup> A multi-year study of children participating in the Thriving Minds arts afterschool program in Dallas, TX—a program that works with school districts and a large number of arts and science organizations to offer arts and academics in afterschool and summer programs, funded in part by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center initiative and Title I grants—found that while participating in the program, children progressed from interacting with creations to becoming creators themselves. Children advanced from listening to music or singing songs by artists to composing a musical piece or writing an original song.<sup>24</sup>

These positive outcomes demonstrate the possibilities the arts bring to children’s lives and what is at stake when children are unable to engage in arts learning opportunities. With these outcomes in mind, the case is strengthened to find the time and space—both in school and out—in which students can more fully involve themselves in, and benefit from, the arts.

### The Role that Afterschool Programs Can Play

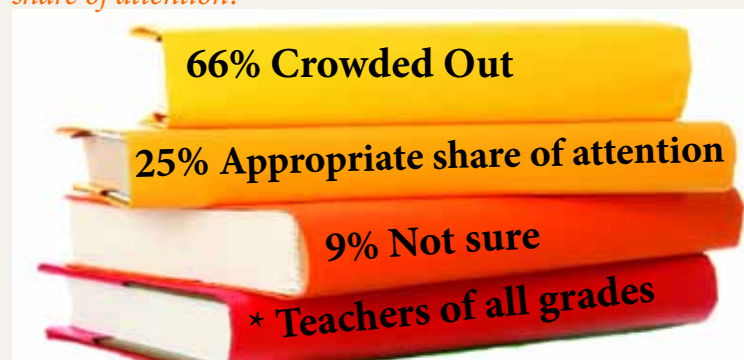
An individual’s introduction to the arts at an early age, particularly before they reach their teen years, is a contributing factor to developing an interest in the arts and ultimately benefitting from what the arts have to offer.<sup>25</sup> At a time when arts education is losing the battle for classroom time in schools, afterschool programs can offer much-needed support and provide students with an additional outlet to participate in the arts. Afterschool

programs across the country are finding new and exciting ways to bring the arts to children in their communities, augmenting students’ access and exposure to the variety of ways the arts can influence their lives and providing the opportunity to further develop a mastery of an art form. A few examples of the ways afterschool programs are broadening middle school students’ access to and time with arts education include:

1. *Working with schools and the community to help ensure all children are able to participate in the arts.*

**The Family Dynamics Beacon Center Afterschool Program**, located at Stephen Decatur Middle School 35 (M.S. 35) in Brooklyn, NY, brings arts programming to students at M.S. 35 who have no access to arts education during the school day. The artist residency program was created in addition to the homework help, service-learning programs and recreational activities the Family Dynamics Beacon Center Afterschool Program already provided. In an innovative partnership with Material for the Arts (MFTA), a New York City Department of Cultural Affairs program, the artist residency program enlists New York City artists to lead daily art-making workshops for students. Students reuse, repurpose and transform donated materials from businesses and individuals into art projects that range from collages to costumes. Each year the Family Dynamics Beacon Center Afterschool Program transforms M.S. 35’s lobby into an art gallery, displaying student art during the program’s annual talent night.

*Would you say that other subjects in your school get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts, or are the other subjects generally getting their appropriate share of attention?\**



\*The Farkas Duffett Research Group. (2012). *Learning Less: Public School Teachers Describe a Narrowing Curriculum*.

2. *Providing an opportunity for children to build on their school-based arts education, further honing their skills and enabling them to master an art form.*

The **Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program** in Milwaukee, WI, is a high-quality, skills-based afterschool music program that prepares middle school students to participate in top-level high school orchestra programs. More than 90 percent of program participants are Latino youth from low-income homes, many of whom would otherwise not have an opportunity to receive serious instruction in violin, viola, cello or guitar. Students are required to practice 30-60 minutes each day and parents must sign off on practice logs. Students also must attend scheduled rehearsals and perform throughout the greater Milwaukee area. The Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program helps students improve their playing skills and prepares them for high-level music performances. Students in the program have performed at national conferences and on television, toured in Europe and released their own CD.

3. *Providing children expanded opportunities to interact with and learn from professional artists.*

The **Wooden Floor** in Santa Ana, CA, offers a curriculum of ballet and modern dance, bringing in leading artists from the community to teach a student body that is 96 percent low-income and 95 percent Latino. It is a unique program that combines high-quality dance education, collaboration with renowned artists, a 10-year mentoring commitment to students, and individualized academic and social services. The Wooden Floor uses dance taught by professional artists to empower children participating in the program: strengthening their self-esteem, self-discipline and sense of accomplishment; helping them learn creative problem-solving; and encouraging teamwork, leadership, cooperative learning, well-being and joy. Professional dancers and choreographers incorporate the life experiences and perspectives of students into the art-making process, creating a stronger connection

*“In both music and visual arts, the tasks, whether responding or creating, had significant intellectual content and often required academic knowledge.”*

*—Stuart Kerachsky, Acting Commissioner,  
National Center for Education Statistics*

between the students and the program, and impart their professional experience to their students. Evaluations of the program found that the overall GPA of students in the program increased from 3.0 to 3.2, 100 percent of students graduated from high school on time and 100 percent of students enrolled in college.

4. *Offering a venue where children can feel safe, explore a variety of art forms and learn to more confidently express themselves.*

**Sitar Arts Center** in Washington, D.C., creates a safe space for more than 800 young people a year, 80 percent of whom come from low-income families. Sitar’s students have the opportunity to sample music, drama, dance, visual arts, digital arts and writing—or delve deeply into one art form. Sitar Arts Center is designed specifically for the arts—with a modern theater, specially designed art rooms, two dance studios, 10 practice rooms, a band room and a digital arts lab—and creates a community environment for young people to freely express themselves and encourages students to experiment with different art forms as they observe other young artists exploring various disciplines. The program partners with some of D.C.’s premiere arts organizations—including The Washington Ballet, the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the National



**Latino  
Arts  
Strings &  
Mariachi Juvenil  
Program in Milwaukee, WI**

Symphony Orchestra—and employs more than 100 volunteer teaching artists, giving their students mentors who are both artistically exemplary and caring adults who provide guidance that carries over into their academic and social lives. Surveys of the program’s students found that 96 percent of students reported that they were confident to express themselves in class, 98 percent reported feeling safe at Sitar Arts Center and 94 percent reported that their art skills have improved because of the program.

5. *Using the arts as a platform to teach children academic subject matter in fun and interesting ways, helping excite students about learning and become more engaged in the subject matter.*

The **Carolina Studios Music Technology Program** is a one-of-a-kind afterschool program in Charleston, SC, aimed at at-risk, urban youth ages 9 to 18. The program combines music, technology, media arts and language arts, offering a structured curriculum designed to encourage and stimulate students’ creative curiosity while providing training in technology skills and improving their academic performance. Appealing to the students’ interest in hip-hop and rap music genres, the Carolina Studios Music Technology program offers them the opportunity to gain proficiency in music creation software programs, create lyrics through written and vocal freelance presentations, collaboratively create CDs, and participate in public performances to showcase their talent. Classroom teachers reported that program participants improved their attendance rates and performance in class, and students reported setting positive future goals for themselves.

## Conclusion

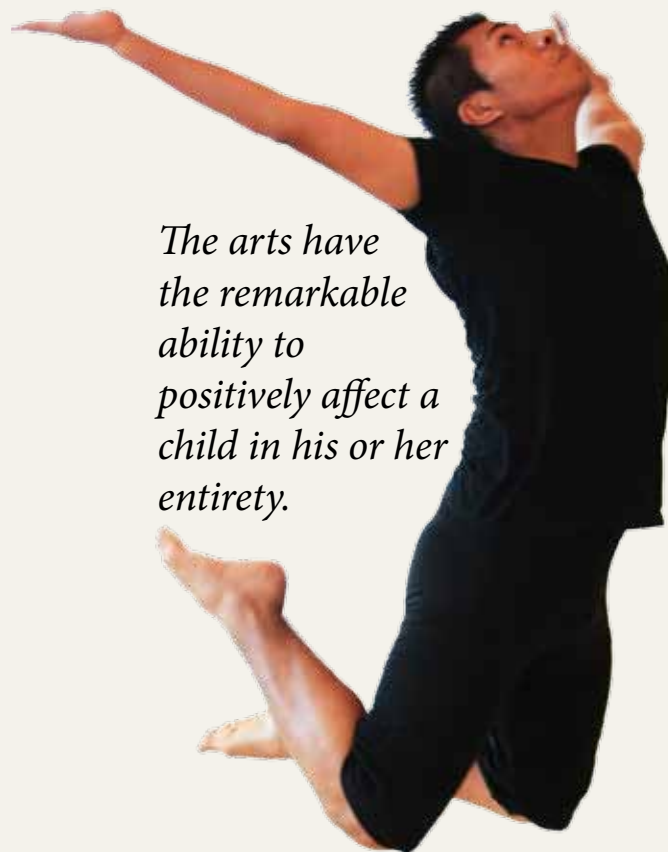
The arts have the remarkable ability to positively affect a child in his or her entirety—influencing his or her developmental, behavioral, social and intellectual capacities. Afterschool programs are helping schools and communities ensure that their children have access to the arts and are able to benefit from all the arts have to offer. The role afterschool programs play in providing arts education and enrichment becomes increasingly important as the arts curriculum finds itself pitted against the pressures of standardized tests.

Afterschool and summer programs draw on the expertise of arts organizations, arts education organizations, and

school arts and music educators, offering broad exposure to the variety of existing art forms and offering dedicated time for deeper learning in the arts. Opportunities for arts education and enrichment, both in school and out of school, can help excite children about school, engage them in academic subjects, improve their focus and spark their creativity. The absence of the arts from a student’s life is a lost opportunity to inspire change and individual growth. Across the country, afterschool programs are providing a nurturing environment and strengthening students’ relationships to the arts, thereby supporting overall student success.

*“The combination of arts and afterschool makes sense. Afterschool programs are making a difference in communities across the country by providing kids with a creative, fun and exciting environment that allows them to express themselves and ultimately grow as individuals.”*

*—Lisa Lucheta, Principal, Torani*



*The arts have the remarkable ability to positively affect a child in his or her entirety.*

# An In-depth Look: The Wooden Floor



Photo by Kevin P. Casey

*“From the very first day our students walk through our doors, they are treated as artists. They have a strong voice in our program’s artistic process, and they know that their ideas and thoughts are valued. We believe dance is a transformational vehicle that gives our students the confidence, perseverance and passion to reach their full potential.”*

*—Dawn Reese, Executive Director and Co-CEO, The Wooden Floor*



**100% of The Wooden Floor alumni have graduated from high school on time and 100% of alumni have enrolled in college.**

**L**ocated in Santa Ana, CA, The Wooden Floor is an afterschool dance education program that combines dance, academics and family services. The Wooden Floor takes a holistic teaching approach to dance. At its core is the principle that dance is a transformational vehicle. In addition to teaching self-awareness and dance skills the program cultivates self-assurance, self-discipline and a sense of accomplishment through dance.

A unique feature of The Wooden Floor is the level of dedication it requires of its students, as well as the level of commitment it gives in return. Students in the program—who must qualify as low-income—pledge a 10-year commitment to the program, and agree to attend at least 80 percent of their classes during the commitment period. In return, the program offers all student classes, workshops and family programs free of charge. Ninety-five percent of program participants qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program and 95 percent are Latino.

