

# Afterschool Programming as a Lever to Enhance and Provide Career Readiness Opportunities

By Marjorie D. Cohen; Susan Therriault, Ed.D.; Jenny Scala; Rebecca Lavinson; and Betsy Brand



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**AUTHORS:**

Marjorie D. Cohen; Susan Therriault, Ed.D.; and Jenny Scala; American Institutes for Research

Rebecca Lavinson and Betsy Brand, American Youth Policy Forum

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# Introduction

Preparing today's students for careers that are emerging or not yet developed is a significant challenge for educators within the U.S. education system. In reaction to this challenge, there is a growing shift that focuses on ensuring that students have transcending and transferable skills, including academic, technical, and employability skills (i.e., social and emotional skills and 21st century skills), to access current career paths, postsecondary education and training opportunities, and careers of the future (American Institutes for Research, 2015), all while still recognizing that acquiring these skills in workplace settings or simulations is ideal.

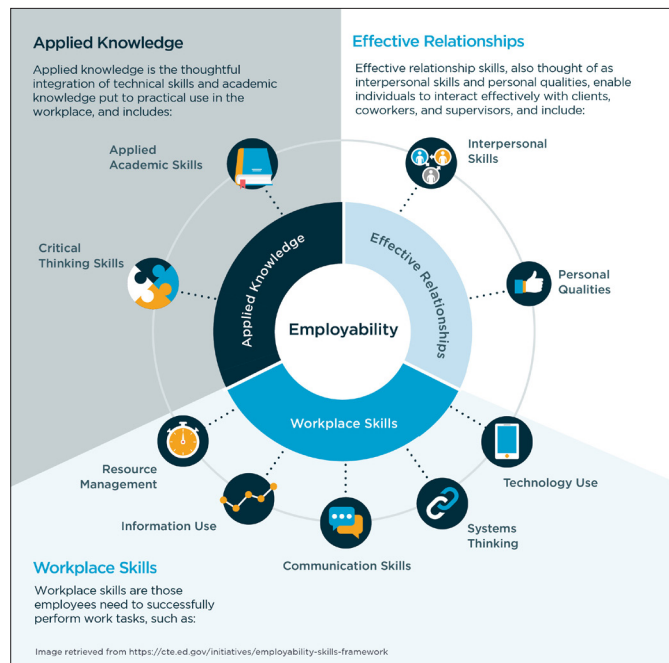
Some youth leverage the opportunity to connect and expand career readiness strategies during out-of-school time (Afterschool Alliance, 2004). This opportunity is real. Youth spend less than 20% of their waking hours in school and more than 80% in nonschool settings (Banks et al., 2007). Afterschool programs take place during afterschool hours, before school, or during school holidays and the summer. These programs have, in some ways, increased flexibility that can be maximized to provide opportunities for students to engage in career readiness in authentic and engaging settings.

In this brief, we discuss how to leverage afterschool time for preparing students for a career by employing a work-based learning developmental continuum for K–12 education and providing examples of afterschool programs at each developmental stage. We identified examples through a variety of Internet searches informed by staff expertise. We conclude by offering recommendations for state leaders interested in using afterschool programming for career readiness.

## Opportunities for Leveraging Afterschool Time for Preparing Students for a Career

Students need a mix of skills, including academic, technical, basic career, and employability, to be ready for postsecondary education, training, and careers. Employability skills—also known as soft skills or 21st century skills—are an essential part of career readiness, and high-quality afterschool programs provide ample opportunities for students of all ages to learn and develop them (see Figure 1). Students also need exposure to career options and opportunities to learn about and experience different types of careers. The benefits of attending afterschool programs are especially important for students from historically underserved backgrounds and low-income families because these programs can encompass work experiences (including work-based learning and internships) and improve equity by making these experiences available to students who may otherwise not have access to work-based learning opportunities during the school day or on their own after school (Brand & Valent, 2014).

