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OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME POLICY COMMENTARY #5

INSIDE THE BLACK BOX: EXPLORING THE "CONTENT" OF AFTER-SCHOOL

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COMMENTARY AUTHORS

Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom • Nicole Yohalem
Karen Pittman

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For information about reprinting this publication and information about other publications, please contact the Forum at:
The Cady-Lee House 7064 Eastern Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20012-2031
T: 202.207.3333; F: 202.207.3329
Email: youth@forumforyouthinvestment.org
Web: www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

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Debates continue on the questions of whether after-school programs should be held accountable for academic outcomes, what the true purpose of after-school programs should be, and whether accepting responsibility for academic achievement sets programs up for failure by preventing them from focusing on outcomes for which they are better suited. While these debates are not likely to go away anytime soon, the positions are not as polarized as they may appear or as they may have once been. Important questions related to accountability persist, but consensus is emerging among practice, research and policy circles that after-school programs can play a vital role in bridging the gap between classroom and community.

Critical Hours, a new report funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, summarizes the evidence that we (in an earlier commentary in this series)[1] and others have discussed: after-school participation is linked to greater engagement in learning including increased school attendance, improved work habits and behavior and positive attitudes toward school as well as better emotional adjustment, positive relationships with peers and adults, and a greater sense of belonging in the community.[2]

There is, however, an important distinction to be made between *increasing engagement in learning* and *impacting academic achievement*. A strong research base supports the notion that engagement in learning leads to long-term academic success,[3] but the link to measurable academic improvements is not necessarily an immediate or direct one.

Whether and how after-school programs can impact academic achievement in content-specific ways is a different set of questions. As our interviews with Bob Stonehill, deputy director for Academic Improvement and Teacher Quality Programs at the U.S. Department of Education, and Karen Walker, vice president of Public/Private Ventures and principal investigator for the San Francisco Beacons Evaluation, suggest, there is strong agreement within the policy and research communities on a couple of basic assumptions. First, if you expect participants to learn specific content, that content must be reflected in the program design in intentional ways. Second, the successful transfer of any specific content ultimately rests on the staff's ability to deliver that content effectively. Third, and equally important, there may be skills and knowledge beyond the "basics" that are important enough for 21st century success that after-school programs and schools may soon be asked to focus on a "basics plus" agenda.

This commentary explores the content and nature of programming that occurs during the non-school hours and, specifically, what it takes to support academic development in that context.

How Do Effective Programs Deliver Academic Content?

Explicit and Embedded Strategies can Both Be Successful

If you want academic effects, you have to include academic content.

— Karen Walker

While successful programs are very intentional about what they do and how they do it, the "whats" and the "hows" vary considerably. This is no less true among programs that are committed to helping students acquire and apply academic skills and knowledge. This variation is a good thing, according to Bob Stonehill, who said:

We need to do everything we can to support kids academically in multiple ways. And we need to do it for the kids who are struggling, the kids who don't like school, and those who have difficulty making progress. The challenge is how to entice those students back into experiencing success, and how to do so in an after-school context. No one answer is always right. In some cases, the student needs direct instruction tutoring to understand basic concepts taught during the school day. In other cases you have to be clever about how you do it; you may be working on reading as a way to learn some other skill.

Programs can generally be described as falling somewhere along a two-point continuum when it comes to academic content delivery. On one end are explicit approaches that leave no doubt that the goal of the program is improved academic achievement. On the other end are embedded approaches that lead with art or sports or service, where academic content is the "hidden curriculum." Below we describe successful programs that illustrate each approach.

Explicit

Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) is an academic enrichment program for elementary school-aged children who live in low-income, under-resourced communities. Started in 1992 by Harvard Law students, BELL serves over 1,500 students in its school-year and summer programs in Boston, New York and Washington, D.C.

