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Aligning Afterschool with the Regular School Day: The Perfect Complement

The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the first in a series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. These issue briefs feature: the importance of aligning afterschool with the school day; service learning opportunities for middle schoolers; bullying awareness and prevention; and literacy education. They examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

The academic achievement gap between low-income minority students and more well-off white children is a well-documented issue that has troubled education professionals for decades. While over time great strides have been made in shrinking the academic disparity between these groups, more recently that progress has slowed. A multitude of studies show that a wide gap remains between low-income minority students and those more well-off in terms of both academic achievement and the number of high school drop outs.ⁱ Additionally, while gains have been seen at the elementary school level over the last 17 years, by the time children reach eighth grade, that progress seems to disappear,ⁱⁱ meaning the issue has become even more significant in the middle grades. Disparagingly, the achievement gap among middle school students persists today despite the best efforts of both school day educators and afterschool, before-school and summer learning program providers. While schools are doing their best to provide specialized instruction for struggling students and expanded learning programs continue to target those most in need with stimulating and engaging enrichment opportunities, more needs to be done among America's most disadvantaged communities to ensure that children are receiving a comprehensive education to catch up with their peers.

Afterschool programs that are aligned with the school day curriculum can support student learning and attack the achievement gap by offering additional supports to struggling students that complement and reinforce learning that takes place in the classroom in new and exciting ways. Collaboration and alignment among schools, expanded learning programs and the greater community offers students the opportunity to enjoy a complementary learning environment where they can truly thrive. Many afterschool programs are seeing the need for this type of learning and have taken steps to align their content with that offered during school to ensure youth participants have ample opportunity to reinforce and practice the skills they need to succeed.

“Linking school, afterschool and summer learning programs is a powerful way to support learning and address achievement gap issues.”

Dr. Heather Weiss, founder and director of Harvard Family Research Project

Not Enough Time: How Afterschool Can Help

There is no denying that American students need more time to learn, but it is also important that children are learning in a variety of ways that build upon each other so that each child has a chance to succeed at something that truly sparks their interest. Although afterschool programs

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are rightly praised for a more informal structure responsive to student interests and passions, many programs have done excellent work in aligning their curricula and content with the traditional school day. Afterschool is at its best when it complements and coordinates with – but does not replicate – the learning that occurs during the formal school day. In this relationship with regular school time, afterschool can provide a host of unique opportunities for students to succeed and remain engaged in school-day learning. Several aspects of afterschool provide advantages for students that are more difficult to offer during the regular school day:

- Flexible schedules, providing the time and space to offer in-depth learning projects
- Low student-to-instructor ratios
- More flexibility for field trips and learning outside the classroom
- Informal learning environments that encourage active participation
- Greater access to parents because programs often extend into the early evening
- A diverse group of workers who can connect with youth in new and meaningful ways.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Community partners that can address specific needs of children and fill gaps in enrichment

Instead of filling their out-of-school hours with idleness and risky behaviors, through afterschool and summer learning opportunities students can continue to expand upon the knowledge gained at school in innovative ways. In this way, afterschool programs can be a strong partner with schools to increase academic outcomes, reinforce learning and promote confidence among all students involved.

Afterschool Is Already Supporting Academics

Afterschool programs across the country have supported students' school day learning in a multitude of ways, from spurring attendance and reducing truancy to improving test scores and promoting engagement. Encouraging attendance is one of the most noticeable benefits that afterschool programs can provide to teachers and principals. By offering exciting programming that engages students' varied interests in the afterschool space, programs keep kids interested in learning. Children begin to see the link between what they are learning during school and in their afterschool programs and understand that in order to fully enjoy afterschool, they have to attend school as well.

- Chapin Hall's study of Chicago's After School Matters program found that students who participated in the program missed fewer days of school than their classmates and that students who participated most frequently failed fewer core academic courses (English, math, science and social studies).^{iv}
- A five-phase evaluation of the Citizen Schools program found that former participants of the 8th Grade Academy consistently continued to attend school more often through ninth, 10th and 11th grade compared to a group of matched nonparticipants.^v

Additionally, the reinforced learning environment provided by afterschool programs offer teachers an ally in improving test results among students. Programs that engage school day teachers to discover the most pressing needs of students can have a great effect on standardized

test scores and grades. Afterschool programs have proven to be a powerful resource for academic enhancement.

