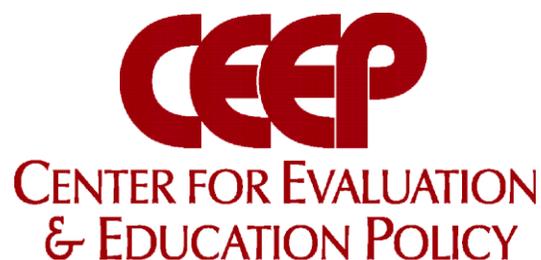

Characteristics of High Quality Afterschool Programming

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A good deal of research has identified characteristics of after school programs that appear to be related to enhancing students' academic and social development. This review of the literature describes a number of program practices and attributes that have been consistently associated with positive academic and social outcomes. Each of the following program practices and attributes will be discussed in more detail, along with the research supporting it, in the pages that follow:

1. Adequate resources
2. Guiding program vision
3. Highly Qualified Staff
4. Professional Development and Staff Retention
5. Partnerships with schools, community agencies, and parents
6. Recruiting academically at risk students
7. Promoting frequent program attendance
8. Low staff to student ratio
9. Positive staff-child and peer relationships
10. Strong links to the school day curriculum
11. Multidisciplinary activity offerings
12. Opportunities for active learning

1. Adequate Resources

Studies have found that adequate resources are critical to the success of high-quality programs (Vandell et al., 2004). The most promising programs require a variety of physical spaces to accommodate the breadth of activities offered by after school programs. Important features of these physical spaces tend to include: availability of both indoor and outdoor spaces, rooms that can accommodate various sizes of groups, and spaces that allow for different activities to simultaneously occur without interfering with one another (e.g. quiet space for tutoring that is not hampered by louder recreational activities). High-quality programs also report access to a variety of materials for program activities, including computers for both student and staff use, reference books, calculators/math tools, physical education material, art supplies, a photocopier, leisure reading

materials, games and puzzles, and transportation for field trips. Additionally, promising programs have adequate resources to provide competitive compensation (salary and benefits) to qualified staff. Studies have found that low salaries, lack of benefits, and the predominance of part-time positions limit the number of qualified staff who work for after school programs (Zuman & Miller, 2005). Moreover, low compensation and benefits contribute to staff turnover. Therefore, programs with adequate funding to provide competitive compensation can hire and retain more qualified staff.

2. Guiding Program Vision

Programs with a “guiding program vision” are those that have a clear sense of purpose, well-articulated goals and/or objectives, and practice regular ongoing evaluation. A number of studies report that high-quality programs have a clear mission and use well-articulated goals and/or objectives to guide their activities. Halpern (2003) describes this as “thoughtfulness about the program as a whole, about what the program is trying to do and to accomplish.” In addition, Gootman (2000) identified “clear goals and intended outcomes” as essential ingredients of high-quality after-school programs and found that high-quality programs were purposeful, self-critical and aligned their goals, activities, and outcomes.

Many promising programs also are guided by a “theory of change”, which includes the goals, activities, and outcomes mentioned above in relation to program vision. A “theory of change”, however, specifies a set of interrelated program components and sequences of events that are hypothesized to effect change in program participants. These models usually involves specifying how program goals will be reached, articulating who must be served, what services are necessary, and what participant reactions to those services need to be present. An evaluation of the San Francisco Beacon Initiative found that quality assurance mechanisms, such as the development of a “theory of change” to guide progress towards long-term goals, were essential features of high-quality after school programs (Walker & Arbreton, 2004).

High-quality programs that have a guiding program vision also tend to evaluate programming in order to understand the extent to which the activities are having the intended effect (Fashola, 1998). For example, staff may implement a series of surveys that are completed by parents and community partners to examine external impressions of the program. Research suggests that evaluation efforts which monitor the implementation and/or measure the effects of a program have also been shown

to improve the overall quality of a program. For example, Bodilly and Beckett (2005) noted that “frequent assessments” of various program components are positively correlated with improved youth outcomes.

