Empowered——

After-school programs are more than just safety nets. They promote positive development and expand children's goals for school and beyond.

Susan B. Neuman

As dancers music thumps from the blaring tape nearby, Lilliana's feet hopscotch around the gym floor faster than most people's fingers would fly over a computer keyboard. She's preparing a dance performance that her after-school program is presenting to the community in a few weeks. Following practice, she'll have a snack and maybe play some games in the school's gym before boarding the bus to get home about 6:00 p.m. Even after a long day, she tells me, "I really don't want to go home after school. It's boring at home."

Lilliana's life is hardly boring after 1:50 p.m., when public schools let out in San Francisco and the after-school program begins at McKinley Elementary School. Run by the After-School Enrichment Program, a nonprofit, community-based agency licensed throughout California, the after-school program serves approximately 125 kids. Students engage in science, foreign languages, literature, drama, sports, jazz, and hip-hop, with all activities meticulously organized to provide for students' active engagement. In addition, collaboration with a local environmental organization has enabled students to work on an urban ecology project.

Normally, Fridays are devoted to field trips, like going to the local farmer's market, but because of the rain on this particular day, students and teachers are hanging out, playing games, relaxing, doing some structured lessons in between.

In one such lesson, Mateo, their after-school teacher and a serious poetry buff, helps students with their writing using Kidzlit, a reading enrichment program designed for use in out-of-school settings. Today, 20 children work on creating a community poem dedicated
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After School
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to their city. Mateo has placed charts throughout the room with sentences referring to each of the five senses: “In my city, I hear…,” “In my city, I smell…,” and so forth. Students divide into groups to fill in different words for each sense, coming together some 20 minutes later. Marcello reads his group’s poem on smell:

In my city, I smell . . .
In my city, I smell burritos, plants, transmission smoke, chicken, Chinese food
In my city, I smell flowers, daffodils, pansies
In my city, I smell hard work, oil, garbage
In my city, I smell . . .
The children clap after each reading and decide to create a class book, an ode to the city they love.

A Program Comes Into Its Own
After-school programs like this one are becoming an increasingly vital part of the education landscape. Sometimes referred to as supplemental learning programs (Gordon, Bridgall, & Meroe, 2005); complementary learning (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003); and out-of-school learning (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006), they offer a mixture of homework help, snacks, art activities, sports, and field trips to children ages 6–14. Bridging formal and informal learning through community-based organizations, museums, universities, and clinics, they’re designed to mimic the daily activity schedule of a parent shuttling children from sports practice to tutoring to music lessons, with play dates in between.

The explosion in after-school programs in the early 1990s occurred as communities increasingly recognized that many children were unable to participate in such activities. Stories of children in self-care and of increases in young people’s alcohol and drug use surfaced in the media. Crime reportedly tripled after 3:00 p.m. Too many children were left on their own, both physically and psychologically, filling hours of downtime watching TV and playing games in video arcades, with few viable alternatives available (Alter, 1998). Damaging patterns, set in the early years, were becoming ever more visible in middle childhood and adolescence, often leading to declining grades, increasing truancy, and cycles of hopelessness.

After-school programs began to take on a sense of urgency to keep children safe and well cared for. Organizations like Save the Children; Colin Powell’s America’s Promise, an umbrella group for hundreds of nonprofits and corporations; foundations including the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Soros Foundation; and the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program all worked toward securing millions of dollars to create new safe places for children.

It turns out that these programs not only kept children safe—they also often changed their lives. Today, more than 8 million U.S. children are in after-school programs (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.), and nearly one million school-age children participate in after-school academic enrichment under the auspices of the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

Schools are the largest providers of these after-school programs, followed by YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, religious organizations, and private schools. Organizations such as The After-School Corporation (TASC) in New York City and L.A.’s Best in California have been at the forefront of community-based efforts to promote high-quality programs.

Good programs nurture children’s talents, expose them to interesting people, and set tough-love standards of behavior. The interaction among play, work, and intense study reinforces children’s growing self-efficacy, social development, and sense of commitment to and place in their community. All these skills are tied to students’ ability to achieve, become successful in life, and form stable relationships of their own.
Results from an after-school enrichment program in 24 Los Angeles elementary schools showed, for example, that 75 percent of the children liked school more after participating in the program. Their parents reported less tension at home, teachers reported improved student behavior, students' grades improved, and school-based crime dipped by a striking 40 to 60 percent (Afterschool Alliance, 2005).

Learning by Doing
As a "distinctly different child development institution" (Halpern, 2003), after-school programs offer a distinctly different type of learning from traditional schools. Lucy Friedman, founder and president of the After-School Corporation in New York City, uses the term stealth learning (Friedman & Quinn, 2006), or learning on the sly. High-quality programs often involve students in project-based learning experiences that give them opportunities to discover and reflect on phenomena in their real worlds and communities. Some programs, for example, include advocacy efforts, volunteering at food banks or urban ecology projects, or visits to local senior citizen centers. Such activities give voice to students' need to engage in productive and meaningful work.