- On an annual basis, attendance at math-focused Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) sessions significantly increased the likelihood that students would pass the math portion of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills examination.^{vi}
- Teachers of students participating in Wisconsin 21st CCLC programs reported that 69 percent of regular program attendees increased their academic performance. Two in five regular attendees increased their grades in math (40 percent) and language arts (42 percent) from the first grading period to the end of the school year. In addition, teachers also reported that 44 percent of 21st CCLC program attendees improved in attending class regularly.^{vii}

Importance of School Support

While afterschool programs certainly hold their own in promoting increased engagement in learning, in school-afterschool partnerships, the programs are only as strong as the schools with which they are aligned. It is crucial that schools provide the supports necessary to allow their students to grow in the afterschool space by offering programs access to classroom space, materials, student records and teachers as guides to honing their curriculum. During his time as superintendent of Roselle, New Jersey Public Schools, Elnardo Webster commented that “expanded learning is a secret weapon in instruction.” This was reflected in his work to expand enrichment before and after school and during the summer in Roselle, where the city’s students showed great academic progress under his tenure.^{viii} In the case of Roselle Public Schools, it is apparent that school administrators such as principals and superintendants can be the key links to expand learning and helping students achieve to meet state and national academic standards. There are a number of important benefits that schools can provide afterschool programs as partners in teaching:

Shared Space

- By sharing both learning space and materials, such as textbooks and recreational equipment, with schools, afterschool programs can better link the fun enrichment activities occurring once the school day ends with math, science, reading and social skills taught in the classroom.
- Just as afterschool programs can help keep children engaged in school, schools can aid afterschool programs in recruiting new participants. Holding an afterschool program inside an actual school provides a direct link for children to participate and eliminates barriers such as transportation and time gaps between learning.

Supportive Leadership

- This is arguably the strongest factor in creating a linkage and positive outcomes for students.^{ix} Principals, superintendants and other school leaders can aid afterschool programs by helping to leverage local resources, assisting in alignment with school standards, offering access to student records and grades and enabling school personnel to work as afterschool staff.

Shared Staff

- School day teachers who offer services to afterschool programs can help ensure that children are receiving the additional support that they need. The expertise of teachers who know their students best leads to increased curriculum alignment, improved school-afterschool communication and better student-teacher relationships. In fact, the first 21st CCLC program national evaluation showed that middle school teachers in particular felt their classroom teaching skills and relationships with students improved after being involved in afterschool programming.^x

Alignment: Varying Strategies, One Goal

The evidence base for the academic, social and emotional benefits of afterschool-school partnerships for middle schoolers is growing, but there remains a wide disparity in views on exactly how afterschool and school day learning should be aligned. Linking with the school day can take the form of homework help, tutoring or reinforcing school day lessons.^{xi} Every school is different and every afterschool program has a unique way of providing enrichment, so aligning strategies will vary from program to program and school to school. However, quality strategies share common key elements concerning how to align afterschool with the regular school day which can be utilized by all middle school programs looking to begin a complementary learning system with a nearby school:

1. *Use the school to identify staff*^{xii} – The luckiest programs are able to employ actual teachers who are dedicated to promoting learning even after a full day’s work. This strategy allows for the most visible school day connection for students and allows teachers to get more one-on-one time with the students that need the most help. In addition, teachers can foster relationships and develop new teaching styles in the afterschool space. While employing teachers after school or in the summer is not always an option for programs, they can still coordinate with teachers to offer periodic training or mentoring to afterschool staff, providing an unparalleled opportunity for staff to learn the ins and outs of a regular school day.
- **The Belmont Middle School 21st CCLC program** in Decatur, Indiana, provides expanded learning for students who are struggling to achieve at school in basic reading and math skills. The program utilizes teacher recommendations for students who are having trouble achieving and sustaining academic gains in reading and math. The fifth through eighth-grade program at Belmont includes time for students to complete homework and to participate in reading and math enrichment. During homework time, students are grouped with grade level peers and teachers so that they can focus on grade level assignments and use peer collaboration to deepen their understanding of the curriculum. Using data from school day results, students are later grouped together by reading and math proficiency during enrichment activities, which change each day of the week. All activities are taught by the Belmont Middle School certified teaching faculty, giving students the opportunity to form extended relationships with their teachers. This staffing arrangement also allows the teachers to quickly identify the learning strengths and deficits of each student, so that they can provide individualized intervention strategies during the afterschool homework help and remediation activities. The program’s great success in enhancing learning for students can be attributed to both the