3. Highly Qualified Staff

Studies report that the most effective after school programs employ highly qualified and experienced staff (Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996; Vandell et al., 2004; Zuman & Miller, 2005). Directors of the most effective programs have strong educational credentials, as well as extensive experience working with youth. Although the backgrounds of program staff members in effective programs vary, activity leaders usually have considerable experience in youth work. In fact, the vast majority of activity leaders have experience as a classroom teacher or teacher’s aide. For example, recent research by Zuman and Miller showed that higher quality programs usually employed more certified teachers and highly educated directors and staff. Similarly, Reisner et al. (2004) found that students performed better academically in after school programs when the site coordinator had a teaching certificate. Although it is not entirely certain why teacher certification made such a positive difference in these studies, the researchers hypothesized that it may (1) increase the ability to develop high-quality after-school teaching through coaching and demonstration, and (2) facilitate the establishment of positive professional relationships with the host school.

4. Professional Development and Staff Retention

In addition to the qualifications and experience that program staff bring to their positions, high-quality programs also emphasize the need for in-service training of their staff (Fashola, 1998). Training includes both content areas (e.g. math, science, reading) and procedural issues (classroom management, conflict resolution). One study (Vandell et al., 2004) showed that the most promising programs included an average of 51 hours of training per year for program directors; and an average of 21 hours of training per year for activity leaders.

Academically enriching programs tend to have a high level of stability among key program personnel. One study reported that the retention of staff is related to positive change on many youth outcome measures (Zuman & Miller, 2005). Specifically, programs that had higher staff turnover were less successful in improving homework completion during the year. Therefore, the retention of

qualified staff is crucial for ensuring that youth who attend programming have consistent and supportive adults who administer programming.

5. Partnerships with Schools, Community Agencies, and Parents

Research indicates that the most successful after school programs build strong partnerships with affiliated schools, local community agencies, and parents of participating students (Vandell et al., 2004). In many cases, these programs consider themselves as “partners in a larger service delivery network” and recognize the value added by families, schools, community resources, and young people working toward common goals (Gootman, 2000). With regard to schools in particular, the most successful after school programs have strong linkages to associated schools. Schools frequently provide the physical space for program activities as well as important opportunities for student recruitment. In addition, research conducted by Zuman and Miller (2005) shows that programs with good relationships and ongoing communication with school personnel, especially school principals, usually have higher quality activities. As such, the strength of the partnership between the school and the after school program is a critical factor in the determining the overall quality of the after school program itself.

In addition to strong partnerships with schools, promising after school programs typically have strong relationships with a variety of community agencies. Again, the recognition that the after school program is part of a well-integrated service delivery network for children and their families strengthens programs and increases the likelihood of partnerships that ultimately benefit children and youth. Support from community organizations is evidenced in the following ways: direct budget support; provision of space, supplies, personnel or structured activities; and/or referrals of possible participants.

Finally, studies indicate that promising programs establish strong linkages with the families of program participants. Some programs offer classes specifically for parents of participants on issues such as child-rearing, health care, and English Language Learning. Other programs report frequent communication through both formal (e.g., events for parents, information sent home) and informal means (e.g., talking with parents). In fact, programs which have frequent communication with parents report positive youth outcomes. In particular, Zuman and Miller (2005) found that youth

who improved the most in their relationships with adults were significantly more likely to attend programs where frequent communication with parents at pickup time occurred.

6. Recruiting Academically At Risk Students

Research has shown that effective after school programs target recruitment efforts towards those youth who are most vulnerable to academic failure. In fact, 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) also 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).

Recruiting academically vulnerable students to non-compulsory after school programs can be challenging, however. Efforts that target only the most at-risk youth can lead to programs becoming stigmatized as one that serves “problem kids”. In this way, 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. For example, Raley et al. (2005) highlight the importance of using “word of mouth” strategies for general recruitment such as actively informing parents and school staff members. Other effective strategies often used to broadly recruit include direct contact between staff members and students during the regular school day and encouraging current participants to bring their friends.

