

Access to Afterschool Programs: Overcoming the Barriers to Getting Youth “in the Door”

Priscilla Little, Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard University

Introduction

Afterschool programs can keep children and youth safe, support working families, improve academic achievement, and promote the civic and social development of young people (for more information, see *The Realm of Afterschool* in this series). Indeed, according to recent polling data of afterschool care arrangements for children in kindergarten through twelfth grade, 6.5 million children are enrolled in after school programs nationwide and therefore are poised to reap the benefits of program participation.¹ However, an estimated 14.3 million children and youth K-12 that still care for themselves in the non-school hours,² thus not experiencing the unique opportunities that afterschool programs provide for learning, development, and safety. In Massachusetts alone, an estimated 5,700 school-age children ages 5-13 that are waiting for afterschool services.³ Further, there are discrepancies in access to programs that impede equitable participation across youth of diverse backgrounds. Public Agenda reports that program participation varies widely between low- and higher-income children, as well as between minority and non-minority children. Low-income and minority parents are considerably less likely to report that it is easy to find programs that are affordable, run by trustworthy adults, conveniently located, of high quality, and/or interesting to their child.⁴

So, while there is evidence that children and youth enrolled in afterschool programs are poised to reap their benefits, there is also evidence that many children and youth who would benefit from participation in an afterschool program are not doing so, and that low attendance is the norm in many afterschool programs. Why?⁵

First and foremost, many children and youth who would benefit most from program participation are not even getting in the door. This issue brief provides an overview of six common access barriers: affordability; the need to “hang out”; transportation; poor program quality; work; and, family factors. It concludes with a set of policy recommendations for improving access, particularly for disadvantaged children and youth. Unless otherwise cited, information regarding the research referenced in this brief can be found in the Related Resources section.

Six Access Barriers

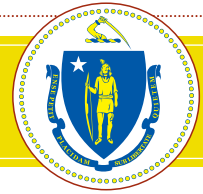
Participation in afterschool activities reveals a consistent pattern of “winners and losers” with significant demographic differences in activity participation across a range of non-school supports including sports, school clubs, and school-based and community-based after school programs.⁶ Highlights from analyses of two nationally representative data sets reveal that children and youth whose families have higher income and more education are the “winners,” and their less-disadvantaged peers are the “losers.”

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Specifically, children and youth whose families have higher incomes and more education:

- are more likely to participate in afterschool activities
- do so with greater frequency during the week
- participate in a greater number of different activities within a week, or a month
- are more likely to participate in enrichment programs, while their disadvantaged peers are more likely to participate in tutoring programs, thus not reaping the benefits associated with enrichment experiences.

Why are children and youth from lower-income and less-educated families consistently less likely to participate in a range of potentially beneficial activities and settings, including both school-based activities and community-based groups? Below are some of the common reasons that children and youth do not participate in afterschool programs.⁷ The first four barriers cut across age groups; the last two are particularly relevant to older youth.

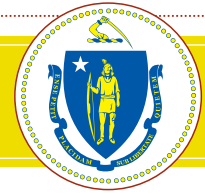
(1) Affordability. As described above, children and youth from higher income families appear to participate in virtually all non-school programs and activities more than children and youth from lower income families. This suggests a continued need to target non-school resources to disadvantaged children and youth, who are far less likely to participate in activities such as lessons, sports, and clubs. Given the evidence (cited above) of unmet demand for affordable afterschool programs there exists a clear need to expend resources and recruitment efforts toward that population.

(2) A desire to relax and hang out with friends after school. As the school day has become more demanding for students, and as districts, states, and the federal government have raised achievement standards and made schools accountable to meet those standards, now, more than ever, children and youth need “down time.” While some afterschool programs can and do incorporate “down time” into their programming, many children and youth perceive afterschool to be an extension of school and shy away from attending programs. Programs that offer time to “hang out,” particularly those in a community-based rather than school-base setting, may have the best chance to attract and retain youth, particularly as they get older.

(3) Transportation and safety. Transportation is a key barrier to program participation. Programs struggle to provide safe transportation for students for a number of reasons: transportation costs, distance from school to afterschool, and lack of public transportation, particularly in rural areas. A related barrier is safety – many parents do not feel that their children can travel safely to and from their afterschool programs, particularly in low-income neighborhoods where resources are scarce and crime is high. Some programs have overcome these barriers by attaining transportation vouchers from local bus companies; developing a “buddy system” for older youth to escort younger children; and by targeting services to the children and youth in the particular neighborhood in which the program is situated.

