

Back to the Future: Engaging Older Youth

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How older youth spend their time during the out-of-school time hours is a primary issue for parents, youth development and education professionals, and policy-makers. Late adolescence has been “noted as particularly important for setting the stage for continued development through the life span as individuals begin to make choices and engage in a variety of activities that are influential on the rest of their lives” (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006, pg. 13). Research shows that juvenile crime rates almost triple between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., and as many as 50% of teens experiment with cigarettes and/or alcohol and are more likely to use drugs during these hours (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2006). Participation in high-quality afterschool programs has been shown to decrease juvenile crime rates and involvement in risky behaviors (National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2002). Research suggests that teens are less likely to engage in risky behaviors when they are engaged in pro-social behaviors and participating in activities in environments where they feel respected and supported. It seems evident that participation in high-quality afterschool programs can be as beneficial to youth ages 13-17 as it is for traditional school-age participants.

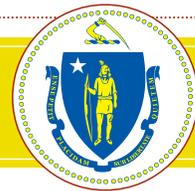
Although over 6 million children are enrolled in afterschool programs, only 8% are teens in grades 9-12 (Afterschool Alliance, 2006). Findings from a three-city study, showed only half of 16- to 17-year-olds and one-third of 18- to 19-year-olds reported being engaged constructively after school (Sipe, Ma, & Gambone, 1998). Program participation drops off in middle school, ostensibly because older youth are not interested in formal afterschool programs (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). However, many youth would actually prefer to participate in structured activities should they be available. Nationally, more than half of teens wish there were more community or neighborhood-based programs available after school, and two-thirds of those surveyed said they would participate in such programs if they were available (Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, 2001).

There have been significant investments in Massachusetts, both public and private, in out-of-school time programs that seek to improve outcomes for youth. However, most of these investments focused on the needs of younger children. Funding sources have tended to adhere to a philosophy that investments are most worthwhile when made at the earliest possible intervention level. So, funding for out-of-school time programs is skewed more towards younger school-age and middle school youth with the expectation that positive impacts are more likely and visible. Afterschool has also been framed in the public eye as a support to working parents (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). The apparent need for parent support diminishes as youth age and are considered capable of caring for themselves. The high school itself has historically been seen as a source of multiple and diverse afterschool opportunities including sports teams, music groups, arts, etc. However, budget shortfalls have decimated high school extracurricular activities or in many cases attached participation fees that eliminate participation for many lower income youth.

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There is strong consensus among afterschool leaders regarding components of effective high school age youth programs. Programs for older youth cannot be the same as elementary and middle school programs. The characteristics and capabilities of the youthworker are paramount to program success, and programs for high school age youth are most successful when youthworkers are creative, well-trained, skilled at building relationships, and can make long-term commitments to programs.

Finding and retaining the right staff is critical to helping youth participants develop and sustain an interest in program participation. Many programs strive to engage young people initially on a social level through interactions with staff. Once engaged, the programs then offer teens high-yield learning opportunities such as computer and music technology.

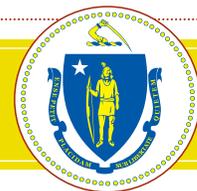
In general, programs appear to be most successful in reaching high school age youth and sustaining their interest when:

- Older youth feel a sense of independence as part of participation in the program, particularly financial independence through earning wages or a stipend.
- Youth voices are listened to and incorporated in decision-making.
- Programs offer employable skills, such as office work skills, and include preparation for or direct connection to job training and employment.
- Youth have opportunity to interact with community and business leaders.
- Schools and principals are active partners.
- Participation includes receiving assistance in navigating the post-high school experience.
- Youth are introduced to the world outside their local neighborhood (Hall, Israel, & Short, 2004).

A number of studies have been conducted to collect direct input from teens about their interests in the content and structure of afterschool program opportunities. During focus groups conducted in Boston, teens indicated ten program characteristics that were most important to them. Teens commented, "It is important to me that my afterschool program..."

- Is fun.
- Teaches new skills.
- Has caring teachers/group leaders.
- Makes me feel safe.
- Is open during hours that fit my schedule.
- Let's me meet new people.
- Has some of my friends who attend.
- Has young people who work there.
- Has different people than at school.
- Teaches me how to get along with others (Innovation by Design and Center for Teen Empowerment, 2002).

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Today's older youth want to have a sense of control in how they spend their time, and they "exhibit a strong need for individuality and self-expression" (Fox, 2004a). Older youth seek programs that can help develop their interests, expand current skills, and teach new ways to adapt the skills they have into real-world activities. For many teens being a part of something that is meaningful and "demonstrates their growing sense of responsibility" is essential (Fox, 2004b). Throughout the research and literature the most salient program feature mentioned by older youth is the presence of supportive relationships which contribute to youth feeling free to be themselves and accepted for who they are. Initially, new and exciting activities may draw them to an afterschool program, but ultimately the relationships they develop are what keep them engaged. (Barr, Birmingham, Fornal, Klein, & Piha, 2006).

Findings from the The After School Corporation's multi-year evaluation of their high school afterschool programs showed that teens who were highly engaged in the afterschool program activities attributed program success to three main program characteristics: (1) high-quality staff/peer interactions; (2) self-directed activities where teens could gain leadership; and (3) projects and activities that provided opportunities for social and interpersonal growth (Birmingham & White, 2005).