frequent and ongoing daily communication between classroom and afterschool teachers and its access to the school's physical and technological resources.

2. *Engage parents and community partners* – It is essential that community partners are engaged in student learning.^{xiii} Creating a complementary learning environment that utilizes parents as a resource in connecting school and afterschool education and employs community partners to offer additional support ensures that learning continues even when children are not in the classroom.
 - Woodcraft Ranger's successful **Nvision Afterschool Program** serves 5,000 middle schoolers annually at 15 public middle schools in low-income areas throughout Los Angeles County, California. The program operates on school campuses five days a week, from dismissal until 6 p.m., beginning with a 45-minute homework clinic. Staff help students complete assignments, practice good study habits and hone their skills, using feedback gained from teachers. Next, youth transition to special interest activities or "clubs." The wide range of club themes are designed to support classroom learning, while sparking students' imaginations so that they become and remain involved over time. The program engages the wider community by allowing students, school personnel and parents to select the specific club offerings at each individual school. Additionally, Nvision employs both a site coordinator and a teacher liaison (certified teacher) at each campus. This team facilitates productive working relationships between school and Nvision staff to coordinate their teaching content and methods and trains Nvision Club Leaders to provide effective academic assistance. Site coordinators and teacher liaisons meet with principals to confirm that the programs are working in tandem. The spirit of collaboration between school personnel and Nvision staff inspires all involved to embrace their mutual mission of giving all students their best chance for academic success.
3. *Identify and perpetuate the schools' goals, objectives and culture after school* – With the enactment of No Child Left Behind legislation, schools have become more focused than ever on standardized testing results. While afterschool programs are recognized as distinct enrichment environments, it is important for programs to keep state and local school curriculum standards in mind during program planning. This will strengthen the ties between program goals and school teaching objectives and lead to a more seamless transition in learning for students. Furthermore, afterschool programs can innovatively address skills such as note taking and organization that will help students be prepared for school.^{xiv}
 - **Higher Achievement** in Washington, D.C., is committed to closing the opportunity gap for underserved middle school youth, launching them to success in both school and life. The Higher Achievement model showers children with academic opportunities: academic mentors; an accelerated, hands-on curriculum aligned with the school day; university stays; academic contests; and top high school placement. After a six-week summer academy to ensure year-round learning, starting in September until May each Higher Achievement scholar gets homework help and academic enrichment from three academic mentors. These mentors commit their time spent in the afterschool space to the scholar's academic and personal growth. Center staff are in frequent contact with the scholar's school-day teachers to identify the best way to support each scholar during the out-of-

school time hours. Additionally, staff members team with parents, classroom teachers and mentors to create Scholar Achievement Plans for each student, which set measurable goals for the scholar to attain during the school year. All parties have a voice in crafting the Achievement Plan and a role in executing the plan. Despite the downward academic trend prevalent during middle school, Higher Achievement scholars show exemplary gains: on average, scholars who complete the program increase their GPA at least one grade point, graduate with a B average, improve school attendance and attend a top-choice high school.