More targeted recruitment efforts can still utilize similar “word of mouth” channels such as teachers and parents, although direct contact with program staff members becomes more important. Raley et

al. (2005) suggest that when recruiting academically at-risk youth, it is important for the staff “to offer straightforward information about the overall goals of the program while framing the activity as a fun opportunity for academic enrichment, not remedial education.” Often, messages such as these can be more effectively tailored when they come from those most knowledgeable about the program (e.g., program staff members). The authors of the study go on to note that recruitment of at-risk adolescent students to after school programs can be enhanced by two programming practices: (1) matching program activities with youth interests and (2) offering less-structured activities.

7. Promoting Frequent Program Attendance

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. This phenomenon has been reported in the evaluations of a number of after school programs including North Carolina’s Support Our Students (SOS) programs, California’s After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program (ASLSNPP), Los Angeles Unified School District’s LA’s Better Educated Students for Tomorrow (BEST) program, and programs in New York supported by The After School Corporation (TASC) (Johnson & Jenkins, 2000; Department of Education, University of California Irvine, 2001; Huang et al., 2000; Welsh, et al., 2002). 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 (Huang et al., 2000). 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 (Welsh, et al., 2002). 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).

Taken together, the results of these studies strongly suggest that frequent program attendance is a prerequisite for effecting improvements in academic performance among after school program participants. With this in mind, recent research has focused on identifying program strategies that

increase the likelihood of student retention. In a review of over 100 after school programs, Public/Private Ventures (PPV) identified four strategies for promoting more frequent attendance among student participants (Raley, Grossman, & Walker, 2005). Not surprisingly, there is considerable overlap between these strategies and the program characteristics described elsewhere in this review.

- A. Forging 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.
- B. Fostering a positive peer environment.** Presenting opportunities for group learning and peer cooperation are also important strategies in retaining students in after school programs.
- C. Offering a range of activities.** Students in after school programs benefit from participating in a diverse range of activities, although emphasis should be placed on academic enrichment activities.
- D. Providing a safe and orderly environment.** Youth are more likely to attend well-managed programs than poorly-managed ones (Fashola, 1998; Walker & Albreton, 2004). If activity leaders are not organized or fail to manage student behavior, participants are less likely to attend on a regular basis.

8. Low Staff to Student Ratio

A number of recent studies have reported that the most academically enriching after school programs provide activities with low student-staff ratios and smaller group sizes (Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996). For example, Zuman and Miller's (2005) evaluation of after school programs in Massachusetts reported that program quality was closely linked with small group sizes and low student-to-staff ratios. A similar evaluation of the Beacon centers of San Francisco concluded that lower student-staff ratios and small groups contributed to students' sense of support from staff and peers (Blank & Farley, 2004). This may serve as a potential mechanism through which students can make significant academic gains as a result of program participation.

Two recent syntheses of research on after school programs also reported strong evidence for the importance of low student-staff ratios. Lauer et al. (2004) found that one-on-one tutoring and individualized instruction were important features of academic enrichment activities that improved at-risk students' reading levels. In addition, Bodilly and Beckett (2005) reviewed a body of literature

on out of school time programs and concluded that a small total enrollment was associated with improved youth outcomes.

9. Positive Staff-Child and Peer Relationships

Studies indicate that high quality programs offer students a welcoming, nurturing social environment (Vandell et al., 2004). This environment is fostered by staff and activity leaders who work closely with students to engage them in each activity. Staff members in promising programs know participants well, and nurture close and caring relationships with them. In addition, program staff take an interest in students' lives outside the program. This same openness and caring is evidenced in participants' interactions with one another, and high quality programs are rarely affected by student conflicts or disagreements. An additional feature of an after school environment that forges the development of trusting adult/youth relationships involves encouraging all staff to be available and approachable. Although it can be easy for activity providers to become exclusively focused on delivering the curricular content of the program, strong relationships are formed when staff member display an openness and willingness to communicate and interact with the students.