Awarded the 1997 President's Service Award and boasting a 100 percent college attendance rate for former participants, BELL is intentionally academic in focus. The program accepts an explicit role in bolstering young people's success in graduating from high school and college, and embraces a share of the responsibility for helping underserved urban children master the skills needed for post-secondary education. In BELL's explicit model, high-quality content involves a purposeful interplay between delivering a results-oriented, standards-linked math and literacy curriculum designed specifically for under-achieving students; investing in a knowledgeable staff reflective of community demographics; and working directly with parents to increase involvement in their children's learning and their capacity to advocate on behalf of their children.[4]

The typical student enters the BELL program 1.2 years behind grade level in math, reading and composition skills. Over 50 percent come into the program believing that college graduation is not an attainable goal. By the end of the 2002 program year, 86 percent of participants were performing at proficient and advanced levels in literacy, compared to 30 percent at the start of the year. In math, 100 percent of students performing at a failing level at the beginning of the year moved out of that category by the end of the program year. Over the summer months, BELL participants on average gained four months of reading, writing and math skills, stemming and reversing the average three months of summer learning loss for demographically similar students.[5]

After-School Program Academic Content Delivery Strategies

Explicit. Youth know they are coming to a math program. Math serves as the focal theme around which activities and events revolve. While delivered in the context of fun, engaging activities, skill building related to math is explicit, regular and builds over time.

Embedded. Youth come to an arts program where they learn to make stained glass windows. Staff intentionally incorporate specific math concepts (i.e., measurement, angles, geometry) — concepts students need to know because they are part of the 8th grade curriculum and because they are critical to successful stained glass window making.

Embedded

California Living Histories provides innovative cultural enrichment programs in the out-of-school hours that emphasize the exploration of cultural identity and heritage. Working alongside artists, children participate in a range of fine arts activities and research efforts designed to help them uncover information about their cultural heritage. Students participate in project-based learning and are exposed to a variety of visual arts, writing, video production and oral presentation methods. Exhibitions account for a significant part of Living Histories programs, providing opportunities for young people to have their work dis-

played in public venues, as well as exposure for communities whose cultures are not always well represented.

Living Histories programs are based on a time-tested and evaluated curriculum that has been endorsed by the Collaborative After-school Project and by California Tomorrow during their recent national scan of after-school programs. The curriculum has been developed with a high level of intentionality, with careful efforts to align program content with state and national academic standards.

In a sample lesson from the Living Histories curriculum called *Cultural Tapestry: Faces*, students examine and create self-portraits. First they explore the work of a diverse set of artists, developing an understanding of how the self-portrait has been used to express personal, cultural and social identity. Children then learn the techniques of creating self-portraits, including the concepts of measurement, symmetry and proportion. Over the course of their participation in *Faces*, students cover California Board of Education standards in visual arts and mathematics, including geometry concepts like bilateral and rotational symmetry.

Young people come to Living Histories for the opportunity to explore culture in a fun and engaging way. But they gain a lot more than that through the embedded learning that covers content in history, geometry, geography, writing and language development. Elizabeth Converse, director of Living Histories, noted, "Increasingly, programs like ours are being tossed out with the incredible pressures on test scores. Funding for enrichment programming has been slashed. I feel fortunate to be able to offer this in a high-quality way."

Is Delivering Academic Content the Same as Helping with Homework?

No. But Doing Homework Help Well Requires the Same Level of Intentionality

Regardless of whether programs take an explicit or an embedded approach to academic content, homework help has become a familiar catch phrase and common strategy for attempting to support after-school program participants' academic achievement.[6] However, both researchers and policy makers recognize that providing homework help is much easier said than done. Because it inherently chips away at valuable programming time, it is a strategy that warrants caution.

Effective homework help sessions involve adequate staff-student ratios, are staffed by people with some knowledge of the content students are working on, and include creative peer education and small-group work.

