



# Research-Based Practices in Afterschool Programs for High School Youth

Jenell Holstead, Mindy Hightower King, and Ashley Miller

Structured afterschool programs are often perceived as a service for young children only. Communities often overlook teenagers, expecting more substantial benefits from investments in programs for younger children (Hall & Gruber, 2007). Of about 8.4 million children participating in afterschool programs nationwide, only 1 million are high school students (Afterschool Alliance, 2009b). In addition, only 15 percent of the programs funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program include high school students (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.). Recent budget cuts in many schools have reduced or eliminated high school extracurricular activities such as music and athletics, leaving some teenagers without safe, enriching activities after school (Hall & Gruber, 2007).

Meanwhile, the benefits of afterschool activities for high school youth are well documented: increased academic achievement (Friedman & Bleiberg, 2007; Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007), prevention of drug use (Hall & Gruber, 2007), and increased likelihood of obtaining work and gaining life skills experience (Barr, Birmingham, Fornal, Klein, & Piha, 2006).

A small body of research identifies characteristics of afterschool programs that enhance the academic and social development of high school youth. Given the relatively small number of afterschool programs that serve high school students, ensuring that the programs that do exist follow these promising practices is critical. If existing programs maximize the academic and social

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**JENELL HOLSTEAD**, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of human development and psychology at University of Wisconsin–Green Bay.

**MINDY HIGHTOWER KING**, Ph.D., is a research associate at the Center on Education and Lifelong Learning at Indiana University Bloomington.

**ASHLEY MILLER** is a graduate student in professional counseling at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

benefits of participation by following these practices, more investment in out-of-school time programming for high school youth may be possible.

To determine the extent to which high school afterschool programs followed promising practice research, we studied 19 21st CCLC high school afterschool programs in one Midwestern state. We looked for research-based promising practices in three key areas identified in the literature: program activities, recruitment and retention, and student choice and voice. We found that evidence-based academic practices such as tutoring services and homework help or credit recovery opportunities were implemented more often than were practices related to student choice and voice. Our findings have implications for practice in other afterschool programs serving high school youth.

### Three Key Areas of Program Focus

The literature reviewed below identifies three key areas of promising practices for high school afterschool programs: program activities, recruitment and retention, and student choice and voice.

These are not necessarily the only important aspects of afterschool programming for high school youth. For example, some practices found to be effective for younger youth may also be applicable to this population. However, programs that serve high school youth must look different from those serving young children in order to meet high school students' interests and needs. For example, high school students are much busier than younger students. Because they generally have other options and obligations, they must be motivated to attend afterschool programs (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). The three key areas of promising practice discussed below therefore are specific to afterschool programs serving high school youth.

#### Program Activities

Previous research suggests that afterschool programs serving high school youth should incorporate such activities as tutoring services and homework assistance, credit recovery opportunities, or opportunities to learn skills necessary for college or the workplace. Academically oriented high school programs should use tutoring to provide targeted assistance (Beckett et al., 2009) and provide homework help sessions to ensure that all students are able to complete their schoolwork.

According to Deschenes and colleagues (2011), one of the most beneficial academic opportunities afterschool

programs can offer high school youth is recovery of school credits (Deschenes, Little, Baldwin-Grossman, & Arbreton, 2011). Students can earn school credits in afterschool programs by, for example, completing classroom work, taking part in internships, or doing community service (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). Since most students plan to either enter the workforce or attend college after high school, afterschool programs can help them by teaching life skills and offering assistance with job applications, résumés, and test preparation (Barr et al., 2006).

#### Recruitment and Retention

One of the most challenging aspects of offering an afterschool program for high school youth is getting youth to attend (Afterschool Alliance, 2009a). It is often difficult for an afterschool program to compete with the many activities to which high school youth have access (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). As a result, afterschool programs must be flexible with these students and diligent in their recruitment and retention (Afterschool Alliance, 2009a; Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). For example, program staff can extend personal invitations to youth and provide incentives for attendance (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Ferber, & Gaines, 2006), such as pizza parties or raffle drawings. Moreover, efforts to recruit and retain students should not occur only at the beginning of the year but should be ongoing.

#### Student Choice and Voice

The literature also documents the importance of providing student choice, that is, giving students the opportunity to select activities. Although it can be difficult to plan programming around the diverse interests of high school youth, it is possible to choose activities that will interest the majority of students (Barr et al., 2006). Programs can also offer a choice of various activities that are organized into short blocks of time, such as eight-week intervals (Lauver, 2004). This kind of scheduling both incorporates many different student interests into programming and prevents boredom. In addition, program staff can build flexible program schedules to allow youth to participate in the activities that interest them most.