(4) Poor quality programs. Many youth “try out” afterschool programs, but become bored with them. The adage that children and youth “vote with their feet” is completely true and when

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word gets out that a program is “no good,” then enrollment drops. Three key messages regarding program quality need to be conveyed to families and their children and youth: (1) the program will keep children and youth physically and psychologically safe; (2) staff are caring and committed to developing positive youth-adult relationships; (3) the program will engage children and youth in a range of age-appropriate enrichment activities that will support learning and development. (For a more complete discussion of program quality, see Making the Case for Quality.)

(5) Work. Teen employment is a reality for many low-income families who rely on that income for the entire family. Approximately 40% of 16 and 17 year olds work during the school year, and one-quarter of these work 20 or more hours a week. In general, a reasonable amount of paid work does not seem to negatively affect teens’ school-related outcomes, but it reduces the time they have to spend on other activities like participation in afterschool programs. High school afterschool programs, then, must compete with jobs for teens’ time. Some programs for older youth employ an apprenticeship model and offer stipends for participation in internships. Others offer them financial incentives for their participation in OST programs.

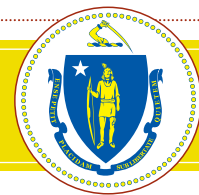
(6) Family factors and responsibilities. Adolescents with less enriching home environments are the least likely to participate in afterschool activities, suggesting that recruiting youth into afterschool programs is more complicated than just getting them to sign up; it sometimes involves working with families to help them understand the value of participating in nonschool supports for learning. Further, family responsibilities such as chores or caring for siblings interfere with participation in afterschool programs. When parents in disadvantaged families work, adolescents often need to take care of their younger siblings during the after school hours. For example, in some evaluations of welfare-to-work programs, the only group of adolescents who experienced gains in participation in formal after school activities were those without younger siblings. This indicates that when parents get paid employment, many adolescents can no longer participate in after school programs because they need to take care of their younger siblings. Some programs have overcome this barrier by accepting the younger siblings of teens into a program, while maintaining developmentally appropriate programming for the older youth.

Considerations for Improving Access to Afterschool Programs

Inequity in access to nonschool supports, such as afterschool programs and activities, can limit opportunities for some youth to engage in positive development experiences, and thus perpetuate chronic achievement gaps, especially for low-income and ethnic minority youth.¹⁰ Moving forward, it is imperative that afterschool program leaders and policymakers alike seriously examine the growing evidence base that disadvantaged youth are less likely to participate in afterschool programs and activities than their more advantaged peers. Below are some policy considerations for improving access.

(1) Understanding who participates, and why, will inform our understanding of access issues. Understanding the predictors of participation in the State is critical in order to better target services to those who need it the most. Of particular importance is getting a handle on existing statewide wait lists such as from the Massachusetts Department of Early Care and Education and map those against available slots. Continuing to encourage programs to conduct needs assessments,

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including capturing the voices of children and youth and what they say is important to them, is essential to ensure equity in access to programs, especially for under-served and at-risk children and youth.

(2) Afterschool program leaders need to ramp up their efforts to attract and sustain disadvantaged children and youth in general, and pay particular attention to specific ethnic groups and special needs populations. Traditional methods of recruitment do not work well for some children, youth and their families, and program leaders and youth practitioners may need to conduct more tailored and targeted recruitment efforts to reach those who are least likely to participate. Further, recruitment and retention challenges exist across a wide range of activities, including recreation programs, school-based activities, and sports. No single type of afterschool program is “off the hook” from needing to address these challenges.

(3) Participation in programs is inextricably linked to program quality. Any statewide policy effort to improve access and participation must incorporate attention to supporting and improving program quality. This includes promoting the use of statewide quality assessment tools, supporting an integrated professional development system, and providing incentives for quality improvement efforts.

(4) Decision makers need to take a systemic view of participation. Afterschool programs are not the only places where children and youth learn and grow in their non-school hours. To fully understand participation and its impacts on learning and development, it must be examined in the context of where else children and youth are spending their time—in families, in schools, and in other community-based organizations. Only when there is a systemic understanding of, and partnership among, the full array of complementary supports for youth and their families, can participation in afterschool programs truly be understood. This is especially true for children and youth with special needs and English language learners. All this means understanding and making available many options for children and youth in the non-school hours, including afterschool programs and expanded learning time, to best accommodate their developmental needs.