Karen Walker explained that in the San Francisco Beacons evaluation, researchers saw a range in terms of the quality of tutoring and homework sessions. "They usually weren't terrible but they usually weren't excellent. In one very strong example, older, mostly retired adults were recruited to work with youth. They received training, some were paid and there were clear expectations. Kids got a lot of one-on-one attention, the adults were very positive and in addition to helping with homework they led things like group word games, dramatic readings, story telling, etc." Bob Stonehill warned against "the 45-minute homework session that is completely unstructured — where kids may have a question or may not, where the adults may support them or may not. That hour of nothingness is the worst I've seen, but if you have a dynamite teacher, it can work."

How can After-School Programs Help Students Master a Broader Base of Content?

By Articulating the Importance of a "Basics Plus" Approach to Learning

> *Schools are clearly under the gun to show kids are doing better academically. But many believe, including teachers and principals, that the function of after-school programs should be to provide activities kids aren't getting elsewhere.*
>
> — Karen Walker

Highly intentional programs that engage young people in positive, authentic ways, though not expressly "academic," can certainly *support* learning. The best of these programs prime children and youth for, and frequently reconnect them to, formal academic learning even when they do not align with specific academic objectives. Programs like Youth Owned Records in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for example, can provide unique opportunities for developing the habits and behaviors of school success, and often facilitate the development and application of skills that go beyond the basics to help students prepare for the 21st century *(see* Beyond the Basics: An Authentic Approach to Program Content, *page 4)*. These programs are a critical component of the out-of-school landscape and may hold the key to needed in-school reforms.

Common agreements about what young people should know and be able to do include three important components: basic skills — reading, writing and arithmetic; basic content — core subjects like math, science, reading,

Beyond the Basics: An Authentic Approach to Program Content
Youth Owned Records

The Neutral Zone, a teen center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, offers a range of youth-advised programs — from one-on-one tutoring sessions to poetry slam teams — and is home to Youth Owned Records, a youth-run production company. The goal of Youth Owned Records (YOR), started in 2001, is to involve young people in the management and operation of a music production company. YOR and its spin-off company, Rebel Grrls Music, offer a professional-quality recording studio, a youth musicians network, and space to connect with adult musicians. Young people can get involved in any one of the six elements of the program: promotions, studio engineering, live sound, finance, administration and Web design, as well as have a place to perform and record music and make connections with other youth and adult musicians.

To successfully run YOR, young people must master all of the knowledge and skills involved in running a music-related business. Depending on which aspect of the company they are involved in, young people learn about music production — undergoing training in booking, promotions and management; creating business plans and managing finances; or developing grant writing skills. The timing, shape and pace of the "curriculum" depends on "who is part of the company at the time," Antonia Alvarez, associate director at the Neutral Zone and director of music and events, explained. There is an underlying framework, but the core team in the company spends several weeks at the beginning of each semester analyzing the goals they have set, budgeting against those goals and figuring out what it will take to accomplish them. YOR has invited booking managers, legal aides, adult musicians and business school students to provide workshops in networking, contracts, copywriting and financial management.

When a new young person comes into the company, YOR is prepared to help them gain the skills and knowledge they need. For example, new live sound engineers apprentice under their experienced peers, working side-by-side with them on shows. After four shows, the apprentice usually takes the lead, with support from their peer mentor. Halfway through a semester, they are accomplished enough to start training someone else. A training guide, put together by young people, contains "plain language" information — about electricity, recording equipment, cables —essential for engineers to know.

Young people's learning at Youth Owned Records always results in tangible products. YOR sponsors numerous concerts and events and produces a few CDs over the course of a year. YOR collaborates closely with the Volume Poetry Project, the Center's most popular program, to record spoken word selections on CDs, featuring works from members of Neutral Zone's nationally-recognized poetry slam team.

See www.neutral-zone.org for more information about Youth Owned Records and other Neutral Zone programs.

writing and social studies; and the application of knowledge and skills. Districts and states create timelines, guidelines and frameworks for academic outcomes, and virtually all state and national standards include some combination of skills, content and application.