The Wooden Floor is open 38 weeks of the year, including the summer, offering 10 levels of ballet and modern dance classes with a number of internationally recognized choreographers, designers, artists and dancers. In addition to dance, the program places a strong emphasis on academics. Individualized one-on-one tutoring and homework assistance are available to all students on a daily basis. Students with a GPA under 2.0 are required to attend the program's tutoring sessions. In addition, all 7th and 8th graders must take part in mandatory life skills

and character-building workshops. The workshops—the IMAGINE series for girls and the On Target series for boys—help students chart an individualized course through high school and on to college. The goal of the workshops is to teach students the motivation and discipline necessary to make positive choices in their lives and reach their goals.

The Wooden Floor's field trips and activities are also a mix of culture and academics. The program takes students to ballet performances, symphony concerts and the theater, and offers families tickets to various performances. Students travel with the program to colleges around Southern California, taking part in college tours and learning more about the campuses. Additionally, the program hosts a Career Night, inviting corporate partners and community businesses to speak to students about the range of job opportunities available to them, as well as the skills and perseverance needed to attain those jobs. In the summer, in addition to bringing in “master class” dance teachers and academic support services, students have the opportunity to attend summer camps at Yosemite National Park and Big Bear Lake.

At The Wooden Floor, parents are viewed as partners, and program staff work with parents to keep them engaged in their child's journey through the program. The program includes a family service component, offering counselors, in-house crisis intervention and outside referrals to partner organizations.

Individualized student attention plays a central role in the program. Students are paired with faculty members who work with them throughout their time at The Wooden Floor, providing students with a sense of consistency and helping establish a deeper level of trust between students and faculty. A close student-teacher relationship allows for real-time feedback from teachers and opens up the channels of communication. Students often view the program as a second home, and say they feel safe and taken care of when at the program.

Since 2005, 100 percent of the program's alumni have graduated from high school on time and 100 percent of alumni have enrolled in college. Many program alumni are the first in their families to attend college.

The Wooden Floor grew out of the need for a safe environment for the youth in the Santa Ana area, which

in the 1980s experienced high levels of crime and gang violence. In 1983 Beth Burns, a sister with the Sisters of St. Joseph order, founded the small ballet summer pilot program to keep youth safe, teach them dance and help them gain self-confidence. Over the course of nearly 30 years, The Wooden Floor has metamorphosed from a small-scale summer pilot program housed in a church basement and focused on keeping youth away from dangerous situations, to a program in its own 21,000 square-foot home that not only concentrates on the transformative power of dance, but also incorporates family services, academics and youth development components. In the past five years, a greater emphasis has been placed on creating college pathways for students to help break the cycle of poverty.

To spread the word about their program, The Wooden Floor hosts a “Dance Free Week,” providing dance education workshops to more than 3,000 students at Title I schools in the Santa Ana area and neighboring cities. Through the years, the program has experienced higher student retention rates and higher enrollment numbers. In the past two years, enrollment increased approximately 80 percent.

High enrollment and retention numbers are indicators of The Wooden Floor’s success; however, they have also created challenges for the program. The Wooden Floor is currently exploring ways to expand their facilities and identify opportunities to grow their program in order to meet the needs of their community. Moving forward, The Wooden Floor will use their MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award to expand their IMAGINE and On Target workshops for their middle schoolers, as well as their family services programs.

## The Wooden Floor

*Category: Afterschool and the Arts*

*Location: Santa Ana, CA*

**Number of Middle Schoolers Served Per Day: 91**

**Year Started: 1983**

### **Main Sources of Funding:**

- Individuals
- Individual foundations
- Corporations

### **Recommendations for Other Programs:**

- Have a strong vision and clear understanding of the program’s theory of change that is tied to the program’s strategic plan.
- Stay closely connected to your community—keeping in tune with and at the forefront of community issues and events.
- Give students a voice in the program to show them that their opinion matters.





# An In-depth Look: Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program



*“Music is a form of expression that has the ability to not only change and improve a child’s life, but sometimes save a child’s life. Growing up, I was fortunate to experience firsthand the profound life saving effects music can have on a child. The Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program is creating opportunities for Latino youth to discover the world of possibilities available to them and the greatness inside of them.”*

*— Dinorah Marquez, Director, Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program*

**T**he Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program in Milwaukee, WI, is a high-level, high-quality strings music program that prepares Latino youth to participate in high school- and college-level music programs. The program stemmed from the conviction that music is a life-changing and lifesaving activity for children. Now 10 years old, the Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program is more than a safe haven for its students, it is a place where middle schoolers can explore who they are, creatively express themselves and gain self-confidence, helping propel them toward future success.

Founded in 2002, the Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program had just 23 violin and viola students in its first year. Through the years, the program grew to include additional string instruments, such as the cello, bass and classical guitar, and additional ensembles, including two youth orchestras, a guitar ensemble and a mariachi band. Today, the program stands at 150 students, with a waitlist of more than 140 students.

A feature of the Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program that sets it apart from other music afterschool programs is the music scholarship it affords to all students who are accepted into the program. Through the scholarship program, students partake in private and small group lessons, and are also provided with instruments, sheet music and any other materials they might need to participate. The scholarship's duration is solely dependent on the student. The program is committed to each student for as long as the student wishes to stay involved in and dedicated to the program through the 12th grade. The scholarship is of significant value to students enrolled in the program—100 percent of whom qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program.

During the school year the program runs Monday through Friday from 2:30-7:00 p.m. and Saturday 8:00 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Students participate in individual lessons, small group lessons and larger ensemble practices. The curriculum is separated into instrumental practice, an orchestra experience and a three-level mariachi training program. Youth involved in the program are exposed to a wide variety of music genres, and while there is a primary focus on classical and Latin American music, students also play everything from folk music to contemporary popular music. For example, during the summer the Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program offers a five week



## Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program

*Category: Afterschool and the Arts*

*Location: Milwaukee, WI*

**Number of Middle Schoolers Served Per Day: 39**

**Year Started: 2002**

### **Main Sources of Funding:**

- Individual foundations
- Fundraisers and parent booster club

### **Recommendations for Other Programs:**

- Keep expectations of your students high and do not expect less from them. When they see you hold them to higher standards, they will rise to the occasion.
- Set personalized goals for students, creating a moment of success for them at each lesson and filling them with a sense of accomplishment.
- Create an environment where children feel comfortable experimenting with music and expressing themselves.

program that allows students to explore different styles and genres of music, such as chamber music, and adds an Afro-Caribbean music ensemble. During the summer, the program also brings in high school-aged program alumni to tutor the younger students. This arrangement allows former students to practice their teaching skills, act as mentors to current students and give back to the program.

A well-rounded cultural experience plays a significant role in the program as well. Students attend concerts, musicals and theater performances at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts and local colleges, giving them a chance to experience and explore venues that many students of the program have not had the opportunity to access before. The program also works with community nonprofit and cultural groups to procure tickets to museums and events for students and their families.

High expectations are placed on all program participants as well as their families. Students are expected to practice for 30-60 minutes each day, maintain daily practice logs and attend all scheduled rehearsals unless absent from school or the absence is pre-approved by their instructor. Individualized short-term goals are established for each student to create moments of success in each lesson. In addition, long-term goals are created to help students track their progress throughout their time in the program. All students are required to participate in three solo recitals a year, one of which is judged by visiting music professionals who are brought in to score performances and give students expert feedback. Parents must sign off on practice logs and provide or arrange for transportation to rehearsals and performances. The program similarly places a high level of importance on students' academic achievement, and middle schoolers are expected to maintain a grade point average of "C" or higher.

Students rise to the program's expectation of excellence, receiving invitations to perform at concerts; national conferences; on television; and at festivals throughout the greater Milwaukee area, nearby cities and abroad. In 2010 the Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program also released their first CD, *Los Viajeros*.

The Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program hopes to continue their success empowering the youth of their program and would like to expand their program and admit more students. The program is also interested in starting

an introductory strings program for very young children, which would include a literacy program, technique instruction and small group lessons. An additional project of interest is providing a "weekend institute" for students who are more advanced, helping to better prepare them for college music auditions.



*Founded in 2002, the Latino Arts Strings & Mariachi Juvenil Program had just 23 violin and viola students in its first year. Today, the program stands at 150 students, with a waitlist of more than 140 students.*

# Afterschool: A Key to Successful Parent Engagement



*“But all these innovative programs and expanded opportunities will not, in and of themselves, make a difference if each of us, as parents and as community leaders, fail to do our part by encouraging excellence in our children.”*

*—President Barack Obama*

*“Research shows that parent involvement in schools has multiple positive impacts: student success increases, along with teacher morale and overall school quality. It’s like the secret ingredient in the recipe for educational success!”*

*—Betsy Landers, National PTA President*

Parents are a child’s very first teacher. This is true from Los Angeles to London, Tangier to Taipei, and every place in between. And, as children continue their educational journey, parents are often the common denominator guiding them through each leg of that journey. In fact, the list of studies that demonstrate the ties between parent engagement and student success is both long and compelling, and one would be hard pressed to find a policy maker, educator or parent who did not believe in the power of parent engagement in a child’s education. Education policies have been developed to bolster parent engagement at school in response to research proving its value. However, schools have come up against challenges to fully engaging parents to be more active stewards in their child’s education. Afterschool programs are an ideal partner to help schools break down the barriers often present between parents and schools. They bring unique opportunities to the table that can work to improve parent engagement in students’ learning. Together, schools and afterschool programs can help increase parent engagement, paving the road for students to succeed academically, become more self-confident and enhance their overall well-being.