Research also indicates that, in order to develop and nurture positive relationships with youth, program staff members need to work within a social context in which they can be successful. Carla Sanger, President of LA's BEST program, identifies the social context of a program as a key element in developing successful programs. Sanger explains, "The single most important aspect of building a context that nurtures and energizes staff is that they listen to, and be guided by, their own voices". (*The Evaluation Exchange*, Spring 2004). Similarly, Halpern (2003) reported that staff excitement about program activities and their efforts to "connect activities to children's lives" were key features in exemplary literacy programs nationwide. Deborah Craig, President of YouthNet of Greater Kansas City, also emphasized the importance of providing a positive social context in which staff can nurture the development of quality relationships. "Program quality boils down to effective interactions between staff and youth. If those interactions are lacking (e.g., adults are not interacting with youth) or are of poor quality (e.g., the adults belittle or yell at youth), no program, research-based or not, can be effective." (*The Evaluation Exchange*, Spring 2004).

10. Strong Links to School Day Curriculum

Studies indicate that the most effective after school programs directly connect academic components of the program to the school day. These programs carefully align after school activities with school curricula and objectives. One study reported that the most efficient way to ensure curricular alignment is to staff the after school programs with effective regular school day teachers who are already familiar with the curriculum plans and objectives (Fashola, 1998). Curricular alignment can also be maintained by providing homework assistance and activities that promote basic skills learning. Many high-quality programs also heighten curricular alignment by aligning their activities with district and/or state learning standards. In this way, these programs may offer different, although complementary, activities to reinforce critical skills and knowledge areas.

11. Multidisciplinary Activity Offerings

Studies indicate that the most successful programs in achieving positive student outcomes offer a large variety of both academic and enrichment activities (Fashola, 1998; Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996; Vandell et al., 2004). These programs offer a diverse blend of academic pursuits, fine arts and crafts, and physical or recreational activities. In addition, the mixture of both academic and non-academic activities appears to be important in capturing youth interest and maintaining involvement. Students in the most promising programs tend to be highly engaged in most activities and exhibit pride in their accomplishments. Similarly, high-quality programs provide opportunities not only for academics, but for students to learn social and behavioral skills.

Research has recognized the link between academic and human development (Foley & Eddins, 2001; Schacter, 2001). As such, the authors of these studies often recommend programs address the social and emotional needs of students in addition to providing academic instruction. In fact, some studies have found that addressing the social and emotional needs of students can improve outcomes important to both school and non-school environments (Durlak & Weissbert, 2007; Schacter, 2001). Moreover, studies of effective programs report the importance of multidisciplinary approaches to learning in the after school setting (Vandell et al., 2004). For example, in their evaluation of TASC programs, Reisner et al. (2004) concluded that the most effective programs provided activities that combined content from a variety of subject areas and contexts.

12. Opportunities for Active Learning

Research also suggests that, within the diversity of program offerings, “opportunities for active learning” are essential ingredients of high-quality programs (Gootman, 2000). Specifically, high-quality programs actively engage children by generating opportunities to practice new skills through hands-on experiences, cooperative learning, peer leadership and structured reflection. Similarly, Noam (2003) concludes that in order to avoid “having the children and staff experience [after-school] projects just as more school” after school programs should strive to serve “as a creative extension of learning that is more hands on, more participatory, and more community-focused.”

Conclusions

The wide array of research on elements associated with high quality after school programs points to a number of program strategies and practices that can be applied to after school programming efforts in order to improve the overall quality of programs. Although it is clear that none of these practices in and of itself offers the “magic bullet” for implementing a high-quality program, those that strive to offer activities and provide environments that include a number of these elements are more likely to help students develop socially and progress academically. The successful implementation of a high-quality after school program is a complex endeavor and an ongoing process. Program staff who seek to enhance the quality of their programming efforts may be best served to prioritize their quality enhancement needs, select discrete areas for emphasis, and/or assign different staff members to focus on particular enhancements.

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