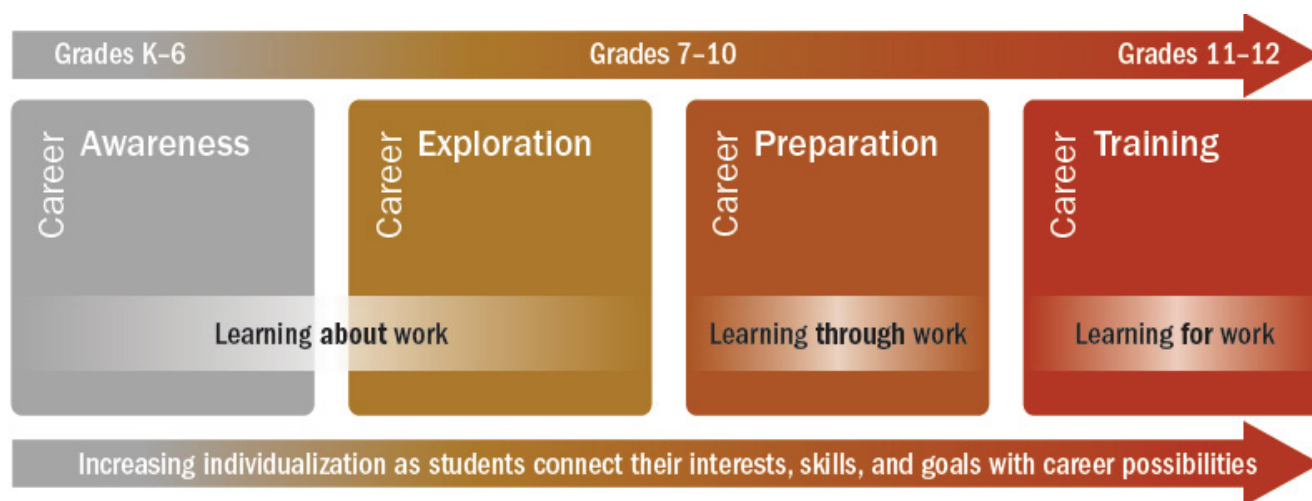
**Figure 1. Employability Skills**



Afterschool programs provide youth from elementary, middle, and high schools with a range of age-appropriate activities along the career readiness continuum, including exposure to and exploration of special interests, building relationships with trusting mentors, and career exploration and preparation (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). These opportunities can and should build upon each other as students move through the continuum (College and Career Readiness and Success Center, 2018).

In practice, career readiness looks different depending on the developmental stage a student is in. To create a linked system of career readiness, it is important to understand the necessary stages, corresponding grade levels, and building blocks of the continuum (see Figure 2). Through the College and Career Readiness and Success Center's (CCRS Center's) work with states on work-based learning, state education departments and their partners learned about the ways in which students learn about work, learn through work, and learn for work. Afterschool programs can contribute to students' career readiness at each stage of the continuum.

**Figure 2. Career Readiness and Work-Based Learning Continuum**



**Career Awareness:** From Kindergarten through Grade 6, students learn about work through different kinds of learning experiences. Many of these opportunities also promote employability skills and engage students in learning, even if they do not develop students' knowledge and skills for specific future occupations. Career awareness includes field trips to job sites, embedding career examples in learning materials and activities, and matching emerging student knowledge, skills, and abilities with particular fields, industries, and occupations.

In elementary school, afterschool programs can expose students to potential careers through visiting workplaces and offices and bringing employers and professionals to the afterschool setting, enabling youth to learn about different careers and pathways and potentially create new career aspirations (Brand, 2014).



## CAREER AWARENESS

### Discovery Zone at Great Plains Technology Center

Discovery Zone at [Great Plains Technology Center](#) in Lawton, Oklahoma, is a career development program for students in the fifth grade. Students are provided with hands-on activities and rotate through modules representing the different careers that are offered at Great Plains Technology Center. Through Discovery Zone, fifth-grade students start to think about career exploration and awareness (Barnett, 2018).