### **The Role of Parents in Student Success**

Parents are a valuable asset to promoting student success, especially during the middle school years when “children often become less focused on school and run the risk of disengaging”<sup>1</sup> and when parent involvement decreases.<sup>2</sup> Other family members and supportive adults—which encompass caring adults such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and mentors—also encourage student growth.<sup>3</sup> An extensive body of research exists that demonstrates the number of positive outcomes associated with parent engagement in their child’s education.<sup>4</sup> Studies show it improves students’ academic performance, attendance and graduation rates; reduces dropout rates and at-risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use; and positively impacts students’ attitudes, behaviors and overall well-being.<sup>5</sup> What’s more, these benefits remain true for children and families regardless of household income, race or ethnicity.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is important to note that there is a range of ways for parents to engage in their child’s learning, each with different degrees of effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> A meta-analysis of studies that focus specifically on parent involvement

during the middle school years identified three distinctive categories of parent involvement:

- School-based involvement, such as volunteering at school and interaction between teachers and parents
- Home-based involvement, such as help with homework and other academic-related activities at home
- Academic socialization, which includes communication between parents and children that conveys the importance of education and encourages future academic and occupational goals<sup>8</sup>

The analysis found that while parent involvement as a whole is associated with positive gains in academic achievement among middle schoolers, activities falling under the category of academic socialization demonstrated the strongest relationship.<sup>9</sup> A separate multi-year case study on parent engagement in middle school offered policy recommendations associated with academic socialization after evaluating the effects of various modes of engagement. Recommendations included helping parents better communicate their hopes to their child, strengthening relationships, and developing trust between parents and school staff, ensuring parents are able to attend school events, and working with parents to further parent engagement efforts.<sup>10</sup>

### **Why Is It So Hard for Schools to Fully Engage Parents?**

For more than four decades through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) policy makers have embraced the importance of parent engagement and have worked to incorporate it into education policy. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 formalized inclusion of parent engagement, providing a specific definition of parental involvement that explicitly delineates how parents are able to participate in their child’s education at school.<sup>11</sup> Recognizing the important role of parents, the Department of Education’s “Parental Involvement Guidance” stated, “When schools collaborate with parents to help their children learn and when parents participate in school

activities and decision-making about their children's education, children achieve at higher levels. In short, when parents are involved in education, children do better in school and schools improve.<sup>12</sup> More recently, the Department of Education included family engagement as a turnaround principle for school improvement efforts under the ESEA flexibility waivers.<sup>13</sup>

However, despite considerations and efforts to involve parents, schools face multiple challenges to improve parent engagement levels. Lack of time on the part of both parents and staff as well as lack of staff training in working with parents have been identified as barriers. Others include cultural, socioeconomic and language differences between parents and staff as well as parent attitudes toward schools, particularly in schools serving majority low-income households and schools with higher levels of minority enrollment.<sup>14</sup>

The Department of Education's 2006-2007 "Parent and Family Involvement in Education" survey found that just 55 percent of parents were "very satisfied with the way school staff interacts with parents."<sup>15</sup> In addition, although the NCLB law includes language to boost parent engagement in schools, many in the education field have argued that the law has not increased engagement, with critiques ranging from too strong a focus on compliance to not enough guidance on how to better involve parents.<sup>16</sup>

### **Afterschool Programs as a "Broker" Between Parents and Schools**

Afterschool programs are uniquely situated to address obstacles schools face and help improve parent engagement. For instance, community-based afterschool programs—that are also often staffed by members of the community—may be viewed as more approachable by parents, thereby filling the role of "broker" between parents and schools.<sup>17</sup> In this role, programs are able to offer guidance and assistance to parents who may be overwhelmed by their school system, provide parents with information on how to better communicate with school staff, and help coordinate and facilitate parent-teacher meetings.<sup>18</sup> Afterschool programs also have the ability to be creative and tailor their supportive services to the distinctive needs of their community. For example, afterschool programs are able to keep their doors open into the evening hours and on weekends to facilitate parent involvement; draw

parents and families in by providing counseling and other wraparound services; offer English classes and translation assistance for families who are not fluent in English; and provide incentives for participation, such as food.<sup>19</sup>

The advantage of afterschool programs addressing parent engagement is two-fold. Not only do afterschool programs have the ability to break down barriers schools face when working to increase parent engagement as outlined above, but afterschool programs also provide additional opportunities to encourage parent involvement and positively impact children's academic success, behavior and overall well-being.<sup>20</sup> Benefits associated with parent engagement in afterschool programs, such as fostering student success, are very much in line with benefits associated with parent engagement in their child's education during the regular school day.<sup>21</sup> In addition, parent engagement in afterschool programs bolsters participation of youth in programs, supports the quality of afterschool programs, and is a constructive influence on parent involvement at home and at school.<sup>22</sup>



*Afterschool programs are uniquely situated to address obstacles schools face and help improve parent engagement.*

*"...good parenting and family involvement in schools are essential if children are going to flourish and fulfill their dreams."*

*—Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education*



**Kid Power Inc.'s VeggieTime Project in Washington, D.C.**

### **Afterschool Programs Encourage Parent Participation**

A research review examining the characteristics and activities that effectively support parent engagement found that the most successful programs share a number of key characteristics. Many successful afterschool programs:

- Promote a welcoming environment,
- Address misconceptions that may be held by teachers and parents about the role of parent engagement,
- Use resources to support increased parent involvement,
- Understand the effect of children's home environment on their academic performance,
- Organize the program structure to encourage parent engagement, and
- Provide parents with the information and tools to support their children's academic success.<sup>23</sup>

Many afterschool programs are actively incorporating the above measures into their programming and working to implement practices that engage parents through:

1. *Helping open the channels of communication and understanding between parents and children by offering counseling and family supportive services that encourage student success.*

**The Family Empowerment Program (FEP)** in Miami, FL, works to help grow children's positive communication and social skills, and places a strong focus on developing children's self-worth, empathy, self-discipline, responsibility and ability to collaborate. The afterschool program also combines a structured learning environment with free individual and family counseling services for parents and children to practice problem solving and communication skills. FEP offers learning sessions to provide students and parents the opportunity for family bonding and improving family communication. Parents are taught how to set positive boundaries, establish healthy standards for behaviors and recognize warning signs of risky behavior. In addition, the program helps to facilitate parent involvement in their child's school. An evaluation of the program found that students significantly improved coping with conflict and understanding their self-worth, and parents made positive gains in conflict management and bonding with their child. Of children participating in the program who were at risk of or who had a first criminal offense, 98 percent remained arrest-free.

2. *Building trust with families who may feel disengaged and disconnected from the school system and providing resources to help parents become active stewards in their child's education.*

**The Sunnyside Community Services Beacon Community Center (Beacon)** in Sunnyside, NY, actively reaches out to immigrant families in their community, addressing the barriers that make it difficult for these families to become actively involved in their child's education. In addition to providing academic enrichment activities—such as life-skills development, career awareness, community building, recreation and the arts—the Beacon offers adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes to help parents gain proficiency in English, multilingual workshops to help parents adapt to the policies and expectations of New York City schools, and events such as potluck dinners and performances to foster positive multigenerational and multicultural interactions. The Beacon is open until 10 p.m. on weeknights and all day on Saturday to ensure working parents are able to participate in the program's numerous activities.

3. *Leveraging program resources to incentivize parent participation.*

**Kid Power, Inc.’s VeggieTime Project** in Washington, D.C.—a program that focuses on nutrition, health, the environment and civic participation—encourages family involvement through its gardening and cooking activities. Parents and children work together to harvest vegetables, learn healthy eating habits and cook healthy meals. In addition, the VeggieTime Project distributes a portion of the produce grown to families participating in the program. Family surveys found 100 percent of parents rated VeggieTime’s programming as “excellent” or “good.” Evaluations of children participating in the VeggieTime Project are also favorable. For example, 99 percent of students were promoted to the next grade, students’ average “good behavior” score increased from 67 percent to 81 percent and students’ average nutritional knowledge score increased from 61 percent to 75 percent.

4. *Soliciting and incorporating parent feedback and suggestions into program structure to gain buy-in and engender participation.*

**The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families @ PS/MS 279** in New York, NY, encourages parent engagement through a science and math program that is for both children and parents. Students and their parents learn side by side in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) activities, such as building a wind cannon, producing lip gloss and learning about weather patterns. Located in a heavily Latino community, the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families conducts lessons in both English and Spanish to encourage greater family participation. The program also solicits feedback from parents and offers workshops based on parent interests, such as citizenship and English language classes for adults. In addition, translation services for parents who need assistance during parent-teacher conferences are also provided. Self-evaluations have revealed gains in parent involvement and student knowledge of STEM.

### Conclusion

There is little dispute regarding the benefits that parent engagement brings to a child’s academic success. Policy makers, school administrators and teachers are conscientiously working to ensure parents are involved

in their child’s education. However, these endeavors are challenged by existing obstacles between parents and schools, such as limited resources and time, language barriers, and levels of trust. Afterschool programs are able to transcend these divides, offering an environment where parents can feel at ease; providing parent-related activities and family services during times more accessible to working parents; offering resources to help parent-child communication; and providing parents with the tools to become more empowered in their involvement with their child’s education. Together with schools, afterschool programs are strengthening parent engagement efforts and helping provide the foundation necessary to make sure that children are on the path to educational success.

*“Parents, schools and communities working together create meaningful partnerships that ultimately lead to significant gains in student achievement and success.”*

*—John D. Barge, State School Superintendent, Georgia*





# An In-depth Look: Kid Power Inc.- The VeggieTime Project



*“Our VeggieTime Project’s focus extends far beyond teaching our students how best to grow fruits and vegetables. We not only introduce our youth and their families to the benefits of fresh and healthy foods, we help them to adopt healthy living practices, learn marketing and management strategies, and become stewards of positive social change in our community. Together with students and their families, the VeggieTime Project is helping to create a healthier, greener and more sustainable D.C.”*

*—Andria Hollis, Executive Director, Kid Power, Inc.*

**F**ounded in 2002, Kid Power, Inc. originally made its start as an organization dedicated to history and the performing arts. The program slowly evolved to encompass a service-learning focus, with the goals of improving the surrounding community and empowering children to become informed and engaged advocates for themselves and for their communities. In 2008, the VeggieTime Project—created out of a growing interest in, and need for, fresh and healthy foods and nutrition education for youth in D.C.—launched at a few school gardens at Kid Power, Inc. sites. Today, the program has expanded to more than 50 garden beds at all 10 Kid Power, Inc. sites and serves a high-needs population, with 90 percent of program participants qualifying for the federal free or reduced price lunch program and a quarter of students with special needs and/or disabilities.

The VeggieTime Project is one of Kid Power, Inc.'s four afterschool programs offered 36 weeks of the year in neighborhoods throughout Washington, D.C., including six weeks during the summer. Each day, the program dedicates one hour to help students with their homework. The remainder of the program is a mix of work in the garden—growing and harvesting produce—and academic enrichment activities. Reading, writing, and math lessons and concepts are blended into activities focused on nutrition, health, environmental science, and sustainable and organic agricultural growing practices. Students in the VeggieTime Project participate in a variety of activities that range from maintaining gardening journals that chart the growth of crops to learning to monitor their heart rate and pulse to applying environmentally-friendly pest management practices in their gardens. Additionally, students visit farmers in the Washington Metropolitan Area to view large-scale agricultural production and take trips to local restaurants to learn about farm-to-table practices.

A strong parent engagement component is just one unique feature of the VeggieTime Project. Families are encouraged to take part in regular gardening and cooking activities, help sell produce at local farmers' markets, and participate in nutrition classes. Kid Power, Inc. views parents as a part of their team and requires VeggieTime Project staff to attend training sessions that teach how to best encourage parent engagement in the program. A deliberate and conscious effort is made to connect parents to their children's work in the program as well as to the goals of the program. Staff

## Kid Power, Inc.- The VeggieTime Project

*Category: Afterschool & Parent Engagement*

*Location: Washington, D.C.*

**Number of Middle Schoolers Served Per Day:** 150

**Year Started:** 2008

### **Main Sources of Funding:**

- 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers
- D.C. Trust
- Individual foundations
- Corporations

### **Recommendations for Other Programs:**

- Create an environment of trust and openness among program participants and families.
- Respect the voice of both parents and students.
- If kids are excited about their work, their excitement will translate into increased involvement on the part of parents.
- Provide mentoring and leadership roles for youth, offering a path to future career opportunities.
- Show students that their work and their voice can make a difference in the community.



schedule weekly check-ins with parents to develop trust and build a better rapport between the two parties. All parents are also encouraged to attend a parent orientation session when their child first enrolls in the VeggieTime Project. In addition, the VeggieTime Project distributes a portion of the produce grown to participating families.