There's actually good science behind stealth learning. Influenced by John Dewey's (1948) pedagogical theory of learning by doing, the notion is based on the premise that children acquire knowledge, language, and social understandings through useful activity, like solving real problems or social challenges. Whether children put on a stage production or participate in an advocacy effort, learning is not isolated in the child's mind, separate from action. Instead, practice grounds learning.

Cultural theorists such as Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) distinguish this type of learning from didactically transmitting information. Real activity typically involves a master crafts-person of sorts, from the fine tailor to the careful after-school teacher who uses strategies and techniques to encourage children to tackle tasks. Adults may lend support, provide structure, and create rules of engagement, but it's the children who must take responsibility for their learning.

If you think about it, only in the last century and only in industrialized nations has formal schooling emerged as the widespread method of educating our young. Before schools appeared, the most common means of learning was through apprenticeship. Children learned by becoming immersed in an activity. They participated in chores, errands, and activities with their families, effectively learning on the job.

Parents essentially mentored children, giving graduated assistance until the children could do things on their own. Eventually, other more specialized mentors took over as young adults learned a trade or went on to a profession. Architects learned to design by working with master architects. Surgeons learned to operate on patients by watching and assisting other surgeons.

You're likely to find this practice-based approach to learning in many after-school programs. The teacher or coach considers the complexity of the learning activity and designs strategies that encourage children to try out new things. Tasks may be a bit more difficult than children can handle on their own, but they can accomplish them with support from a more capable peer or the teacher. Whether students are getting ready for a dance performance or creating an orchestral composition, mentors are there to support students' developing talents. Tasks are typically geared to something relevant in the
students’ lives. The teacher models the new skills and coaches the students to apply them.

Unlike in school, in after-school programs, skilled performance matters most—not standardized test scores. Whether the child is engaged in sports, creative arts, or some urban ecology project, programs focus on mastering knowledge and skills to accomplish specific tasks. Purposefulness as well as high demands on performance make this type of learning well suited to children who have, in other circumstances, felt defeated, marginalized, and often invisible in schools.

**Taking the Right Steps**

For Liliana, the high demands involve keeping up with her teacher, Lincoln Chavez, a local musician and director of the program. In his late 20s, exuding cool with his long dreadlocks and black sunglasses, Lincoln cuts quite a figure as an after-school leader. After graduating from college, he turned to after-school programs. “I wanted to be a role model for kids—black, white, Hispanic, whatever—to show how important education is,” he said. “I see too many kids who think they can become sports stars or music stars without getting an education. I think that education is the key to opening doors—and that doors will open for them if they have the qualifications.”

Lincoln is a tough and demanding taskmaster. Getting ready for the dance performance, students practice their moves. “OK, Santiago,” Lincoln says, “let your hand go in a motion that looks like you’re hugging yourself. Let’s take it from the top!”

The dance moves are complicated, yet none of the children give up, even after the 10th go-round. Like an effective coach, Lincoln teaches by modeling: “Watch, this is what it’s supposed to look like. Try it with me. Yeah, Liliana, you got it!” He demonstrates and gives specific feedback, such as, “Here’s how to do it, here’s how you did it, and here’s how to do it better!” Sometimes he even scolds the students: “How many times have I told you guys to follow through on that move?” From time to time, he’ll yell “Freeze!” pointing out what they’re doing wrong and showing them how to do it correctly.

All through these moves, Lincoln praises, encourages, and smiles, finding tiny glimmers of activity to reinforce. But at the same time, he places responsibility for learning on the learner and fosters skills through vigorous teaching, practice, and repetition. He works on teamwork—unity, team spirit, and cooperation—reminding the students that only a few days remain before their community performance. Lincoln is clearly a role model. Call him camp counselor, big brother, or coach, he is both leader and collaborator in helping students learn.

The children don’t misbehave. According to Lincoln, one reason the program hasn’t experienced the disciplinary problems that plague many inner-city schools is that the staff work with both the kids and families. They’ll visit parents in their homes, work with students and their teachers, and try to make connections between school and the community.

And they don’t turn anyone away. “In some cases,” explained Lincoln, “where the children are needy, we’ll have someone shadow them, and we may need an extra adult. But we’ll work with any and all kids.”

**Basic Building Blocks**

The evidence suggests that good after-school programs have some essential characteristics (Neuman, 2009):

- **They give children opportunities to solve problems** and use their reasoning skills to full capacity. For example, students might adapt recipes to create nutritious meals and publish their own cookbook at the end of the year.

- **They focus on teamwork.** Projects encourage children to begin to think of “we” instead of just “me.” For example, a recent performing arts program involved students in script reading, dance, costume design, and drama. The children produced and presented a wonderful performance for family, friends, and the community. Such teamwork provides the discipline and role models that children desperately need—especially those children who have been isolated from beneficial socializing influences.