### YMCA: Developing Youth Through STEM

[Developing Youth Through STEM](#) is a high-priority initiative for the YMCA. Year-round, at more than 1,000 YMCA sites across the country, youth from prekindergarten through high school are engaged in developmentally appropriate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) activities. The YMCA supports equity in STEM by helping all students (including a focus on girls and the use of gender-equitable practices) develop critical thinking skills, learn to problem-solve, understand the scientific process, learn to work successfully in teams, and discover a wide variety of STEM careers. For the youngest learners, there are Citizen Scientist projects to learn about how the environment affects their local waterways (EarthEcho), plan how to make any plot of land more wildlife friendly (YardMap), or study almost anything using the scientific process.

**Career Exploration:** In middle school, students continue to learn about work through activities that begin to connect students' interests and goal with career possibilities but are not solely centered around identifying students' own interests. Career exploration activities may include skill and personality assessments, service learning, independent learning projects, career exploration courses, and student stores and initiatives. In middle school, afterschool programs can act as a lever for enhancing career preparation through additional learning time and flexibility (e.g., pace and curriculum) and are able to offer students a range of experiential learning opportunities—driven by student interests.

## CAREER EXPLORATION

### Career and College Clubs

[Career and College Clubs](#) (CCC) serve primarily underserved students nationally in Grades 7–12 across 370 schools (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships [NCCEP], 2018). CCC has partnerships with K–12 and higher education institutions, government, community organizations, and businesses (NCCEP, 2018). The program is free to students and addresses five domains through peer-to-peer learning: (1) college and career preparation and readiness, (2) academic preparation, (3) leadership development, (4) social and emotional skills, and (5) professional etiquette.

In seventh and eighth grade, students participate in a two-year program where they explore their interests and link them to potential careers and higher education opportunities (Galindo, 2011). In seventh grade, students complete 10 lessons and a college visit, while in eighth grade, students participate in the honors curriculum, which consists of miniprojects and a visit to a local employer (Galindo, 2011). Other topics include college admissions, financial aid, budgeting, and financial literacy (Galindo, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

### Citizen Schools Expanded Learning Time

The [Citizen Schools Expanded Learning Time](#) (ELT) initiative provides an afterschool apprenticeship opportunity to middle school students. The ELT apprenticeships are 10-week long courses taught by volunteers (including community volunteers and AmeriCorps members), or Citizen Teachers, that connect adolescents to the world of work. Every semester ends with a WOW! event in which students teach parents and community members about what they learned through mock trials, robotics work with Microsoft, aviation projects with United Airlines, or any of the other career readiness experiences they had.<sup>2</sup>

**Career Preparation:** In early high school, students engage in purposeful reflection on the connections and applications of learning through work. Students may engage in several different activities such as project-based learning, independent learning projects, Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs), short-term internships, service learning, and student enterprises.

Afterschool programs can provide students with enhanced exposure to a broader set of career possibilities based on student interest and even provide them with employability skills by participating in real-world work experiences. By participating in internships, work-based learning, and other work experiences, students become familiar with careers and the workplace (Brand & Kannam, 2017). Some programs promote mentoring relationships between students and professionals, and employers often partner with afterschool programs to provide work-based learning or apprenticeship style experiences (Brand & Valent, 2014). These relationships allow students to practice skills and try interests before leaving high school (Prince, 2017).

## CAREER PREPARATION

### Evolutions (EVO)

[Evoking Learning and Understanding Through Investigations of Natural Science \(EVO\)](#) is a free afterschool program that serves 100 students across all four years of high school in New Haven, Connecticut. EVO is a science-focused program that teaches career readiness through classes, activities, and paid work and internship opportunities. In particular, EVO aims to recruit high school students who will be the first in their families to attend college.