4. *Employ an academic liaison*^{xv} – To facilitate the coordination of curricula, an afterschool staffer assigned to identify the specific needs of middle schoolers can ensure that the afterschool program is conscious of the education priorities and standards within schools.^{xvi}
 - **THINK Together**'s afterschool program at David A. Brown Middle School in Wildomar, California, prides itself on its ability to develop and maintain strong partnerships with the school district to align its content with the instructional day. The program's successful alignment hinges on the work of the afterschool site coordinator. The site coordinator at Brown Middle School attends regular data inquiry team meetings at the school that include structured discussion about curriculum and assessment outcomes. As a result, the site coordinator is better able to identify the academic needs of all program participants, gain "fluency" in the myriad of commonly used academic terms, become familiar with core day curriculum and pacing guides, and learn effective teaching strategies. The site coordinator has developed innovative programs such as their own Academic Decathlon, which students used to learn the content on the California State Test. Additionally, program staff has addressed homework help in fun and inventive ways by creating games and activities, like a giant class Scrabble board made out of shower curtains, which support the grade-appropriate state standards and provide a fun way to align learning.
5. *Maintain open communication with school staff* – Quality afterschool programs offer school and afterschool staff time to work together to develop relationships in order to get the most out of students in each learning space. Though schedule conflicts can make communication difficult, strategies such as holding regular meetings between staff and teachers, attending school conferences and parent meetings and offering teachers' input in afterschool learning can facilitate a discussion on alignment.^{xvii} In order to avoid an environment in which school day teachers are upset by the use of their classroom space after school, invite them to visit the program and encourage them to take part in program activities or promote them during the school day and voice any concerns they may have to avoid misunderstandings.^{xviii}
 - **Urban Arts/Project Phoenix** is an afterschool program based at Urban Promise Academy in Oakland, California, designed to enhance the learning of Oakland's immigrant population. In the program, afterschool academic mentors meet with grade level teachers once a month to identify struggling students and grade level-specific routines and procedures that academic mentors can later implement. Project Phoenix uses California Standardized Test scores from the previous school year to identify students in need of specialized intervention. While daytime teachers provide structured

English language arts intervention for struggling students, Project Phoenix provides academic intervention in mathematics, aiding school day teachers who simply lack the time to address all of the students' needs. Academic mentors are provided with quarterly reports from teachers detailing the achievement of their students on district math benchmarks and adjust instruction accordingly. In addition to improving math skills, the program focuses on improving participants' English speaking skills by providing an opportunity to practice speaking in a more open and relaxed environment. Urban Arts staffers and school day teachers are working together to ensure that Oakland's immigrant population receives the full complementary education they deserve.

6. *Support shared data*^{xix} – Transparency between schools and afterschool programs is essential to all alignment partnerships. Sharing tests scores, grades, behavior reports and other important student information between learning environments facilitates instruction and enhances student outcomes.
 - **The AfterZone** is a citywide afterschool system created by the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) and its community partners in Providence, Rhode Island. The AfterZone serves 1,800 middle school youth annually with hands-on, experiential learning that promotes healthy social, emotional and academic development. Instead of simply filling gaps in service, the AfterZone knits together a network of partners from the public and private sectors, including the city, school department, community providers and local nonprofit and business organizations. The AfterZone builds on the community's strengths and assets by enlisting organizations and individuals who have a strong commitment to serving youth in order to build a coordinated schedule of programming that maximizes opportunities for youth to explore their interests. In addition to its various programmatic partnerships, PASA has reached a watershed development with the School District: the creation of a data sharing agreement. This agreement signifies a new level of trust between the school department and its community partners, and enables PASA and its partners to work together with the district to closely monitor characteristics of its AfterZone participants, including attendance, academics and other indicators of success.

Conclusion

It is certainly no easy task to align afterschool and school day curricula. Afterschool programs across the country face issues such as lack of teacher and principal support, lack of funding to hire additional staff to coordinate with the school day and lack of access to student's school-day data.^{xx} Despite these barriers, afterschool programs of all sizes and types have made great strides in linking afterschool and school day learning to reinforce and support the social, emotional and academic benefits that children receive in the classroom. Aligning afterschool and school-day learning can be a valuable weapon in the nation's education arsenal, combining the invaluable knowledge and instruction gained during the school day with the more flexible enrichment environment of afterschool. With this combined effort, which includes support from the entire community surrounding them, hopefully low-income students can receive the help they need to succeed in school, and perhaps soon the notion of any gap in educational opportunities or achievement will be forgotten.

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