Youth have a strong voice in the development of the program's curriculum. For instance, lessons on molecular gastronomy were incorporated into the program in response to student interest in the subject after watching the television show "Top Chef." Students have also created public service announcements, advocated for community wellness programs and testified in front of the D.C. City Council to share lessons learned through the VeggieTime Project.

Program assessments show favorable results for student participants. In Kid Power's 2010-2011 assessment data, 99 percent of students successfully graduated to the next grade and 84 percent of students maintained high program attendance levels. The program's behavioral, nutritional and civic assessments also found positive gains. Students' average "good behavior" score increased from 67 percent to 81 percent, students' average nutritional knowledge score increased from 61 percent to 75 percent and students' civic assessment scores improved from an average of 79 percent to 82 percent. Students also completed more than 8,000 service hours.

*While participating in Kid Power, 99% of students successfully graduated to the next grade.*



Hands-on and participatory activities are strong draws for middle schoolers who are excited to take part in a curriculum that is challenging, yet seamlessly combines fun and academics. Another factor in the program's success with student recruitment and retention is employing a staff that includes federal work study students from local colleges and program alumni. Students in the program are able to build relationships with a staff comprised of passionate and caring adults and older youth who are often from the same community.

*84% of students in Kid Power maintained high program attendance levels.*



Broad community support—with partners that include D.C. Public Schools, D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation, the Capital Area Food Bank, and Booz Allen Hamilton—illustrates the VeggieTime Project's positive impact on the community. Moving forward, with the help of the MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award, Kid Power, Inc. hopes to expand its VeggieTime Project by reaching a greater number of families and youth in the community, building greenhouses to allow year-round gardening, and establishing their own Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project.

# Afterschool: An Ally in Promoting Middle School Improvement



*“The unique opportunities for innovation presented while working in a turnaround school have been exciting for me as an English Language Development and Reading Interventions teacher. Through the afterschool programming and the guidance provided by the turnaround grant, I have been able to offer students extra support before and after school that would not be available otherwise.”*

*–Katie Estabrook, teacher at Rachel B. Noel Middle School in Denver, CO*

According to the Department of Education there are approximately 5,000 chronically underperforming schools across the country, making up roughly 5 percent of all schools in the U.S. These schools are in all community types, with half in big cities, close to a third in rural areas, and the rest in suburbs and small towns.<sup>1</sup> Many of these schools have developed an immutable reputation in their communities as unsafe and to be avoided if at all possible. High schools receive much of the blame for the 7,000 students who drop out of school every day,<sup>2</sup> but many middle schools are also failing to help students succeed. In 2005, middle schools were overrepresented on the list of failing schools, constituting 37 percent of Title I schools identified for improvement, but only 14 percent of all Title I schools.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the middle school years can often be the first step in students falling off the track toward high school graduation. Eminent drop-out researcher Bob Balfanz found that sixth graders who failed math or English/reading, attended school less than 80 percent of the time, or received an unsatisfactory behavior grade in a core course had only a 10 to 20 percent chance of graduating from high school on time.<sup>4</sup>



The Parma Learning Center in rural Parma, Idaho

Additional supports are needed to help these schools and the students attending them become successful. In response, the Obama administration has put in place several highly-funded grant opportunities to help struggling communities turn around their most underperforming schools including Race to the Top, the Investing in Innovation Fund and School Improvement Grants. Along with funding, support from surrounding communities is also crucial. New leaders need to arise not only in schools in the form of principals and teachers, but community-wide with parents, businesses and local governments stepping to the plate to provide additional assistance to help the nation's middle schoolers thrive.

*“School improvement comes about when schools have the tools they need to improve and their focus on student achievement is front and center. The E. Greenwood Leadership Academy is a great example of that. Harvard has been a critical partner, providing everything from afterschool support and homework help to parent engagement, leadership training, and professional development for teachers. It’s partnerships like these that have a huge impact on teaching and learning.”*

*–Carol R. Johnson, Superintendent  
Boston Public Schools*

Most notably, afterschool programs can offer an environment that reinforces the new atmosphere developed in an improvement school and provide new opportunities for children in need of innovative, active learning experiences. Afterschool programs also present an avenue for community involvement in school improvement efforts and have been proven to increase academic achievement, improve students’ attitudes toward school and reduce antisocial behaviors,<sup>5</sup> all of which are keys to successful school turnaround. With dedicated funding from the Department of Education in place, it is important that expanded learning efforts, such as afterschool and summer programs that include community partners, are seen as a vital element in middle school turnaround across the country.

### **Afterschool Programs: Proven, Effective Models for Middle School Development**

The number of studies proving afterschool’s effectiveness at not only enriching students’ experience outside of school, but also improving their attendance, grades and behavior in school continues to grow:

- Ninety-four percent of middle school students attending 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) programs in Pinellas County, FL, maintained or showed growth in language arts (compared to 59 percent of non-participants), 84 percent maintained or showed growth in math (compared to 62 percent of non-participants) and 85 percent maintained or showed growth in science (compared to 40 percent of non-participants).<sup>6</sup>
- An evaluation of THINK Together afterschool programs in Santa Ana, CA, conducted by University of California, Irvine found that the more THINK Together afterschool opportunities a student participates in, the more likely they are to experience significant standardized test gains in math and English/language arts.<sup>7</sup>
- Students in Washington, D.C., attending Higher Achievement’s intensive year-round middle school afterschool and summer learning program significantly improved their standardized test scores.<sup>8</sup>

However, if afterschool programs across the country are going to be successful allies in school improvement efforts, it is imperative that they strive toward the highest level of effectiveness. In their analysis of 68 afterschool studies, researchers Joseph Durlak and Roger Weissberg identified four evidence-based practices that were associated with significant improvements in students’ self-concept, relationship with school and positive social behaviors, while also reducing negative conduct and drug use, and improving test scores and attendance rates. The four practices formed the easy-to-remember acronym SAFE:

1. Use of a *Sequenced* set of learning activities to achieve skill objectives;
2. *Active* learning techniques to help participants acquire targeted skills;
3. *Focused* attention and time on skill development; and
4. *Explicit* objectives for the skills being taught.<sup>9</sup>

Even when programs strive toward this level of effectiveness, they are too often viewed as add-ons that are not essential to regular school day learning.<sup>10</sup> High-quality afterschool programs, as exemplified above, can provide an unparalleled opportunity for schools to create partnerships that help enrich student learning and boost school improvement efforts.

## Federal Funding for School Improvement Grants

Fiscal Year	Amount Appropriated
2007	\$125 Million
2008	\$491,265
2009	\$3.5 Billion*
2010	\$546 Million
2011	\$535 Million
2012	\$534 Million

\*Includes \$3 Billion from the American Recovery and Investment Act

## Lessons Can Be Learned from Expanded Learning

While awareness of the importance of expanded learning has grown over the past 10 years with the success of the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC initiative, many school reform efforts have yet to take full advantage of expanded learning opportunities to better engage students. Most notably, expanded learning opportunities and the additional time they offer can have impacts on academic, developmental and health outcomes, which help youth in the program to be more prepared and ardent learners.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, schools can benefit from partnerships with afterschool and summer learning programs in the following ways:

- Expanded learning offers an opportunity for enrichment activities that may be cut from the regular school day in an effort to maximize time for core subjects.
- Expanded learning opportunities, especially summer programs, help students successfully navigate transitions into and out of middle school.
- Afterschool and summer programs can improve school culture and community image through parent engagement, public events and performances.
- Afterschool and summer staff, volunteers and mentors can assist school day staff and help support in-school learning.<sup>12</sup>

With these benefits in mind, expanded learning opportunities should be key to school improvement efforts going forward, and lessons from effective afterschool enrichment should also be used to inform all aspects of improvement efforts for middle schools nationwide.

### **School Improvement Grants: Where Does Afterschool Fit In?**

School Improvement Grant (SIG) dollars represent the most direct attempt by the Department of Education to help turn around America's lowest performing schools. Since entering office in 2009, the Obama administration has dedicated more than \$4 billion in School Improvement Grants to more than 1,200 schools.<sup>13</sup> Previously the grant program had been funded modestly, but in 2009, utilizing additional funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Obama administration dedicated more than \$3 billion to SIG and has funded it with more than \$500 million each year since. The intent of the grants is to boost academic attainment in the country's lowest-performing five percent of schools. The Department of Education is required to award grants to each state based on the proportional share of funds it receives under Title I and then states provide subgrants to eligible school districts. When eligible low-performing schools apply they are required to demonstrate their commitment to advancing achievement by utilizing one of the following improvement models as defined by the Department of Education:

- *Turnaround Model* – School districts would replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff, adopt a new governance structure and implement a new or revised instructional program.

*“What is new is that today's leaders are looking at a wider array of approaches for expanding learning time...Based on a growing sense that schools cannot do this work alone, states, districts, and individual schools are seeking ways to tap the resources of community partners to help ensure that every child is ready for success.”*

*–Sharon Deich, vice president of the education policy consulting firm Cross and Joftus*

- *Restart Model* – Districts would close failing schools and reopen them under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an educational management organization selected through a rigorous review process.
- *School Closure* – Districts would close a failing school and enroll the students who attended that school in other high-achieving schools in the district.
- *Transformational Model* – Districts would address four specific areas: 1) developing teacher and school leader effectiveness; 2) implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies; 3) extending learning and teacher planning time and creating community-oriented schools; and 4) providing operating flexibility and sustained support.<sup>14</sup>

Twenty-one percent of schools implementing one of the four SIG models are middle schools.<sup>15</sup> Expanded learning opportunities—like afterschool and summer learning programs—can arguably be a strategy in all of these reform models for middle schools. The transformational model has been the most popular among grantees, accounting for almost 75 percent of SIG schools to date.<sup>16</sup> This option offers the most flexibility in terms of staffing and programming, and afterschool efforts fit nicely with the directive to extend learning and create community-oriented schools. In addition, many afterschool programs are currently situated in the same communities as SIG schools: 1 out of every 3 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC programs is located in a low performing school and 1 in 4 SIG-funded schools also has a 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grant.<sup>17</sup> With afterschool programs already located in some of the nation's highest-need communities, it makes sense for them to partner in school improvement efforts, especially in schools utilizing the afterschool-friendly turnaround, restart or transformational models.