The Afterschool Alliance (2009a) notes that student voice is one of the most important aspects of afterschool programs serving high school youth. One way to give students input into program matters is to incorporate students in the process of planning activities (Friedman & Bleiburg, 2007). Students should also have the chance

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to make other programmatic decisions. For example, programs can develop student advisory councils to give youth leadership opportunities and representation in staff meetings. In addition, programs can involve students in the process of hiring new staff (Barr et al., 2006).

## Methodology

### Setting

We studied 19 21st CCLC afterschool programs that served high school youth. They included rural, suburban, and urban locations, representing 11 different counties distributed throughout one Midwestern state. At 17 of the sites, local school districts were the fiscal agents of the 21st CCLC grant; community-based organizations were the fiscal agents at the remaining two sites. All implemented programming on school property. All 19 programs served youth from grades 9–12, with two schools also serving students in grades 7 and 8. Data were collected during the 2010–2011 school year, when all 19 sites were in the second year of implementing 21st CCLC programming.

Because the programs included in this analysis were funded by 21st CCLC grants, they focused on academic outcomes. The program activities we observed therefore were geared heavily toward academic achievement. This emphasis on academic achievement may not generalize to other kinds of programs that have a broader focus.

### Data Sources

Working as the external evaluators for the state department of education's 21st CCLC initiative, we developed an inventory form to study the extent to which the 19 sites were implementing research-based promising practices in the areas of program activities, recruitment and retention, and student voice and choice. We developed the tool because no such instrument was available to examine the three target areas in high school afterschool programs. The inventory was used as part of the statewide evaluation of the 21st CCLC program for several years.

Each site was visited on one afternoon in the fall of 2010 by a trained site visitor, a graduate student with a background in education and research methodology. To ensure consistency in their coding of the inventory form, site visitors participated in a three-hour training that included vignettes and role-playing activities. Site visitors completed the inventory form based on interviews with site coordinators and teachers, which were recorded, and on observations of programming.

The visitors also compared interview responses to their observations. Each inventory form submitted by a site visitor was reviewed by an experienced research team member to ensure interrater reliability.

## Implementation of Promising Practices

We found that many of the 21st CCLC sites implemented promising practices identified in the literature. However, the extent to which programs implemented the practices varied, with some being more frequently implemented than others.

### Program Activities

Table 1 displays the number of 21st CCLC sites that, according to their reports or our observations, offered program activities such as homework help and tutoring, credit recovery, and career and college development or life skills training. As shown in the table, 11 of the 19 afterschool programs serving high school youth reported offering students time to do homework or receive tutoring. These programs offered a much greater level of flexibility in this academic support than is typical in programs serving younger youth, where children are usually required to participate in homework help at set times daily (Johnson & McComb, 2008). To begin with, eight of the 19 programs reported that they did not offer homework help and tutoring at all. At almost half of the 11 sites that did, homework help and tutoring were voluntary for all students. At three sites, this academic support was voluntary for most students but mandatory for some students, based on need. At only three sites was it mandatory for all students. Despite this voluntary status, observations showed that, in nine of the 10 sites that offered homework help and tutoring on the day of the site visit, most program participants engaged in this activity.

Of the 19 afterschool programs, 15 offered students time for credit recovery. Five programs offered credit recovery only, without any homework help or other kinds of activities. As shown in Table 1, almost all of the programs that offered credit recovery did so with computer-based software exclusively; one program provided teacher-led credit recovery. The number of students who attended credit recovery opportunities on the day of the site visit differed dramatically from site to site. At some sites, a limited number of students were able to take part in credit recovery at one time, as only a certain number of licenses to use the software had been purchased. At other sites, students could participate in credit recovery before school, during school, after school, or any time they had an Internet connection. At such programs, afterschool

**Table 1. Program Activities Offered by High School 21st CCLC Programs**

Program Activity	Number of Sites (out of 19)
<b>HOMework HELP/TUTORING</b>	<b>11</b>
Mandatory for all	3
Mandatory for some, based on need	3
Voluntary	5
<b>CREDIT RECOVERY OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Format</b>	
Teacher-led	1
Computer-based	14
<b>Timing</b>	
Before school	2
After school	12
During school	5
Summer	1
Any time online	4
<b>CAREER AND COLLEGE PLANNING</b>	<b>7</b>
Information about colleges	4
College readiness	2
College visits	3
Information about careers	2
Guest speakers on careers	1
<b>LIFE SKILLS OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>10</b>
Character development	3
Cooking classes	2
Financial literacy	4
Nutrition & healthy living	5
Self-defense	1
Social skills	3

staff monitored student progress and provided technical assistance, even if students did not attend the program after school. Because of these variations, the number of students engaged in credit recovery activities on site visit days ranged from one to 52.