But there is growing recognition within education and employment circles, now reinforced by public opinion polls, that children and youth need to learn more than the "basics" in order to enter adulthood successfully, and that in order to develop the full range of necessary skills they need authentic opportunities to apply their knowledge in real-life contexts. Good after-school programs are well positioned in terms of both expertise and flexibility to deliver "beyond the basics" skills and offer hands-on opportunities for application. They are also clearly places where young people are exposed to and can develop a range of interest-driven skills in the arts, music, sports and other areas; avocations which contribute significantly to their development and their quality of life.

Table 1: What Kinds of Content are Important?

	Core	21st Century	Interest-Driven
Skills and Knowledge Acquisition	• Literacy • Science • Math • History	• Technology • Problem solving • Global awareness • Financial literacy	• Art • Jazz • Astronomy
Skills and Knowledge Application	• Essay writing • Applied math • Cartography	• Web site design • Project planning • Community service	• Painting • Gymnastics • Playing an instrument

Beyond the Basics: 21st Century Skills

In June 2003, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a public/private organization formed in 2002 to create a model of learning for the 21st century, issued a call to action report that presents a menu of the skills, knowledge and experiences young people need and a clear set of recommendations for what schools can do to increase their capacity to teach, manage and partner.[7] The framework builds on earlier efforts to define "basics plus" menus — most notably the 1991 Secretary's Commission on Achieving the Necessary Skills Report, the work of the 2002 National Skills Standards Board and Murnane and Levy's "new basic skills"[8] — and reflects an extensive consensus building process with educators, employers, parents, community members and students.

Recent polling suggests that the core academic skills that educators, business leaders and the public consider important go well beyond the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.[9] The content the public and key stakeholders agree is critical includes both "21st century skills" such as collaboration, adaptability, communication and technology, and "21st century content" such as global understanding and critical media analysis. The same poll revealed that only four out of ten Americans polled believe schools currently do a good job at teaching basic skills; less than a quarter believe most students are learning any of the 21st century skills identified.

While the vast majority of the public (90 percent), teachers (94 percent) and business executives (93 percent) believe schools need to teach this package of skills, and two-thirds believe it is realistic to expect schools to integrate the new skills, stakeholders do see a role for other settings, including after-school settings, in supporting learning.

A majority of those polled believe it could be very effective to:

- complement what happens in schools by teaching these skills in programs outside of school hours (51 percent); and
- provide all young people with access to high-quality after-school and summer programs that include these skills (59 percent).

While schools are, by far, considered the primary places and spaces for organized learning, the increasing association of the basics, 21st century and related skills as part of the "common core" appears to align with the public's growing understanding and support for the range of settings where learning can and should intentionally occur.

What Strategies Help Programs and Systems Deliver Content Effectively?

Alignment, Resources and Professional Development

We need to create the infrastructure to disseminate information about promising practices and facilitate on-site assistance to better address programs' needs. For the most part, locals are inventing programs from the ground up without the benefit of learning from others.

— Bob Stonehill

Alignment

Around the country, emerging after-school systems are developing intentional strategies for aligning program content with school learning. In some places this means orchestrating staff exchanges between schools and programs; in other places it means incorporating specific benchmarks from state standards into after-school program design. Seattle Public Schools' Community Alignment Initiative is one intentional effort to reinforce the relationships between schools and out-of-school time (OST) providers to maximize young people's learning and success. Alignment is defined as schools, OST providers and communities working collectively to ensure that children and youth meet or exceed learning standards and that schools and out-of-school time activities reflect the developmental needs of young people.

Seattle's alignment model is an attempt to blur the lines between school and OST contexts. It does not call upon out-of-school time providers to duplicate what occurs during the school day, but rather to provide an array of activities that can serve as venues for learning — an approach that is described as "tight on standards, but loose on strategies." Teams made up of OST providers and school representatives work together to complete an alignment plan which specifies how they intend to work together to support children's learning in and out of school. Alignment plans address areas such as use of resources, communication and curriculum.