### **In Partnership with Schools, Afterschool Programs Can Aid Improvement Efforts**

Many successful school improvement efforts have taken steps to more fully integrate the afterschool programs into the learning community being developed in turnaround schools. In such efforts, programs and partner schools should look to:

- Align school and afterschool curricula;

- Create a position for a teacher liaison that facilitates coordination between the school and the afterschool program;
- Utilize afterschool staff to supply summer and intersession programs; and
- Include afterschool staff in school meetings and professional development opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

Aligning school and afterschool improvement endeavors can provide a full learning experience for children that need more time to learn, as well as support from the community and a diverse array of enrichment opportunities. Of course, there are challenges inherent in adopting afterschool initiatives into a School Improvement Grant:

- The SIG process is fast-moving, complex and subject to confusion.
- Afterschool is mentioned in the guidance but only as a permissive component rather than a requirement, meaning many schools can overlook afterschool as a component in turnarounds.
- With new players involved in school improvement efforts, including education management organizations and charter organizations, afterschool leaders need to build new relationships.
- A radical turnaround in a short period of time can cause tumult and immense change in the programs involved.<sup>19</sup>

To help overcome these challenges at the local level and solidify the role of afterschool in school improvement, afterschool programs are helping in a variety of ways to ensure that expanded learning opportunities are integrated into school reform efforts, including:

1. *Promoting an understanding and positive vision of expanded learning that helps schools realize the worth and value of afterschool programs in a school improvement venture.*

The **Granger Turnaround Model at Castle Park Middle School** in Chula Vista, CA, has done well in promoting an understanding of their afterschool program in the four middle schools they work with, showing their value as a rigorous academic program focused on improving student achievement and aligned results. Struggling students are

*“This is an opportune time to strategically consider how school improvement initiatives taking place in thousands of sites can be complemented by the educational and youth development practices that are the hallmark of effective expanded learning programs.”*

*–Robert M. Stonehill, managing director at American Institutes for Research*

engaged in a variety of core-subject-specific classes after the school day that are designed to bring them up to speed with classmates. This goes a long way in helping school day teachers, who are then able to build on the afterschool classes and provide students with more complex material. This all leads to an enhanced learning environment in and outside of the school day, and a cultural shift from a struggling school to a successful model of improvement with increased student attendance and academic performance, and a decrease in discipline issues.

2. *Encouraging a strategic use of funds for afterschool and summer enrichment that assures the partnering school that their school improvement dollars are going toward activities that will promote the new vision of the school and higher academic achievement.*

**Elev8 Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation (GADC)** at Perspectives Middle Academy in Chicago, IL, has a multitude of learning and developmental programs that are directed toward helping students stay healthy and on-track toward graduation. The program envisions these young people graduating from eighth grade ready to make the important choices of adolescence by providing an engaging learning environment that promotes healthy bodies and minds as well as offering the support required to succeed in high school and beyond. To accomplish this mission, Elev8 established networks of school and community partners to extend learning with afternoon, weekend and summer programming; create an on-site adolescent-focused health clinic; and provide social supports including mentoring and assistance with high school placement. Through these efforts, Elev8 has demonstrated its ability to use school improvement funding for focused, high-impact services that help not only the students but the community as a whole, and the results are proving the program’s worth. Since Elev8 GADC’s inception in the fall of 2008, the number of students



meeting or exceeding standards has increased from 58 to 79 percent in math and 41 to 66 percent in science. Similarly, student health has increased dramatically with 100 percent of the student body receiving immunizations (up from 44 percent before 2008). This program stands as a model for smart, aligned school improvement combining its innovative enrichment activities and its wise use of funding.

3. *Relying on a wide range of partners who can offer a multitude of enrichment activities and academic supports that are linked to school reform efforts.*

The Providence Afterschool Alliance's **AfterZones** in Providence, RI, stand above the rest in their ability to engage intermediaries in their work. The programs serve 1,400 middle school youth by organizing a network of partners to provide a wide array of enrichment activities to students after school that support school improvement efforts throughout the Providence Public School District. Youth are engaged in opportunities that spark their curiosity, connect them to real world experiences and allow them to explore their interests. Meanwhile, partnering schools that share school improvement money with the AfterZones benefit from the enrichment activities the program provides that could not be offered during the school day, such as sailing, photography, team sports, engineering, veterinary studies, dance and more.

4. *Contributing to the research base that demonstrates afterschool programs' worth to school improvement efforts so that schools and funders have a better understanding of the effect that high-quality afterschool and summer learning programs can have on school and student success.<sup>20</sup>*

**The Parma Learning Center** in rural Parma, ID, partners with the Parma Unified School District by utilizing both 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC and School Improvement Grant funding to provide a variety of enrichment opportunities for students. Among other activities, the program offers robotics, a broadcasting class and a creative garden project that allows students to grow healthy fruits and vegetables while learning about germination, transpiration and the weather cycle. In their partnership, Parma Middle School has benefited from some impressive program results. The number of afterschool program participants who scored at or above proficiency on reading standardized tests has risen 10 percent in the past school year, and afterschool

program participants have also been shown to score higher on standardized test scores in all subjects—math, reading and language arts—when compared to matched non-participants. Additionally, the program is linked to improved behavior, with lower discipline referral rates among participants than among the general middle school population. With a bevy of enrichment opportunities and results that demonstrate its effectiveness, the Parma Learning Center is an excellent example of how an afterschool program can provide immense benefits in a school improvement effort.

## Conclusion

In communities across the country, afterschool programs are proving their worth in supporting school improvement efforts. Working with community partners, afterschool and summer learning programs are able to complement the learning that takes place during the school day and year and bring new educators and mentors to the school improvement table. With a wide range of backgrounds, expertise and content area knowledge, afterschool and summer staff are connecting with students and motivating kids to stay on track to school success. One school at a time, afterschool programs are helping kids and schools succeed and building the case that afterschool is a key ally in school improvement.



# An In-depth Look: Parma Learning Center



*“We have always had a strong vision of how we want to support our middle schoolers. The Parma Learning Center works hand-in-hand with school administrators, teachers, parents and the community to give students an encouraging and constructive environment that will help them to be the best versions of themselves. But most importantly, we work closely with our students to create a space where they know they are respected, appreciated and valued.”*

*— Sheri Faust, Director, Parma Learning Center*

**F**ormed in 2006 with the help of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers grant, the Parma Learning Center grew out of a need to revitalize a school district that was struggling academically. The Parma Learning Center first began as a 45-minute afterschool program where elementary, middle school and high school students gathered under one roof for homework help. Since its inception, the program has grown immensely. A variety of enrichment activities are now offered to students, with separate curriculum tailored for the elementary, middle school and high school levels.

The Parma Learning Center is located in rural Parma, ID, one hour outside of Boise. Situated in an agricultural region that traditionally attracts migrant families, more than one-third of the Parma Learning Center's students are designated Limited English Proficient. Additionally, more than half of students qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program.

As a core component of the Parma Middle School Improvement Plan, students who attend the Parma Learning Center are those most at-risk of falling behind in their classes and must be referred to the program by their teachers. In addition to the homework assistance middle schoolers receive each day during the program's first 40 minutes, students take part in a rotating curriculum of art lessons, physical fitness activities, a robotics class, a video communications class and a gardening project.

The primary focus of all activities is on student well-being—both mental and physical. For instance, anti-bullying lessons were incorporated into the video communications class to address the harmful emotional effects bullying had on students at the school. Students created a 20-minute original film on the negative effects of bullying and the steps students could take to help stop bullying. Students took the lead in all aspects of the filmmaking: storyboarding concepts, script writing, acting, filming and editing the video. Another example is the program's garden project, which teaches students the science involved in gardening—such as germination, transpiration and the weather cycle—and provides lessons in nutrition and the importance of healthy eating. Part of a small and close-knit community, the Parma Learning Center also includes a service-learning component. Students help take care of neighborhood gardens, created a mural on healthy eating for the local grocery store and presented their “Why Me” anti-bullying video to the city council.

## Parma Learning Center

*Category: School Improvement*

*Location: Parma, ID*

**Number of Middle Schoolers Served Per Day:** 171

**Year Started:** 2006

### **Main Sources of Funding:**

- 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers
- Title I School Improvement Grant
- Individual foundations

### **Recommendations for Other Programs:**

- An afterschool program should look very different from the school day.
- A program needs the support of all stakeholders, but the students' needs must always be first and foremost.
- Program staff must be a good teacher, a good listener and someone who is passionate and enthusiastic about their work.



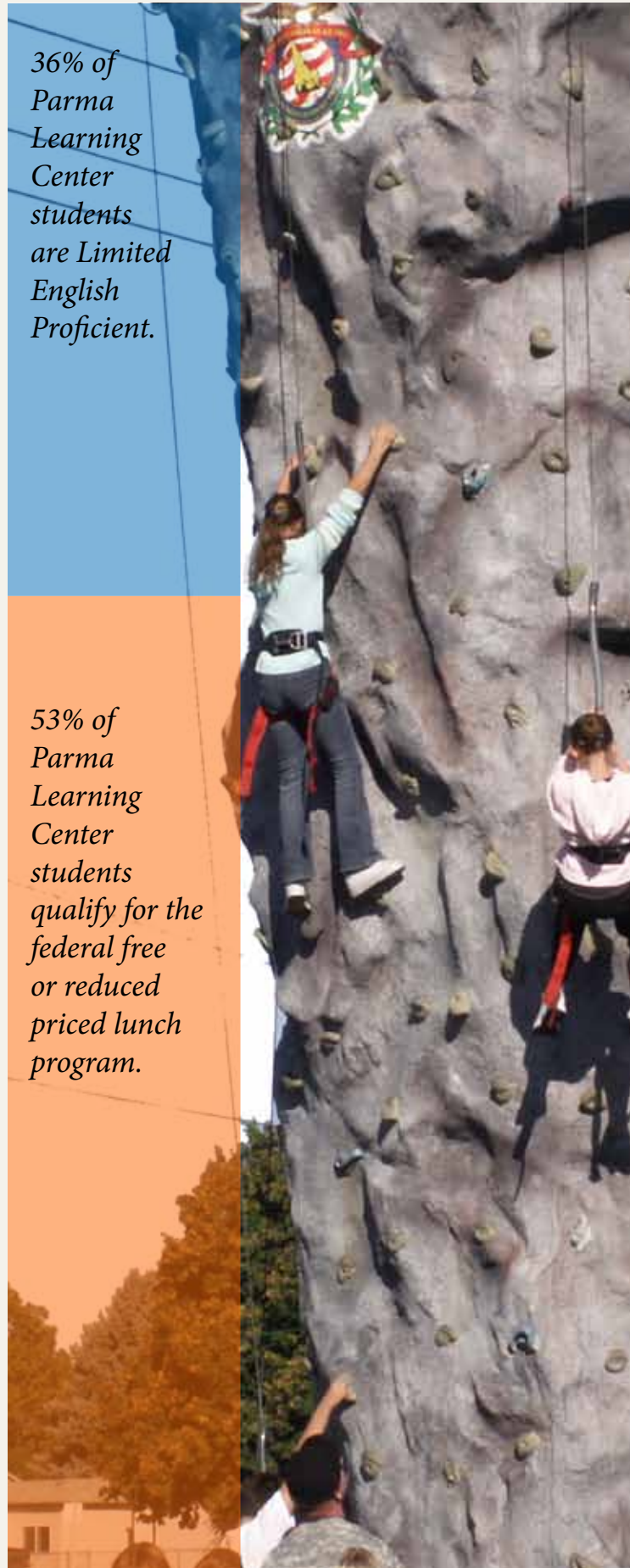
Students in the Parma Learning Center have made positive academic and behavioral improvements. Although students attending the afterschool program are those who have the most difficulties academically, program participants scored higher on standardized tests in reading, math and language arts when compared to non-participants during the two years data were available. In the 2010-2011 school year, students in the program receiving state standard test scores at or above proficiency level in reading rose 10 percent. In addition, data collected found Parma Learning Center students received significantly lower discipline referrals than non-participating middle schoolers.