Activities incorporating real-world application include career and college development and life skills training. Seven of the 19 high school afterschool programs provided opportunities for career and college development, and 10 offered life skills training. Interestingly, only three programs offered these activities on a regular basis, four or five days per week. Examples of program offerings in these areas, as reported by the programs or observed by site visitors, are provided in Table 1.

**Recruitment and Retention**

Table 2 displays the number of sites that incorporated recruitment and retention strategies into their programming. Recruitment methods ranged from active approaches to passive strategies. As shown in Table 2, passive strategies included having teachers or guidance counselors remind students about the program, sending information to parents, using the morning or lunch school announcements to promote the program, relying on word of mouth, and distributing flyers to students. More proactive approaches were less often reported. Three programs sent program staff into classrooms to promote the program, and four programs sent personal invitations to students who might benefit from participation. Sites reported implementing recruitment strategies anywhere from once at the beginning of the year to daily throughout the year. However, over half of the programs (10) implemented recruitment strategies infrequently: monthly, at the beginning of each semester, or at the beginning of the year only. The remaining nine programs reported implementing

recruitment strategies at least weekly.

Retention tactics included both active and passive strategies to keep students attending. As outlined in Table 2, proactive strategies included using tangible incentives such as pizza parties or raffle drawings, having interesting field trips, and having a formal “bring a buddy” program. Sites also reported using passive strategies. Six relied on students’ intrinsic motivation to graduate or receive academic help. Three sites said that they relied on the positive relationships youth had developed with program staff. Only six of the 19 programs reported that they asked youth about possible retention strategies.

**Table 2. Recruitment and Retention at High School 21st CCLC Programs**

Strategy	Number of Sites (out of 19)
<b>RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES</b>	
<b>Passive</b>	
School announcements	9
Flyers	8
Communication by school personnel	13
Information to parents	10
Word of mouth	8
<b>Active</b>	
Program staff enter classrooms to describe program	3
Program staff extend personal invitations to students	4
<b>RETENTION STRATEGIES</b>	
<b>Passive</b>	
Building positive relationships with youth	3
Intrinsic motivation	6
<b>Active</b>	
Bring a buddy program	1
Field trips	3
Incentives	5

**Student Choice and Voice**

Table 3 (on the next page) displays the number of sites that incorporated elements of student choice and voice into afterschool programming, such as opportunities for interest-based choices and involvement in program decisions and development. Fourteen of the 19 programs we studied reported that they offered students interest-based choices. However, on the day of the observation, no opportunities for student choice were observed at nine program sites. Only four programs offered students two or more choices on the day of the observation. Examples of choices included allowing students to choose which activity to participate in, which assignment to complete, or where they would work. Sites reported that they changed program offerings throughout the year to accommodate student interests. The frequency with which activities changed varied anywhere from weekly to once a semester.

Student voice—youth involvement in program decisions and development—was less common. We identified from the literature three formal means of involving youth: surveys, youth advisory boards, and involvement of youth in hiring decisions. Only three of the 19 programs reported that they distributed surveys to gain stu-

dent feedback about the program: one at the beginning of the year only, one at the midway point of the semester, and one at the end of the semester. None of the sites had youth advisory boards to help plan activities and make program decisions. None requested student input on new staff hires. However, 10 sites reported that they used informal communication and solicited verbal feedback as means of including students in program decisions.

**Implications for Practice**

The extent to which practices in the three key areas identified in the literature were implemented in the

21st CCLC programs we observed varied considerably. Research-based program activities were implemented most frequently, followed by recruitment and retention practices and finally by student choice and voice practices.

**Program Activities**

The programs in our study frequently provided academic program activities identified in the literature as being important to high school students: homework help and tutoring, credit recovery opportunities, and career and college development and life skills training. This finding is not surprising, as our sample included only 21st CCLC programs, which are geared toward the development of academic skills. Moreover, these activities may be intrinsically motivating to participants, as high school youth are likely to attend afterschool programs because they are motivated to excel, not because they are required to attend (Deschenes et al., 2011) or lack other options after school. In addition, program staff might be able to establish real-world connections for high school youth more easily than for younger children, since high school students will soon embark into the real world (Deschenes et al., 2011).