Programs whose alignment plans are approved gain rent-free access to Seattle Public Schools facilities, but must also have a plan for reinvesting the rent savings to maintain or enhance the quality of programming. Programs are accountable to principals for reaching objectives and receive both evaluation and technical assistance support. School's Out Washington, a key partner in the initiative, has developed an Alignment Tool Kit containing practical resources for programs in the areas of staff development, programming and curriculum, strategies for infusing literacy and math, and more.[10]

Resources

In recent years there has been a proliferation of curricula developed for use in after-school contexts, adding to an already rich array of informal education and experiential education resources. National organizations are stepping up to help practitioners sort through the myriad of resources. The National 4-H Council's rating system involves a juried review process that considers things like content, developmental appropriateness and ease of use. Only those curricula which have been accepted into the national collection are recommended for use in programs.[11]

Foundations, Inc., a national nonprofit whose work supports the after-school field, is currently in the review and production stages of a guide designed to provide tools for

Table 2: Curricular Resources for After-School Programs: Examples by Content Area

Content Area	Level	Description and Example Activity
Math	Middle School	Designed to encourage middle school youths' interest in math, the *Math Explorer*[1] is linked to standards and is activity-based, drawing on the principles of active and experiential learning. Tested with and designed for middle school students, the projects, games and activities provide opportunities to practice a variety of mathematics skills — problem solving, graphing, fractions and ratios, among others.
Science	Upper Elementary/ Middle School	*Astronomy "It's Out of This World,"*[2] is an introductory level astronomy curriculum for young people ages 8–12. Building on what youth already know, the curriculum illustrates complex science principles in an engaging way and provides for a variety of experiences ranging from completion of work sheets to building stargazers and sundials. A simple evaluation helps staff assess how much knowledge students have gained.
Literacy	Early Elementary	*KidzLit*[3] connects literacy development with real-world issues that impact children's lives. In addition to reading activities, the curriculum offers opportunities for role-playing, writing, creating music and art, and playing physically active games. Program staff may choose from ten book sets connected to literacy activities. The curriculum is accompanied by a leader's guide that provides the academic content connections and tips for facilitating activities and discussion.
Culture and Language	High School	*No More Lies, No More Shame*[4] is designed to support high school-aged youth in exploring issues of culture, language and identity. Written through a social justice and cultural identity lens, the curriculum also examines systemic ways in which various social groups have been negatively impacted (e.g., racism, sexism), and how, historically, groups and individuals have positively responded to combat these forces.

[1] Exploratium. *The Math Explorer: Games and Activities for Middle School Youth Groups.* San Francisco, CA: Key Curriculum Press. May be ordered online at http://store.yahoo.com/explo/mathexplorer.html.

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[3] Developmental Studies Center. *Afterschool KidzLit Guide Sets.* Oakland: Developmental Studies Center. Order information retrieved September 22, 2003, from http://products.devstu.org/.

[4] California Tomorrow. (2003). *No More Lies, No More Shame.* Oakland, CA: California Tomorrow. Order information retrieved September 22, 2003, from www.californiatomorrow.org/publications/cts.pl?pub_id=29.

merging academic learning with after-school programming. Throughout the guide, practitioners are given concrete tools designed to help them move from informal learning to shaping intentional learning and further linking that learning to academic content.[12]

While organizations like Foundations, Inc., and 4-H are working to develop and collect curricula and strategies across content areas, the proliferation of relevant curricula for after-school settings make it difficult to capture in one place. In Table 2, we offer descriptions of a handful of high-quality curricula. These examples are well-regarded by our peers in the field; our selection is not based upon a thorough scan and critique of available curricula.