A strong shared vision of the program's goals—with input and buy-in from the school administration, teachers, students and parents—creates a positive and collaborative environment. Program staff is comprised of certified teachers who work to build strong relationships with the students, communicate often with the students' classroom teachers and work closely with school administration. Student interest in the program is sustained through a continuously changing curriculum, where middle schoolers work toward accomplishing self-selected objectives. The Parma Learning Center also often teams up with local businesses and hosts public events to bolster community support for the program. For instance, the program hosts an annual Community Health Fair featuring the work of students in the program and services offered by local businesses. In 2012 more than 400 students, teachers, family members and community members attended Parma Learning Center's Community Health Fair, featuring approximately 20 booths showcasing various activities and games promoting healthy habits as well as booths with local businesses.

Over the course of the past few years, the Parma School District has grappled with finances, undergoing budget cuts on a number of levels. But, as a crucial piece of the Parma Middle School Improvement Plan, the Parma Learning Center continues to work closely with the Parma School District and the community to maintain its programming that supports and positively affects hundreds of middle school students. Looking toward the future, the program is working to build an indoor walking track where youth can walk and stay active throughout the year. And because many youth in the program have not traveled outside of the town of Parma, the track will be equipped with televisions and DVD players that will play landscape DVDs to help open the door to the opportunities, adventures and possibilities around the world available for Parma youth.

*36% of Parma Learning Center students are Limited English Proficient.*

*53% of Parma Learning Center students qualify for the federal free or reduced priced lunch program.*



# Digital Media & Learning in Afterschool



Green Energy Technologies in the City  
(GET City), Lansing, MI

*“The president and I are convinced that with technology, we have an extraordinary opportunity to expand educational excellence and equity, and personalize the experience for students... Technology can enable the high-quality teaching and learning that today’s students need to thrive as citizens, workers, and leaders in the digital age and the globally competitive knowledge economy.”*

*—Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education*

Undoubtedly, digital media and technology are revolutionizing how, where and when children learn. As one might expect with any type of transformative innovation, digital media has compelled many educators to completely reimagine the learning experience. There is broad agreement that digital media and technology should be viewed as tools that can facilitate equally valuable learning opportunities beyond the school day and outside the school walls; permit students to learn at their own pace; and provide interactive experiences that allow them to learn in their own style and in ways that are personal and engaging.<sup>1</sup> These digital tools are viewed as most effective when grounded in strong, student-centered environments that are collaborative, relevant and often involve the application of knowledge through project-based opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

As school districts around the country race to build technological infrastructure that permits increased access to digital devices in the classroom, the resulting fundamental shifts in instructional practices are blurring the lines that once existed between formal and informal learning environments. Increasingly, teachers are adopting pedagogical strategies that have long underpinned the youth development framework that is at the core of quality before-school, afterschool and summer programs. These strategies include the use of a flexible and interest-driven curriculum, the view of educators as mentors and facilitators within an environment that encourages youth to take ownership of their learning, and a focus on situating the goals of schooling within the broader context of a child's life.<sup>3</sup>

Now that these strategies are also being recognized as instructional practices that facilitate more effective digital learning within schools, it raises the question of how digital media and technology are affecting the afterschool field in ways that complement the changes occurring during the school day. This issue brief draws on a review of existing research on digital learning and a sampling of afterschool program models from around the country that have integrated digital media and technology in varying ways.

### **Challenges and Opportunities for the Afterschool Field**

Although many afterschool programs find ways to successfully integrate digital learning practices—or

develop entirely new offerings built around digital media and learning—there are a number of challenges that inhibit the widespread adoption of these practices. Chief among them is the difficulty of securing the necessary funding to acquire and maintain a technological infrastructure. In today's uncertain economic climate, many programs are struggling just to meet the basic needs of the children and families in their communities. With more than 3 in 5 programs (62 percent) reporting a loss of funding over the last three years, many are cutting services in order to keep the doors open.<sup>4</sup> These funding concerns, which are not unique to afterschool, strongly reinforce the need for schools and afterschool programs to work closely together as they seek to integrate digital media in teaching and learning.

Afterschool providers may also have difficulty identifying the best ways to use digital tools to support their program objectives. The diverse nature of the afterschool field often limits opportunities for professional development and the sharing of promising practices across afterschool providers. Intermediaries can play a key role in supporting the sharing of instructional practices, and joint professional development organizations—like The After-School Corporation, the National AfterSchool Association, the National Network of Statewide Afterschool Networks and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time—have been offering trainings and related resources to help programs. Furthermore, in cities like Chicago and New York groups of youth-serving institutions—including libraries, museums, community-based organizations, school- and afterschool programs, and media companies—have formed professional learning communities to connect local programs. Formally known as the Hive Learning Networks, these communities facilitate communication, knowledge-sharing, and coordination across organizations serving middle- and high-school students in the respective city. The member organizations—also known as learning sites—extend learning beyond the classroom through innovative uses of digital media and technology enhanced by strong mentorship components.<sup>5</sup> Together, they are working to reinforce the notion of “anytime, anywhere learning” by creating a system that recognizes and documents how these informal learning environments use digital learning practices to support core academic standards.

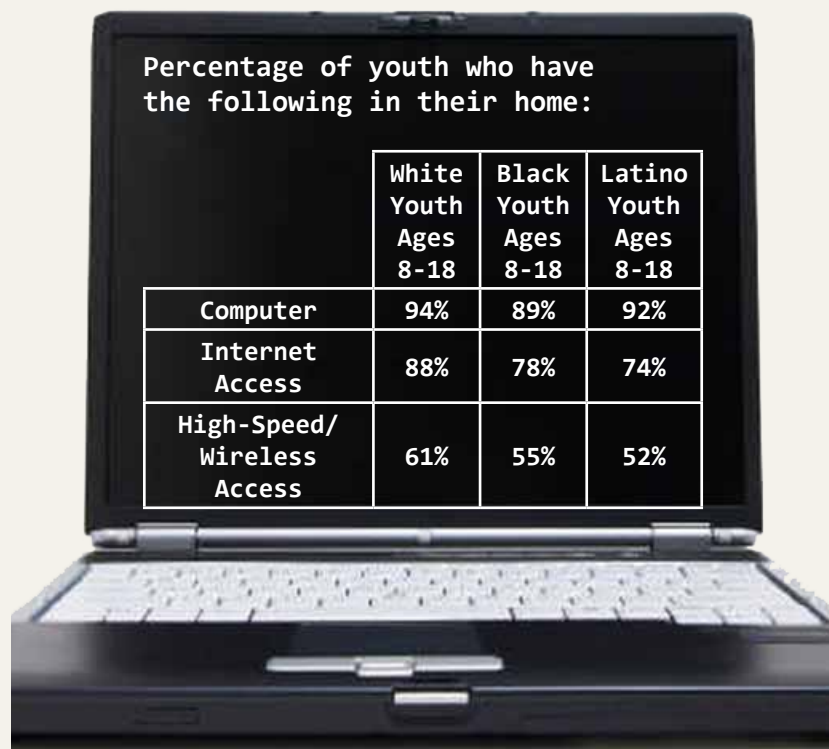
## The New Digital Divide

Within disadvantaged communities, afterschool programs have traditionally been praised for helping to alleviate the “digital divide.”<sup>6</sup> When defined in terms of basic access to the Internet and technology, informal learning environments certainly offer spaces where middle school youth—who might not have broadband access at home—can develop digital literacy outside of the school day. However, there is evidence to suggest that the nature of the digital divide is changing. The student-to-computer ratio between low-income and more affluent schools has closed considerably since the term was first popularized in the ‘90s.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the gradual decrease in the price of computers and rise in popularity of tablets and Internet-enabled mobile devices has meant that more disadvantaged youth are finding ways to get online. According to a 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation Study, among youth ages 8 to 18 years of age, African-Americans exceeded whites in their use of mobile devices.<sup>8</sup> The survey also found that a majority of all youth, regardless of race, have access to a computer and the Internet at home, although the quality of Internet access does vary.

Today, a new digital divide is emerging—one defined in terms of interaction rather than access. There is a growing awareness of the inequalities that exist in the way that youth are interacting with digital media; whereas affluent youth are more likely to behave as “content producers,” disadvantaged youth tend to be “content consumers.”<sup>9</sup> Through the process of creating digital content—such as blogs, zines, videos and digital art—youth who are content producers are acquiring a number of key skills and competencies, including a more comprehensive understanding of intellectual property, opportunities for cultural expression and the importance of active citizenship.<sup>10</sup>

*“Digital learning empowers students with the ability to customize their education to master critical knowledge and skills at the time and pace that best fits their needs. State leaders must harness the power of technology and adopt policies that will provide every student with high-quality, rigorous courses that prepare them for success in college and their careers.”*

*—Jeb Bush,  
Former Governor of Florida*



Percentage of youth who have the following in their home:

	White Youth Ages 8-18	Black Youth Ages 8-18	Latino Youth Ages 8-18
Computer	94%	89%	92%
Internet Access	88%	78%	74%
High-Speed/Wireless Access	61%	55%	52%

*Data from: Kaiser Family Foundation. (2010). “Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18- Year-Olds”*

Youth who sit on the sidelines as content consumers—or, in other words, those who interact with digital media only in the context of watching videos or using social media sites—will be left behind as they enter institutions of higher education and, eventually, the workplace. The 21<sup>st</sup> century skills perceived to be essential to the future success of youth are precisely the same skills that are fostered through involvement in a participatory digital learning culture.

While a divide exists between higher- and lower-income youth, overall youth interaction with digital media leans toward the content consumer side of the spectrum, with youth engaging in basic digital media activities. A 2005 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey found that half of youth ages 12 to 17 created content for the Internet.<sup>11</sup> The Pew Internet & American Life Project’s July 2011 survey found that although 95 percent of 12 to 17 year olds use the Internet, just 27 percent record and upload videos to the Internet.<sup>12 13</sup> Their September 2009 survey found that only 38 percent of youth said they shared something they created—such as artwork, photos or stories—online and 21 percent said that they created their own work from pictures, songs or text that they found online.<sup>14</sup>

A recently released report by the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub at the University of California, Irvine further reinforces this data, stating that “many young people take the fairly basic steps” when going online, “fewer undertake the more complex, social or creative activities that techno-optimists have hoped for them.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Promising Practices for Digital Learning**

Effective digital learning practices in afterschool depend on the recognition that the use and purpose of technology in informal learning environments can vary as widely as the curricular objectives that the technology is intended to support. Across the spectrum of programs that have implemented digital learning strategies, technology is frequently used as a tool to enhance and extend broader goals that often revolve around a few key themes including creative expression, youth empowerment and civic engagement.

When used appropriately, these tools naturally support the core principles of youth development practiced by quality afterschool programs. For middle school youth in particular, these informal learning environments offer an important opportunity for them to explore their own identities and engage with the world around them in ways that are exciting, relevant and driven by their interests. A closer look at effective digital learning strategies used by some of the more successful programs reveals a few key promising practices for afterschool providers.