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills notes that in order to thrive in the world today, young people need higher-end skills, such as the ability to communicate effectively beyond their peer groups, analyze complex information from multiple sources, write or present well-reasoned arguments, and develop solutions to interdisciplinary problems (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, n.d.). Older youth must be on a path of preparation towards spending their adult lives in a multi-tasking, multi-faceted, technology-driven, diverse workforce environment, and they must be equipped to do so (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004). Considering the current challenges facing the public education system and disparity in student achievement levels, "the nonschool hours are an underused tool in supporting older youth in their transition to adulthood" (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Ferber, & Gaines, 2006).

Public policy related to meeting the needs of older youth during the out-of-school time hours must be aligned with the developmental needs of older youth and include strategies to support financial incentives, school credit, alternative pathways to credentials, participation flexibility, and sustained funding (Yohalem et al., 2006). Local investment and policy priorities should focus on increasing the capacity, scope, and effectiveness of older youth serving organizations by supporting: (1) partnerships between high schools and community organizations; (2) increasing opportunities for youth voice and contribution; (3) establishing a formal structure for staff development, professional recognition, and training; and (4) developing and organizing technical assistance to match the specific needs of programs (Hall et al., 2004).

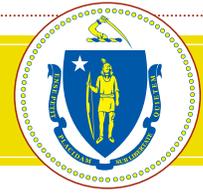
The state should continue to build upon funding initiatives such as the new grant program at the Department of Public Health (Prevention of Youth Violence Through Promotion of Positive Youth Development) which recognizes the critical need for a positive youth development approach at the cornerstone of youth supports and services.

Efforts to train and support youth development workers must be continued and expanded. The

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THE MASSACHUSETTS SPECIAL COMMISSION ON AFTER SCHOOL AND OUT OF SCHOOL TIME

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BEST Initiative, a project of the Medical Foundation, is one of 15 BEST sites around the country. BEST offers a Youth Worker Certificate Program, providing training in the youth development approach and the basic competencies of youth work. Over 300 youth workers in the Boston area have completed the BEST Training Certificate Program, including workers from residential programs, afterschool programs, health programs, peer leadership programs, and traditional recreational and multi-service programs.

The School Age Youth Development credential (SAYD) for youth development and afterschool professionals, sponsored by Achieve Boston, was launched in January 2007. SAYD is a competency-based credential which includes a three-part sequence of college coursework, community-based training, and direct field experience. With the implementation of the SAYD credential, Achieve Boston hopes to improve the overall quality of afterschool and youth programs by ensuring that program staff at all levels have access to comprehensive educational opportunities that enable them to strengthen their skills, develop their knowledge base, and advance along their chosen career path.

There is truly hard work ahead to develop and bring together sufficient quantity of high quality out-of-school time opportunities for older youth. Recognition that we are at a significant juncture of unmet needs and stretched resources, should serve as a critical motivator and guidepost to continuously push forward towards a coordinated, inclusive, and informed funding and policy strategy for serving older youth in Massachusetts.

Program Profiles

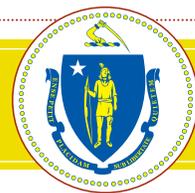
United Teen Equality Center (UTEC), Lowell

United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) in Lowell was established in 1999 and provides a safe and multicultural place of belonging for Lowell's young people ages 13-23, particularly those most often overlooked and labeled as "at-risk." UTEC has a balanced approach to youthwork and frames itself as a "by teens, for teens" safe-haven, youth development programming, and youth organizing center. Over 1000 young people participate in the opportunities and activities offered through the four main centers of programming: Streetwork, Youth Development, The Open School, and Youth Organizing. Activities include intervention services, enrichment classes, GED and employment preparation, and training to create systemic change in the Lowell community. UTEC is a private/public/community partnership that has successfully reached out to young people using a youth development approach and creates opportunities to best support them in becoming agents of social change and organizers in the community. www.utec-lowell.org

The Holyoke Youth Commission, Holyoke

The Holyoke Youth Commission is sponsored and supported by the Holyoke Youth Task Force of the Holyoke Mayor's Office. The Commission which is made up of about 20 youths ages 13-21 meets weekly at City Hall Annex and regularly with the Mayor. Youth participate from a variety of afterschool groups, middle schools, and high schools and reflect the economic and racial diversity of Holyoke. Accomplishments of the Youth Commission include organizing Youth Summits, managing a mini-grants competition for local youth groups, organizing a

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speaking-out on racism, and starting up the Youth Commission Recreation Basketball League. www.youthtaskforce.org/holyokeyouthcommission.html

Roca, Chelsea

Roca began in 1988 and is a human development and community building organization committed to serving the most disenfranchised and disengaged young people ages 14-24 in the communities of Chelsea, Revere, and East Boston. Roca means “rock” in Spanish and represents Roca’s belief that we can “be the change.” Roca connects over 600 young people into educational, employment, and life skills programming every year to help them re-engage in society. Roca serves an additional 450 young people and parents through education and training, and provides one-time outreach and education to 20,000 community members. Roca believes that by promoting values such as belonging, generosity, competence, and independence, young people can become self-sufficient and live out of harm’s way. Activities and supports offered at Roca include: literacy and MCAS preparation, peacemaking circles, employment training, community organizing, and community collaboration initiatives. www.rocainc.org

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Related Resources

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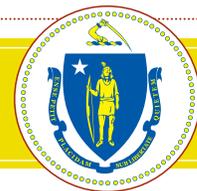
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About the Authors

Georgia Hall is Senior Research Scientist and Diane Gruber is Research Associate at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. The Centers are home to an interdisciplinary community of scholars and theorists engaged in action, research, theory building, publication, and training.

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