The homework help and tutoring in the high school programs in this study were structured differently from

**Table 3. Student Choice and Voice at High School 21st CCLC Programs**

Element	Number of Sites (out of 19)
<b>ALLOWING YOUTH TO CHOOSE ACTIVITIES</b>	<b>14</b>
Number of times students chose activities during site visit	
None	9
One	6
Two or more	4
<b>INVOLVING YOUTH IN PROGRAM DECISIONS</b>	
Methods used to involve students	
Student survey	3
Youth advisory board	0
Involving youth in hiring staff	0
Talking informally with students about program	10

ways they present their programs to youth. They should also consider talking with youth about potential recruitment and retention strategies. Few programs in our study solicited such student feedback.

**Student Choice and Voice**

A clear challenge for the 21st CCLC programs in the study was student choice and voice. To maximize participation, afterschool programs for high school youth must offer activities based on

what is typically observed in programs serving younger youth. Programs for younger children usually offer homework help and tutoring on a predictable schedule (Johnson & McComb, 2008), expecting students to participate before they go on to other program activities. At many of the programs included in this review, participation in homework help and tutoring was voluntary, reflecting research that identifies flexibility of programming as a promising practice for high school youth. Although homework help was voluntary, numerous students participated on site visit days, suggesting that the youth saw the benefit of completing their homework during program time.

Credit recovery opportunities were also very flexible. Indeed, five programs provided credit recovery activities exclusively. This practice represents a shift from the more customary 21st CCLC model, which provides numerous types of offerings. However, the exclusive focus on credit recovery shows that these programs were tailored to meet the unique needs of high school youth.

**Recruitment and Retention**

Research-based practices in the area of recruitment and retention were less frequently observed. This area could certainly be enhanced at many of the programs in this study. Although the methods used to recruit and retain students were adequate, the frequency with which programs implemented active recruitment and retention strategies was less than optimal. Program staff should actively recruit students and must be intentional about the

student interests (Friedman & Bleiburg, 2007). Programs therefore must consider ways to incorporate students' interests and allow students to choose activities in which to participate.

Additionally, to enhance the quality of programming, program staff should involve students formally in program decisions and development. Though many of the programs in our study solicited student input in informal conversations, programs for high school youth should be intentional about this element. Giving students a voice in program matters has been identified as one of the most important aspects of a high school youth program (Afterschool Alliance, 2004).

**Limitations**

Although our study adds to the research on afterschool programs for high school youth, a few limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample of 19 afterschool programs is relatively small. Results may not generalize broadly to other 21st CCLC programs. In addition, all programs included in this study were funded through the 21st CCLC initiative. Due to the goals of the 21st CCLC program, they may have implemented more academically based content than would other kinds of programs. The great extent to which the programs in this study offered homework help and tutoring, credit recovery, and career and college development may not be representative of programs funded by other means. By the same token, programs in this study may not have incorporated as many diverse student interests beyond academic

achievement as other programs might. However, the study does further the research base on programs serving high school youth by providing information on practices observed and reported in these 19 21st CCLC programs.

### Capacities and Challenges

A quality afterschool program is one that can provide safety, positive youth development, academic enrichment, and support to students, no matter their age. For high school youth specifically, regular participation has been found to have academic, personal, and social benefits (Afterschool Alliance, 2009a). However, compared to programming for younger age groups, there is a relative dearth of afterschool programs for high school youth. For this reason, it is critical for the programs that do exist to provide quality programming.

Since afterschool programs can help high school students graduate and prepare for life beyond high school, offering high-quality programming is of the utmost importance. Afterschool programs for high school youth must implement practices aligned with literature. They must provide high school youth with program activities that help them succeed academically. They must also actively recruit and retain students and allow students to choose their activities and have a voice in program development.

Clearly the afterschool programs in our study face challenges. These challenges may also affect other high school programs, even those not funded by 21st CCLC. The big challenge for programs in our sample was providing student choice and voice. As a start, programs should focus professional development on this area. At staff meetings, for example, program leaders could give resources to program staff and facilitate discussions about student choice and voice. In addition, organization-specific professional development workshops could host local youth development professionals to talk about ways to incorporate student choice and voice. Finally, statewide and national leaders should emphasize student choice and voice in selecting conference themes and workshop topics. When program staff are trained to implement research-based strategies in their work with high school youth, the quality of programs serving high school youth can be enhanced.

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