- **They nurture children’s skills and**
talents. Programs that help children explore new skill areas, discover talents, and experience doing something just for the love of it open up new opportunities and channels of communication. These programs can build children's self-esteem, as well as the other three Rs—resourcefulness, responsibility, and reliability.

■ They offer choices. Children in these middle years are seeking fun, friends, voice, and choice. They seek out places where they can gather with friends and interact with adults on relatively equal footing. They want attention and recognition for their efforts and skills; they want to make choices about what they do and why they want to do it. As one child said, "I like everything I do here, cause I get to choose it." Interest drives engagement. The children stay focused when they believe the task is important and worthwhile to them personally.

Programs like these build a culture of learning. At their best, they encourage children to express ideas openly, reason, and apply their abilities to authentic activity. Such programs use immersion as their model of learning, helping children learn in ways that are more connected with day-to-day experiences. They enable children to safely explore independence, peer relationships, and leadership. They not only support healthy, positive development during middle childhood, but they also put in place a crucial safety net for children who are juggling a volatile mix of family, school, and social pressures in harsh, disadvantaged communities.

What Makes Them Work?
Deborah Vandell and her team of researchers (2004) and the Afterschool Corporation (Birmingham, Peckman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005), among others, have been systematically gathering data to identify characteristics of high-quality after-school programs as well as promising practices. These independent studies converge on a number of shared characteristics around staffing, and support systems. These programs work because they offer

■ New learning opportunities. For many children, after-school programs provide their first exposure to learning opportunities in such areas as dance, music, art, and organized sports, the very activities that more affluent children routinely enjoy. Activities introduce children to experiences that spark their interest and expand their goals for what they hope to accomplish in school and beyond.

■ Skill-building and mastery. Many successful programs create opportunities to build skills through reading, storytelling, and writing. In addition to learning basic skills, children practice new skills to the point of mastery in projects that often lead to an exhibition or performance.

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■ Intentional relationship building.
Successful programs foster positive relationships with the host school through ongoing leadership training and team-building activities. Program directors frequently communicate with school staff about curriculum ideas, homework assignments, and the needs of individual children. Relationship building extends beyond school staff, however. Common to these successful programs is their ability to draw from a variety of resources in the community and maintain close partnerships with parents.

■ A strong, experienced leader supported by a trained and supervised staff.
Successful programs hire highly qualified site coordinators who bring a rich set of experiences in youth development and who cultivate a strong connection to the community, children, and families they serve. These leaders articulate a program that balances the potentially competing pressures of academic and social supports. They hire teams of professionals and community-based staff who share a common belief in young children and their capacity to achieve.

■ Strong partnerships with sponsoring organizations. Successful programs have strong connections to their community partnership organizations yet have considerable autonomy to make programming decisions. They give site coordinators flexibility to manage the project while providing administrative and fiscal support. Strong financial and managerial support is needed for leaders to be able to concentrate on creating thriving after-school projects.

What Research Can Tell Us
Thanks to the efforts of organizations like The Afterschool Corporation (TASC) and L.A.'s Best, after-school programs are beginning to employ a variety of accountability mechanisms to become even more effective. Programs are asking such questions as, What can we learn about improving attendance and retention in after-school programs? How intense does a program need to be to have a measurable effect? What processes do we need to set in motion or continue to sustain positive change? What major barriers and constraints limit the possibilities for positive change?

Future research will undoubtedly answer these and other compelling questions. Recognizing that after-school programs are complicated efforts that
require ongoing corrections, we will need to develop accountability mecha-

nisms that draw on bodies of evidence and comprehensive measures of
outcomes. By doing so, we can begin to identify not only what works, but also
why it works to improve children's develop-

ment during these crucial middle childhood years.

**Not Just More School**

Recently, the U.S. Congress increased funding for the federal 21st Century
Community Centers after-school initiative by $35 million, which is good news
for children and families waiting to get into these programs. The $1.2 billion
appropriation in fiscal year 2010 will provide even more families with the
support they urgently need during tough times. Unfortunately, thousands of chil-
dren are still left out of programs because of limited availability and
limited funds.

Good after-school programs involve children in learning that is distinct from
what happens during the school day. In fact, these programs' success often
hinges on their **nonschool** flavor—on their ability to reinvigorate and replace
the drill-and-kill environment for at-risk kids with one that enables students to
use their skills and talents in the prac-
tice of interesting activities.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Thou-

sands of children, many of them
emotionally vulnerable, are on the
precipice of developing either self-
confidence or self-consciousness, either
industry or inferiority. Those who
succeed will do so because they have
some kind of structure to help them
move to the next level. High-quality
after-school programs provide one of
the scaffolds for changing the odds for
these children.

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**EL online**

To learn how another school has provided learning opportunities outside school hours, read the online-only article “Wishing Every Day Were Saturday” by Susan Catapano and Jenny E. Gray at [http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/apr10/vol67/num07/Wishing_Every_Day_Were_Saturday.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/apr10/vol67/num07/Wishing_Every_Day_Were_Saturday.aspx).