*Highly effective programming can be built around readily accessible technology.*

**Wide Angle Youth Media** in Baltimore, MD, partners with the Enoch Pratt Free Library and local schools to engage 10-15 year-old youth in an innovative program that challenges them to use digital tools as a means to explore issues impacting their communities. In the course of creating media projects, students engage in critical discussions, conduct research, interview community members and participate in reflective writing exercises. Past projects have included topics such as school bullying, gang activity, pollution and police surveillance. The most recent project involved the use of “photo walks” in the neighborhood where the program meets. The students combined the photography with sound and narration to tell a compelling story about the inequalities within a

neighborhood undergoing gentrification. Digital media projects like the photo walk are accomplished using the students’ own mobile devices and basic software, illustrating that effective digital learning does not require investments in costly equipment. The program’s success is measured through pre/post student and parent surveys and staff observations of skill development using the Verified Resume tool, which is based on SCANS skills for workforce development. Students in Wide Angle Youth Media made significant gains in a number of skills, but the most notable improvements were made in technical media skills (100 percent), teamwork (95 percent), listening (80 percent) and creativity (90 percent).

*Digital media and technology should support broader programmatic goals through research-based instructional practices.*

**Computers4Kids (C4K)** in Charlottesville, VA, uses an innovative combination of long-term mentoring, technology training, job readiness skills, academic support and college-prep guidance to target middle school students who are at risk for decreased academic achievement, lower self-esteem and increased risk-taking behavior. The students are matched with volunteer mentors who work with them to complete two in-depth, personally meaningful technology projects using professional-grade software in the areas of graphics, audio, Web design, video, animation, print, presentation or 3-D modeling. Between 2:45 and 8:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, the students are given year-round access to the program’s computers, equipment and staff to help them acquire an impressive portfolio of technology skills and projects. Graduates from the middle school program are then eligible to participate in Teen Tech (T2), a program for high school students that offers advanced technology training, college prep activities and connections to paid internships.

*“The urgency of providing a quality education means every child has access to the engaging experience that comes with powerful teaching and rigorous content available through digital learning...The teachers are here, the technology is everywhere, and the students are ready and able. Now it’s time to put it all together.”*

*—Bob Wise,  
President, Alliance for Excellent Education*



C4K uses digital media and technology as tools to support a mission grounded in a college and career readiness framework. Students complete technology projects that meet “C4K Essentials” or project guidelines developed by staff to ensure that the students:

- Demonstrate a sound understanding of technology concepts;
- Use digital media to communicate and work collaboratively;
- Show creative thinking;
- Demonstrate critical thinking skills for planning and managing projects; and
- Make informed decisions using appropriate digital tools and resources.

Furthermore, C4K Essentials align with the International Society for Technology in Education’s National Education Technology Standards and include evaluation tools that effectively measure the achievements of students at different grade and ability levels. Students in C4K have exhibited positive academic achievements: 95 percent of C4K’s mentored students have graduated from high school, and 87 percent of students made improvements in at least three technology areas.

*Digital media and technology projects should create opportunities to empower middle school youth by providing an outlet for self-expression and a platform to assert their voices within the local and global community.*

**Green Energy Technologies in the City (GET City)** in East Lansing, MI, is a year-round program focused on youth development in STEM and information technologies (IT). The program was founded in 2006 through a partnership between Michigan State University and the Boys & Girls Club of Lansing. GET City seeks to develop middle school youth into STEM experts who use cyber-tools to take on scientific problems of local and global relevance. Cyber-toolkits include digital public service announcements, podcasts and other multi-media artifacts that contain youth-authored messages intended to educate their peers and communities about energy issues.

Youth develop STEM expertise through authentic

investigations of green energy challenges that are locally relevant and globally significant. They put their knowledge to work through youth-led community workshops, social media outreach and creating content for the project website. In recent years, their multimedia artifacts have won statewide recognition and been featured on Detroit Public Television, Lansing’s WLNS television and in Ann Arbor’s Michigan Historic Theater. They use their materials to provide workshops for student groups, churches and community centers, and to document the community impact of energy policy for local government.

In addition to GET City youth successfully securing internships with engineering labs and scholarships to university-based summer engineering programs, an external evaluation conducted by the Brown Education Alliance revealed that participation in the program significantly increased technology skills and impacted students’ aspirations and expectations. Youth are positioned as STEM experts and culturally-relevant teachers, helping them feel more empowered by their subject expertise and the knowledge that they have a voice that matters, not only within the program, but in school settings and in the community as well.

*Digital media and technology projects should be supported by explicit goals, while allowing for flexible implementation.*

**YTECH Civic Voice Curriculum Programs** in Seattle, WA, is based on a digital media and civics education model that enhances students’ digital literacies, communication and leadership skills while also developing their sense of belonging and investment in their communities. The middle school program, *Becoming Citizens*, provides youth in low-income, urban communities with the opportunity to experiment and create digital projects with tools that are often banned in schools—such as YouTube and Facebook—but are key to the students’ personal lives. The curriculum is flexible enough to be applied to activities that enhance the skills of students ranging in ages from 6 to 21, and used in programs ranging in length from 2 to 160 hours. All programs teach a core set of units with the explicit goal of developing digital literacy and creating long-term investment in civic engagement. YTECH youth review news articles, blogs and online videos created by both adults and peers, and they are led through the

information-seeking and evaluation process to develop the skills needed to effectively navigate our information-saturated world. Youth are also challenged to interact in participatory online environments by synthesizing the information collected from the evaluation process with their own personal stories. A post-program online survey found that 80 percent of students agreed that the program led them to volunteer or participate in activities that helped solve problems or make the community a better place, 70 percent reported more confidence in their leadership skills after participating in the program and 80 percent reported an increased understanding of technology after taking part in the Becoming Citizens program.

## Conclusion

At the core of effective digital media and learning is the principle that instructional strategies should be personalized and flexible and that technology is a tool that supports effective teaching and learning practices. There is no one formula for success, but rather a multitude of

ways that technology can be effectively applied to support the academic, social and emotional needs of middle school youth. Digital learning does not require educators to be experts on technology, but rather enables them to be facilitators in an environment where youth are encouraged to explore and find the answers on their own.

Learner-centered strategies need staff who are invested in both the children and the program, and these strategies are most effective when educators are passionate, supportive, and willing to experiment with new technology and new ways of teaching. The lower-stakes environment and higher degree of instructional freedom within afterschool settings allows these programs to more easily develop and test innovative models of technology-enabled learning.<sup>16</sup> These elements of effective digital learning, along with the fact that afterschool programs already excel at providing interest-driven learning opportunities, contribute to afterschool being an ideal setting for digital learning and an excellent partner to schools.



# An In-depth Look: Green Energy Technologies in the City (GET City)



*“GET City students are invested wholeheartedly in their work at the program. We use digital technology to link their work back to the community and make their projects representative of who they are and what they want to say. Our students view their projects as ‘science that matters’ because they know that what they are doing can have a direct impact on their community.”*

*— Angela Calabrese Barton, Co-Director, GET City*

Science educators and engineers from Michigan State University and staff of the Boys & Girls Club of Lansing joined forces to launch Green Energy Technologies in the City (GET City) in Lansing, MI, and to address the small percentage of African-Americans employed in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. The afterschool program targets low-income middle schoolers from under-represented and underserved backgrounds, and is rooted in STEM and information technology (IT), engaging students in a digital technology-rich science and engineering curriculum. All students (100 percent) in GET City qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program, and 85 percent are African-American and 10 percent are Latino. GET City's goal is to provide authentic research experiences that excite students about STEM and leverage digital technology to help turn students into "community science experts"—scientists who work to address issues affecting their community.

GET City's curriculum is divided into three components: 1) research and investigation, 2) analysis of information gathered, and 3) sharing findings with the community. To start, students are presented with a research question that will frame their investigation of green energy issues within their community. Students have explored a wide variety of green energy issues, ranging from learning about carbon footprints to determining if the city should move forward with building a hybrid power plant. To further investigate these issues, students have designed and administered surveys, built electricity producing devices, taken a field trip to a power plant, and met with engineers from companies such as Dow Chemicals.

Next, students distill and analyze the information gathered, interpret their findings and develop a message for their findings. To address the question "what is important for others to know about my investigation?", students use their findings and produce "cybertoolkits." Cybertoolkits are communication materials that include various student-produced media—such as digital public service announcements, podcasts and raps—that summarize their findings.

Students are able to use their cybertoolkits to educate various audiences about green energy and sustainability issues relevant to their community. In a past curriculum component, GET City students lead workshops, classroom lessons and social media outreach to educate other

## Green Energy Technologies in the City (GET City)

*Category: Digital Learning*

*Location: Lansing, MI*

**Number of Middle Schoolers Served Per Day: 25**

**Year Started: 2007**

### **Main Sources of Funding:**

- Individual foundations

### **Recommendations for Other Programs:**

- Develop strong partnerships with multiple organizations in the community. These relationships can help strengthen programming—presenting potential resources for speakers, site visits and materials.
- Create lessons that are culturally relevant and allow youth to leverage their personal knowledge.
- Give students the opportunity to take their work beyond the classroom, and show them that their work matters.
- Encourage students to experiment with technology. When they practice their skills and work at their own pace, they have more ownership over the technology.



students, parents and community members—including the city council and mayor—about lessons learned through their investigation.

The program, founded in 2007, runs two days a week during the regular school year and offers a two to three week intensive program in the summer. During the school year, students dedicate one day per week to develop computer skills, such as working with databases, creating a webpage and exploring webpage design. The second day every week, students work on their investigations and further develop their cybertoolkit. During the summer intensive program, students travel to Michigan State University to get a glimpse of university life. Students visit the university’s engineering and science labs and meet with professors in STEM fields to better understand the STEM paths that are available to them once they enter a university.

An important feature of GET City is the approach to student learning—allowing students to work at their own pace, play around with the technology and practice their skills. The program encourages students to spend time with technology, becoming more comfortable and feeling an ownership over their work. Student progress is monitored by “tech tracker,” computer software that allows staff and students to keep track of the skills they are acquiring through the program.

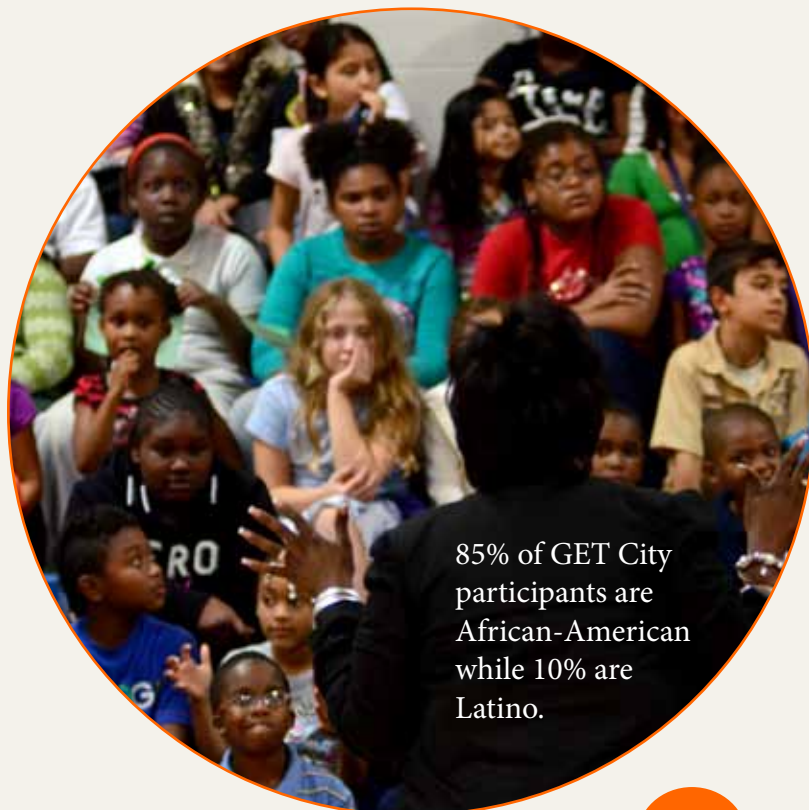
GET City is unique in its commitment to encourage students to become community science experts, placing an emphasis on youth examining real-world issues affecting their community. Rather than focus solely on providing fun STEM activities, GET City shows students that their work can make a difference on important and relevant issues. The program’s curriculum also works to broaden students’ understanding of STEM-related jobs, and dispel STEM stereotypes and assumptions held by students. For instance, GET City introduces students to professionals in various STEM occupations, proving to students that a future in STEM extends beyond the laboratory.