Professional Development

Achieve Boston. Achieve Boston was created in 2001 to build a professional development infrastructure for after-school and youth workers across the city. The organization serves as a clearinghouse and referral network for professional development opportunities in Boston. Providers can go online to find workshops, trainings or courses provided by a diverse set of organizations (colleges, museums, professional training organizations, curriculum developers, city departments) on topics ranging from program management to content and curriculum. A registry allows workers to document and track their professional accomplishments.[13]

Content and curriculum development offerings are plentiful. Achieve Boston categorizes offerings by content area, times offered, duration, format, intended practitioner audience (e.g., administrators or direct staff) and targeted youth age for the material/content (e.g., K–3, High School, etc.).

High/Scope Youth-Adult Training Institutes and Trainer Certification Program. Building a network of programs and certified trainers one program at a time is one way to describe the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation's work in the Detroit and Kalamazoo, Michigan, metropolitan areas.[14]

Over the last five years, High/Scope has built a core of out-of-school time youth-serving organizations that have undergone training using a common framework based on an active learning pedagogy and youth development principles. To date, staff from over 60 programs have undergone extensive training in the areas of active and cooperative learning, adolescent development, and staff-youth interaction. Youth from those programs have had advanced opportunities to develop leadership skills and bring their specific ideas for program design and improvement back to their home organizations. A unique aspect of High/Scope's professional development offerings is that they include intensive follow-up work with organizations to help apply learnings to program design and content delivery.

The Trainer Certification Program (TCP) is offered to individuals who seek to adapt High/Scope's training curriculum and develop in-house or cross-agency training among geographically or programmatically similar organizations. TCP candidates participate in a semester-long training for which they can receive graduate-level credit through area universities that helps them integrate the High/Scope framework into their programming. The trainers in training are diverse — agency directors, program administrators, experienced line staff and coordinators of citywide technical assistance initiatives — applying the knowledge they gain in a variety of contexts. To date, 45 individuals have completed the TCP, and approximately twenty OST programs have in turn implemented in-house or cross-agency training programs.

Given All of This, What Is It Realistic to Hold Programs Accountable For?

The Most They can Honestly Commit to Providing

Like it or not, we are in an environment of increasing accountability pressures on school-based programs — all programs, really — and particularly those that are part of 21st Century Community Learning Centers. That means resources are going to be deployed in direct support of academic instruction, remedial sessions and tutoring. That premise fueled rapid expansion of 21st Century.

— Bob Stonehill

What is possible and what is realistic are two different questions. If the main driver behind a program's existence is safety — still the number one reason the public points to when polled about the purpose of after-school — and that program has cut corners on teachers and programming, then it is not appropriate for them to commit to raising student test scores. It may not even be appropriate for them to claim that they will enhance students' engagement in learning.

The accountability environment coupled with specific policies (e.g., No Child Left Behind) and the need for schools to secure additional supports has put enormous pressure on all parties to "play the academics card." But the tide may be shifting. On the one hand, there is recognition that after-school programs cannot be held accountable for what schools cannot achieve. As Karen Walker put it:

I think the Department of Education faces something of a dilemma. When you look at how little time these kids are actually spending in programs, increasing grades and test scores is really expecting a lot. Even four or five days a week of participation might produce modest, but probably not large, gains.

On the other hand, there is growing recognition that after-school programs are an important variable in the outcomes equation. Bob Stonehill underscored this point:

We believe that there are many dimensions of kids' development that programs can impact. We don't talk very much any more about after-school programs by themselves getting you any of these. We look at the cumulative impact of the school, the program, the family and other services and ask whether the full package creates the desired outcomes.

After-school programs — those that strive to teach academic content and those that strive to instill a love of learning — face both expanded opportunities for public funding and increased obligations to demonstrate impact. The challenge is to create the space in which these programs can accurately describe the content of what they offer and the context in which they offer it and then determine the extent to which they can and should be held accountable for academic and nonacademic outcomes.

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