EVO's work opportunities and internship program provide students with content knowledge and employability skills, enabling them to begin the stages of career preparation and training. Sci.CORPS (Science Career Orientation and Readiness Program for Students) is a paid EVO opportunity for students to work as gallery interpreters at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. Students learn by shadowing their peers before being promoted to teach visitors about the galleries, and, once experienced in this role, they can progress to work as Museum Fellows, acting as supervisors of younger peers and content developers.

**Career Training:** Finally, late in high school, students learn for work by engaging in activities more connected to students' own interests and career goals. Students participate not only in project-based learning, independent learning projects, and CTSOs in career training but also take specialized career and technical education courses and are hired for long-term internships and apprenticeships.

Work experience through afterschool work-based learning can also enhance academic preparation by allowing students to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-world situations (Singmaster, 2015). These school-connected real-world work experiences have the potential to teach students skills valued in the academic and working worlds such as planning, financing, problem solving, communications, teamwork, applying knowledge to solve problems, meeting workplace demands, and arriving on time (Brand & Valent, 2014). Through participation in a real work environment, these experiences provide students with a range of academic, technical, and employability skills (Alfeld, Charner, Johnson, & Watts, 2013). Work-based learning, unlike a typical afterschool job, is supported by a larger career development infrastructure inside the school. Afterschool programs that encompass work experiences including work-based learning and internships improve equity by making these experiences available to students who may otherwise not have access to work-based opportunities during the school day or on their own after school (Brand & Valent, 2014).

**After School Matters**

After School Matters is a nonprofit organization that serves approximately 10,000 high school teens in Chicago, Illinois, each year. It provides afterschool and summer programming to develop skills in the arts; communications; sports; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). After School Matters has created public-private partnerships with Chicago Public Schools as well as the Chicago Public Library, the Chicago Park District, and community organizations. In total, After School Matters has reached 300,000 teens since 1991.

Students apply to up to three programs, each of which can run up to five days a week. During the course of either six weeks during the summer or 10 weeks during the school year, students are introduced to a content area and related careers, allowing for career exploration and acquisition of content-specific skills that culminate in a project or showcase. After School Matters also provides advanced apprenticeship opportunities in which students refine their technical skills and also develop a final project or showcase (an event like an open house or a staged event in which family, friends, and other special guests are invited). Through these activities, students learn career readiness skills such as having a career plan, social awareness, verbal communication, collaboration, and problem solving.<sup>3</sup>

## Recommendations: How to Use Afterschool Programs for Career Readiness

For all the benefits that afterschool programs provide, there are still some challenges in leveraging afterschool programs for career readiness. State leaders can meet these challenges by encouraging and promoting the use of afterschool programming as a strategy to improve the career readiness of youth by (1) incentivizing in-school and afterschool coordination and alignment of career readiness and career pathways, (2) encouraging and incentivizing partnerships between afterschool programs and employers, and (3) increasing support for afterschool programs that serve high school students through braided funding, with a particular focus on career readiness.

### 1. Incentivize in-school teachers and staff to share career readiness and career pathways knowledge with afterschool instructors and staff.

Afterschool instructors and staff need to be knowledgeable about career options as well as how programs are connected to work if they are to help students become career ready (American Youth Policy Forum, 2018). However, many afterschool staff (similar to in-school teachers) have limited knowledge about careers, career planning, career development, and the need for a range of employability skills in the workplace. In addition, the career readiness and career and technical education programming between schools and afterschool programs often is not directly connected. Open communication channels between schools and afterschool programs and having a consensus on the goals of career readiness could greatly benefit the students.

State leaders can encourage and incentivize afterschool programs and schools to codevelop curricula and teacher preparation programs to promote coherence across the school day and out-of-school time by sharing career readiness insights and to ensure that career readiness is integrated into both settings. One way to support in-school teachers to share what they can about student interests, student skills, and relevant classroom topics with afterschool providers is to reimburse them appropriately for their time with afterschool providers. Another way to promote coherence is to align afterschool programs with career pathways so that students in early grades learn about careers in afterschool settings, students in the

middle grades have opportunities for greater exploration and preparation, and students in the upper grades participate in internships or apprenticeships in afterschool settings that are connected to the pathways. Partnerships between K–12 and afterschool programs can help align curriculum and validate the skills and competencies gained in afterschool programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2017).