Staff report that students are “able to find real meaning in the program” when they are able to take their findings outside of the classroom and into the community. GET City students show significant increases in technology skills, place a high value on the impact of communication technologies on communities and show an increased

likelihood of self-identifying as a “community science expert.” Students have also won scholarships to university-based IT and STEM summer residential programs, as well as statewide competitions for green energy education videos.

Consistency in staffing and an emphasis on building strong relationships between GET City staff and youth create a safe and trusting environment, where students know they have an adult to turn to and rely on. Staff also works closely with parents of students in the program, reaching out on a regular basis to share student projects.

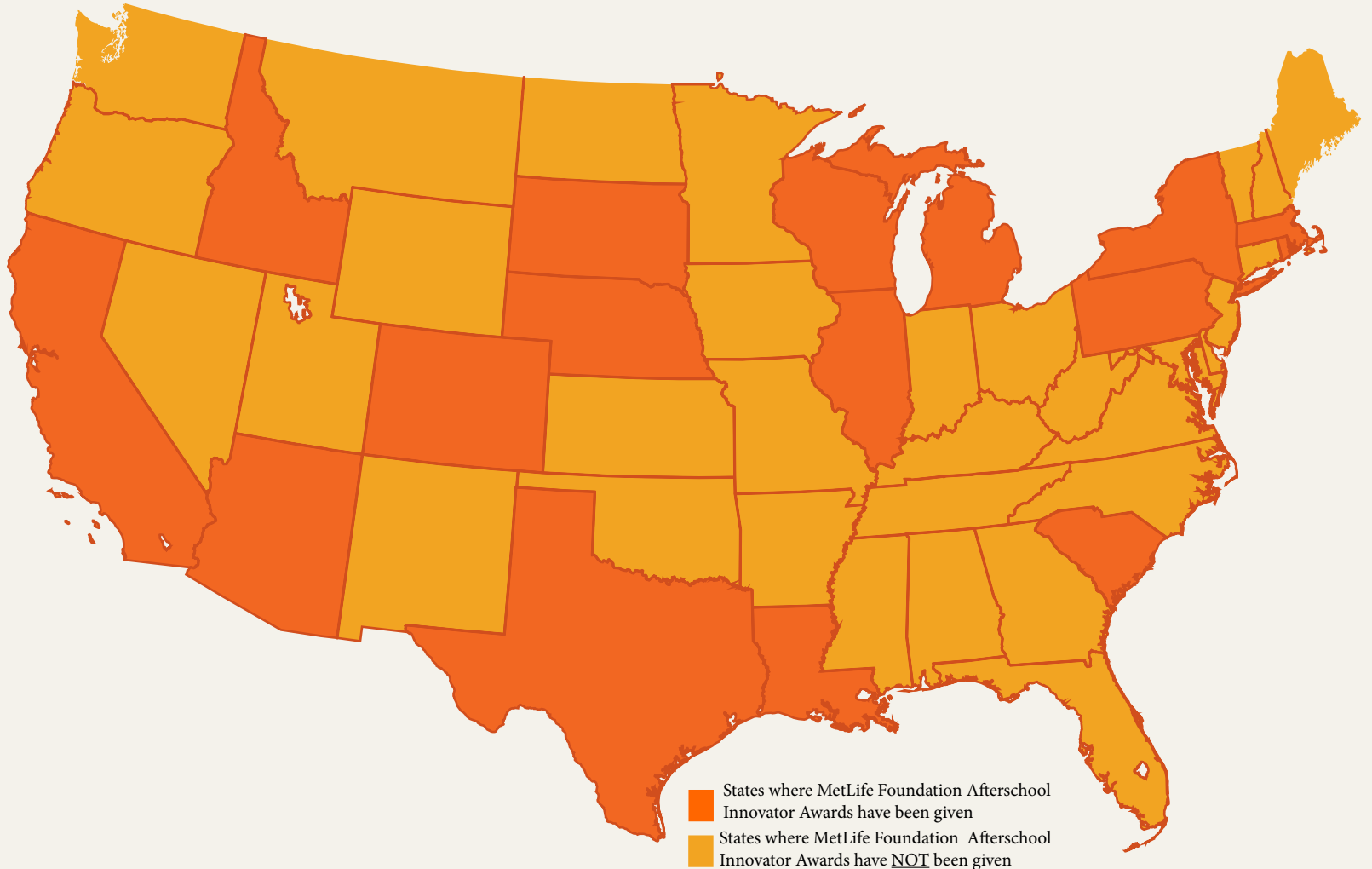
Since its establishment, GET City’s goals have become more ambitious. Originally, the program concentrated on creating out-of-school opportunities for underserved youth and sharpening their STEM and IT skills. In the past few years, the program has incorporated the goal of bringing together students and experts in STEM fields, in hopes of better positioning youth to pursue STEM majors and careers. Moving forward, GET City wishes to see their program scale up, both in size and in scope. The program would like to serve a greater number of youth in the Lansing area and expand the number of days their program is offered. In addition, GET City is working to replicate their curriculum at other Boys & Girls Clubs in different states, such as Hawaii and North Carolina, and serving different ethnic populations.



85% of GET City participants are African-American while 10% are Latino.

# Highlights:

## MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award Past Winners



*For the past five years the Afterschool Alliance and MetLife Foundation have been pleased to present the MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award to deserving afterschool programs for their new and fresh approaches to help middle school students succeed in the programs, school and life. We have followed up with a few past winners to find out how the MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award has helped to catapult the program to new heights.*

## 2008:

- LA's BEST, *Los Angeles, CA*
- Native Youth Club, *Sioux Falls, SD*
- Lincoln Community Learning Centers, *Lincoln, NE*
- The After-School Corporation, *New York, NY*

### LA's BEST

A 2011 evaluation of LA's BEST provided further evidence of the program's success supporting student academic achievement; achievement increased with increased program attendance. Students taking general math showed improvements to their GPA at 50 days; students taking algebra, science and/or history showed benefits to their GPA by 80 days; and students who attended the program for at least 140 days saw benefits to their GPA in language arts.



### Native Youth Club

A 2008 Afterschool Innovator Award winner for their work bridging the divide between schools and communities, the Native Youth Club is currently listed as a program that meets the criteria for “high-quality complementary learning” by the American Institutes for Research—a national research, evaluation, assessment and technical assistance organization.



## 2009:

- Challenging Horizons Program, *Columbia, SC*
- RiverzEdge Arts Project, *Woonsocket, RI*
- Colorado MESA, *Denver, CO*
- Student Success Jobs Program, *Boston, MA*
- Arizona ICAN Peer Leadership Program, *Chandler, AZ*
- Ann Arbor Teen Center Neutral Zone, *Ann Arbor, MI*

### Challenging Horizons Program

The Challenging Horizons Program has since been awarded the Literacy Champion Award for excellence in promoting literacy through service-learning by the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee and was also included in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices in 2011.



### RiverzEdge Arts Project

The RiverzEdge Arts Project was one of 15 afterschool programs to receive the 2010 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award. First Lady Michelle Obama presented the program with the award at a White House ceremony in October 2010. In 2011, the RiverzEdge Arts Project was invited to speak at a special forum for Rocco Landesman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, organized by Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse and the Rhode Island Foundation. More recently, the program was highlighted in a November 2012 Associated Press article as a National Endowment for the Arts grant recipient.



## 2010:

- The Bridge Project, *Denver, CO*
- San Antonio Youth, *San Antonio, TX*
- Cypress Hills/East New York (CHENY) Beacon Program, *Brooklyn, NY*
- Junior ACE Program, *Sacramento, CA*
- Learning through an Expanded Arts Program, Inc. (LeAP 22), *Bronx, NY*
- Science Club for Girls and C.E.L.L.S. (Career Exploration, Leadership and Life Skills), *Cambridge, MA*

### Bridge Project

A 2010 Afterschool Innovator Award winner for their work in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), the Bridge Project reports that 95 percent of students participating in their Tech Academy or Tech Team Program graduate from high school and attend college or trade school. In 2012, 63 young people are attending college or trade school on Bridge Project scholarships, and as of September 2012, 148 Bridge Project high school graduates have received college or trade school scholarships—an estimated value of \$775,000.

### San Antonio Youth

The past few years have been busy for the San Antonio Youth (SA Youth) program, a 2010 Afterschool Innovator Award winner for their work promoting middle schoolers' health and wellness. The program has been awarded a number of grants recognizing and supporting their continued work around health and wellness. For example, the SA Youth program received a UnitedHealth HEROES service-learning grant to create a community gardening program and a grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for their Youth Getaways Program, which provides outdoor activities for San Antonio's inner-city youth. Most recently, SA Youth was awarded a grant in February 2013 from the U.S. Soccer Foundation to keep their kids active and physically fit.

## 2011:

- Kids Rethink New Orleans, *New Orleans, LA*
- Higher Achievement, *Washington, D.C.*
- Urban Arts/Project Phoenix, *Oakland, CA*
- 21<sup>st</sup> Century PASOS, *Gettysburg, PA*
- America SCORES, *Chicago, IL*

### Higher Achievement

A 2011 Afterschool Innovator Award winner for their work aligning their afterschool and summer programming with learning happening during the school day, Higher Achievement has gone on to receive the 2012 HandsOn Greater DC Cares Deloitte Spirit of Service Grant and is currently listed as one of the top 100 most impactful nonprofits by the Social Impact Exchange, a national membership organization comprised of 4,000 funders, philanthropists, corporations, nonprofits, research firms and consulting firms.

### 21<sup>st</sup> Century PASOS

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century PASOS program, a 2011 Afterschool Innovator Award winner for their bullying prevention curriculum, has shared their best practices with afterschool program providers across the country. In February 2012, the program presented alongside the Afterschool Alliance at the Foundations, Inc. Beyond School Hours conference in Burlingame, CA, which was attended by people who represented more than 2,000 professions from across the teaching and learning spectrum. Additionally, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century PASOS program participated in the Afterschool Alliance's 2012 *Afterschool for All Challenge* in Washington, D.C., taking part in the Let's Get Digital: Strategies and Resources for Afterschool workshop.



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