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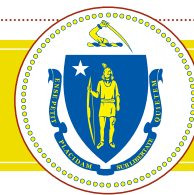
“Three key messages regarding program quality need to be conveyed to families and their children and youth: (1) the program will keep children and youth physically and psychologically safe; (2) staff are caring and committed to developing positive youth-adult relationships; (3) the program will engage children and youth in a range of age-appropriate enrichment activities that will support learning and development.”

Related Resources

Information regarding the research referenced in this brief can be found in the following resources:

Moving Beyond the Barriers: Attracting and Sustaining Youth Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs. (Written by Priscilla Little and Sherri Lauver, 2004). This brief culls information from several implementation and impact evaluations of out-of-school time programs to develop a set of promising strategies to attract and sustain youth participation in the programs. Available on the web at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html>

What are Kids Getting Into These Days?: Demographic Differences in Youth OST Activity Participation. (Written by Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) staff, 2006). HFRP used national data to examine the many factors and contexts in children’s lives that predict participation. This research brief distills findings about demographic characteristics of youth participants includes implications for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. Available on the web at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/afterschool/resources/demographic.pdf>



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Participation in Youth Programs: Enrollment, Attendance, and Engagement. This issue of *New Directions in Youth Development* (No. 105, May 2005), edited by Harvard Family Research Project staff, proposes that to fully understand, and then intervene to improve participation in out-of-school (OST) programs, issues of access, enrollment, and engagement must be considered, and in the context of program quality. Chapters provide research-based strategies on how to increase participation, and how to define, measure, and study it, drawing from the latest developmental research and evaluation literature. Available for ordering at: <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0787980536.html>

¹ Afterschool Alliance. (2004). *America After 3 PM: A Household Survey on Afterschool in America. America After 3 PM Executive Summary*. Retrieved November 16th, 2004 from http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/press_archives/america_3pm/Executive_Summary.pdf.

² Afterschool Alliance, 2004.

³ Massachusetts Special Commission Progress Report. August 2007.

⁴ Duffett, A. & Johnson, J. (2004). *All work and no play?*. New York City, NY: Public Agenda.

⁵ Lauver, S., Little, P., And Weiss, H. (2004). *Moving beyond the barriers: Attracting and sustaining youth participation in out-of-school time programs*. Harvard Family Research Project: Cambridge, MA. <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html>

⁶ This information is based on research conducted by the Harvard Family Research Project on the contextual predictors of participation in out-of-school time. For a complete description of the study and its methodology, visit the HFRP website at: http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/ost_participation.html

⁷ This set of barriers is based on research conducted by the Harvard Family Research Project. For a full description of the research methodology visit our website at [HFRP.org](http://www.hfrp.org).

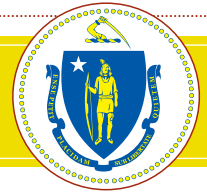
⁸ Lerman, R. I. (2000). *Are teens in low-income and welfare families working too much?* Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Available at www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=309708.

Rothstein, D. S. (2001). Youth employment during school: Results from two longitudinal surveys. *Monthly Labor Review*, 124(8), 25–58. Available at www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2001/08/art4exc.htm.

⁹ Gennetian, L. A., Duncan, G. J., Knox, V. W., Vargas, W. G., Clark-Kauffman, E., & London, A. S. (2002). *How welfare and work policies for parents affect adolescents: A synthesis of research*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. Available at www.mdrc.org/publications/69/overview.html.

¹⁰ Gordon, E., Brigdall, B., and Meroe, S.A (Eds.). (2005). *Supplementary education: The hidden curriculum of high academic achievement*. New York, NY: Littlefield Publishers.

¹¹ Afterschool Alliance. (2004). *America After 3 PM: A Household Survey on Afterschool in America. America After 3 PM Executive Summary*. Retrieved November 16th, 2004 from http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/press_archives/america_3pm/Executive_Summary.pdf.



About the Author

Priscilla Little is Associate Director of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE); is the project manager of HFRP's out-of-school time work; and is a part-time lecturer at HGSE. She is a national expert on research and evaluation of out-of-school time programs and how they can complement in-school learning and development. In addition to her out-of-school time research, Little is also well-versed in issues of early childhood, pre-K, and family involvement, currently evaluating a universal Pre-K initiative in California, conducting a cluster evaluation for Atlantic Philanthropies' integrated learning cluster, and working on a cross-project team to provide technical assistance to the Parental Information Resource Centers. This cross-disciplinary work gives Little a unique perspective on the importance of integrating a range of school and non-school components to support learning and development.

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