## **2. Encourage and incentivize partnerships between afterschool programs and employers.**

High-quality afterschool programs effectively leverage partnerships with a variety of stakeholders (Wong, 2008). However, there are only a few partnerships between afterschool programs and employers (Deeds, 2018). Creating these connections can improve the effectiveness of afterschool programs in imparting career readiness skills, identifying career pathways, and developing internships and work-based learning experiences.

Afterschool programs that connect youth with employers and workforce development can provide them with valuable workplace skills and career exploration (Deeds, 2018). State leaders can encourage representatives from afterschool programs and local employers to communicate and meet regularly by incentivizing partnerships and collaboration through funding opportunities.

## **3. Increase funding for afterschool programs at the secondary level by braiding relevant funding streams, and ensure that communities have support to develop high-quality programs that are relevant, engaging, and focused on career readiness.**

Most afterschool programs serve elementary and middle school students. As age increases, participation in afterschool programs decreases: 23% of elementary school students participate in afterschool programs compared to 19% of middle school students and only 12% of high school students (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). One of the reasons for the drop-off in high school afterschool participation is that many policymakers have chosen to fund afterschool for younger students, thereby limiting resources for high school students.

States can explore how funding from a range of other programs—such as the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; health, human, and social services; youth; juvenile justice; and parks and recreation (Grossman et al., 2009)—could be used to support afterschool career readiness programming. States can also provide technical assistance to ensure that schools and afterschool providers, especially those supported by 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds, are employing high-quality practices to support career readiness.

# Conclusion

Afterschool programs can align with career readiness efforts in schools by providing additional academic support, guidance, and information on career planning; the development of employability skills, including 21st century and social and emotional skills; and the provision of access to work-based learning experiences and exposure to various career paths. By meeting K–12 students where they are in their developmental stage, afterschool programs can help students move through the career readiness continuum, starting at career awareness to career exploration to career preparation, and, finally, to career training. Afterschool programs can be particularly beneficial for historically underserved youth who may not have access to the same resources as their more advantaged peers through their schools or family connections. However, afterschool programs that prepare students for career readiness face challenges, including limited funding, lack of support to develop high-quality programs, and lack of strong partnerships. The recommendations provided in this brief can help state leaders leverage the effectiveness of afterschool programs for career readiness. Enhancing the capability of afterschool programs to impart career readiness skills will have a positive impact all around, especially among students from low-income households and minority students who have the fewest resources to prepare for college and careers.

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- 1 An ACT Working Paper (2015) found that participation in CCC increased the odds of enrolling in college during the 2014–15 school year compared to the comparison group (a random sample of underserved public middle school students) after controlling for differences in prior academic achievement, race, the race of other students in the same school, and the percentage of students who were receiving a free lunch in the same school (Cruce, Mattern, & Sconing, 2015). The college enrollment rate for participants in CCC was 62%, closer to the 66% national average than the 50% average for students from low-income households (Cruce et al., 2015).
  - 2 Conducted over five years (2010–2016), Abt Associates evaluated the implementation and impact of the ELT initiative as it scaled across the Citizen Schools national network. The study found that participants reported that the ELT program helped their pro-social behaviors and self-esteem and that they gained about three months of additional learning in mathematics.
  - 3 After School Matters has tracked their impact on students. A study by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (2007) found that teens who participated during the spring and fall of 2003 in After School Matters were 2.7 times more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who did not participate in the program after controlling for demographic characteristics and prior achievement (Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007). In addition, 90% of high school seniors in After School Matters recently graduated, and 66% of After School Matters 12th graders had enrolled in college by the fall following their graduation, compared to 58% of their peers (After School Matters, 2019).



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