
PROMISING PRACTICES FROM AFTER SCHOOL RESEARCH:

Student Recruitment and Retention in Middle School Programs

Developed by



**CENTER FOR EVALUATION
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INTRODUCTION:

Compared to Kentucky 21st CCLC programs that serve predominantly elementary school students, programs that serve middle school students tend to provide programming to fewer students on a less frequent per-student basis. This same trend is observed in 21st CCLC programs across the nation and is often attributed to a number of factors. First, there are more after school activities (e.g., school-based clubs and athletics) from which middle school students can choose. Second, middle school students are often perceived by their parents as old enough to provide self-care during the after school hours or at least chose for themselves the after school activities (if any) in which they participate. Finally, middle school students are sometimes required to care for younger siblings during the after school hours when their parents are at work.

Nonetheless, many middle school students in Kentucky could benefit from the academic, social, cultural, and recreational enrichment activities of Kentucky's 21st CCLC programs. However, as data from current 21st CCLC middle school programs suggest, it can be challenging to recruit and retain these students. Although no single strategy will overcome these challenges, CEEP has compiled practices from research on after school programs that may help middle school programs with recruitment and retention.

STUDENT RECRUITMENT

Recruit students who are most vulnerable to academic failure as well as those who can serve as role models for struggling students.

How to do it:

- **Communicate positive messages about the program.** Offer straightforward information about the goals of the program while framing the activity as a “fun opportunity for academic enrichment” instead of remedial education.
- **Match program activities with youth interests.** Older students must be motivated to attend programming. Programs that are flexible and build activities based on youth input can more successfully recruit and retain students.
- **Offer less-structured activities in addition to those that are more structured.** For older students, drop-in activities can serve as an entry to a more structured activity. For example, programs can offer a non-structured drop-in program which allows youth to spend time with friends, play games, and socialize. During this time, staff can connect with youth informally and encourage them to join other structured activities.
- **Actively inform parents.** Parents often play a role in getting their children to attend after-school programming, even among teen participants. Approaches to informing parents include posting ads at nearby churches and community centers, placing advertisements in newspapers, sending fliers home with youth, and hosting kick-off events or community fairs that attract both youth and adults.
- **Target school staff.** Connecting with school staff and administrators is key and programs should inform such individuals about the program’s outcomes and offerings. Specifically asking school staff to identify and refer youth to the program is crucial. To encourage referrals, program staff can make announcements at school staff meetings, distribute monthly newsletters to school staff, and meet individually with teachers and school counselors to inform them about program offerings.
- **Go directly to youth.** Those who are most knowledgeable about the program (e.g., program staff) are most effective at accurately representing it. Find opportunities for program staff to interact directly with students. Getting permission to visit classrooms and maintaining a presence in the school during the day can allow program staff to extend personal invitations to youth. Also, programs can implement “peer-to-peer” programs, offering incentives to youth who bring their friends.
- **Recruit students throughout the year.** The task of recruitment should be ongoing. Because seasonal shifts in programming, changing youth interests, and annual grade promotions mean that programs are evolving, Staff should continually seek to reengage old participants and attract new ones.

Why do it:

The academic benefits of after school programs are greatest among those students who are at most at-risk (defined according to SES, previous academic performance, or race/ethnicity). For example:

- An evaluation of programs supported by the After School Corporation (TASC) in New York reported that students who had scored in the four lowest proficiency levels in the year prior to program participation benefited the most from participating in the after school program. The study also found that students from the lowest-income families benefited from the program to a greater degree than other students, but that these effects were only realized after two to three years of program participation (Welsh, et al., 2002).
- An evaluation of California's After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program (ASLSNPP) found that students who initially scored in the lowest quartile on standardized test scores and English Language Learners showed the largest improvements in standardized math and reading tests as a result of regular program participation (Department of Education, University of California Irvine, 2001).
- Recruitment efforts that target only the most at-risk youth can lead to programs becoming stigmatized as serving only "problem kids". In this way, targeted recruiting efforts can backfire as students are reluctant to participate in a program with a negative stigma. In order to overcome this potential effect, researchers suggest that programs combine a variety of recruitment strategies that welcome all youth with those targeted specifically at more at-risk students.

PROMOTING FREQUENT PROGRAM ATTENDANCE

Offer frequent opportunities for program participation and encourage students to attend often.

How to do it:

- **Structure programming to compliment other after school activities.** Because middle school students are more likely to play sports or attend other school-based clubs, programs that collaborate and coordinate with these additional activities are often more successful in retaining students and encouraging more frequent attendance.
- **Forge strong, trusting adult/youth relationships.** The development of strong, trusting relationships with staff members serves as a powerful motivator for students to persist in after school programs long enough to learn and develop.
- **Foster a positive peer environment.** Presenting opportunities for group learning and peer cooperation are also important strategies in retaining students in after school programs.
- **Offer a range of activities.** Students in after school programs benefit from participating in a diverse range of activities with emphasis placed on academic enrichment activities.
- **Provide a safe and orderly environment.** Youth are more likely to attend well-managed programs than poorly-managed ones. If activity leaders are not organized or fail to manage student behavior, participants are less likely to attend on a regular basis.

Why do it:

Multiple studies have demonstrated that students who participate in programs more frequently and for longer periods of time are more likely to show improvements in academic performance, particularly on scores of standardized achievement tests. For example:

- The evaluation of LA's BEST program, conducted over a ten-year period, found that regular attendance (at least 150 days per year) for more than one year was necessary for impact on academic performance and 4 years of regular participation was related to the highest gains in standardized math, reading, and language arts scores. The evaluation also found that regular attendance over multiple years was related to better school attendance, increased engagement in school, and higher aspirations to finish school and go to college.
- A six-year evaluation of TASC programs in New York found that students who had attended the program over two years for a minimum of 60 days per year were most likely to show improvements on standardized math tests.
- Additional research has found that participation of at least two days per week over 12 to 18 months was sufficient to achieve positive behavioral and attitudinal outcomes in students (Grossman, 2002).

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