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Putting children and families first to ensure high academic achievement for all

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EXTENDED LEARNING TIME: AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

AT A GLANCE

Afterschool programs have been operating for decades in communities across the country, and federal investment in afterschool has increased dramatically since the mid 1990s. Educators came to realize that afterschool programs help children become responsible, productive citizens of tomorrow, while helping their parents be responsible, productive citizens today, as well as have positive effect on various student outcomes. The passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in January 2002, created favorable opportunities for supporting afterschool programs, as a result of which different afterschool programs sprung up all over the country. The purpose of this brief is to look at the research and evaluation conducted on afterschool programs in recent year. This should help us better understand what has been the aim of these programs and what has been measured.

Introduction

Afterschool programs are thought to have a potential to benefit children in a number of areas: (i) improve students' socialization, (ii) provide students' supervision and distract from more anti-social behaviors, (iii) help improve students' academic achievement especially of those who do not seem to be achieving during regular school hours. Grossman et al. (2002) argue that students who participated in the school-based, afterschool programs seemed to experience positive change in four key areas: staying out of trouble; improving their school attitudes and behavior; strengthening their social networks; and learning new skills, seeing new possibilities and improving their self-confidence.

Sample Empirical Studies on Afterschool Programs

Several studies exploring the effectiveness of afterschool programs have been reported. Those studies suggested that afterschool programs have been designed with different content and had different expectations for student academic and non-academic performance.

Magana (2015) reported about the extended day program at Grant Beacon Middle School in Denver, CO, that, from their perspective, turned the middle school around. They added one hour to the school day to offer “enrichment programming, advanced classes, student leadership development and interventions” (p. 10) such as hip-hop dance, athletics, cooking, resume building, and leadership development. From their perspective these experiences created motivation for students to attend school. Further, the extended day model supported blended learning approach by utilizing technology to create learning environments for individual students and small group activities and a system of online interim assessments that teachers could use to measure student performance. It seems that a couple of things ensured the success of the program: (i) “buy-in”- students were invited to help with crafting a catalog of enrichment programs that they wanted, (ii) structure – clear schedules for teachers and students were developed, and students were provided an opportunity to choose from enrichment programs, and (iii) a committed administrator who could make it happen.

A study by Furrer, Magnuson and Suggs (2012) examined school attendance, credit attainment, and standardized reading and math scores in a group of students at risk of academic failure who participated in extended school day programming. The results of the study suggested an advantage for students participating in extended school day programs in terms of better school attendance, earning credits towards graduation, but not in terms of standardized test scores.

Finn, Yan, Martin and McInnis (2017) conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of the Active Science after school program in promoting physical activity and science learning in different site locations across the U.S. The results of the study suggested that students had significantly higher physical activity levels and improved science scores when they participated in the afterschool program Active Science.

Young, Ortiz and Young (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of the effects of out-of-school time (after school, summer camps, enrichment programs, etc.) on the student interest in STEM. The questions that the study attempted to answer were: (1) How effective is out-of-school time (OST) as a means to foster student interest in STEM? (2) How does the effectiveness of OST differ by program and study characteristics? The results of the study suggested that out-of-school time had a positive effect on student interest in STEM. Furthermore, the variation in these effects was moderated by program focus, grade level, and the quality of the research design (study quality).

Taheri and Welsh (2015) reported the results of a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of afterschool programs (ASPs) on delinquency. The authors grouped the studies into the three primary intervention types: academic, recreation, and skills training/mentoring. There was evidence that ASPs had a small but nonsignificant effect on delinquency. Moderator analyses indicated that not one of the intervention types was associated with a significant effect on delinquency.

Stacy, Cartwright, Arwood, Canfield and Kloos (2017) conducted a study on the use of tablets on informal math practice. They used four settings for the study, the fourth setting being an afterschool program offered alongside afterschool homework help. In afterschool, the program was carried out exclusively with tablet practice, to explore voluntary attendance to a math-practice program. The researchers discovered that while consistent student attendance remained a challenge, student attendance gradually increased.

Eleven out of 19 students felt that the program helped them either a little bit or a lot with math. The students also reported that they enjoyed staying after school to attend the program, and 89% of the students stated that they would participate in the program again.

Huang, Craig, Xie, Graesser, and Hu (2016) conducted a study to explore the effect of an intelligent tutoring system, the Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces (ALEKS) system, on reducing mathematics gaps in afterschool program. The study was conducted with a sample of 6th grade student volunteers who were randomly assigned to one of the two afterschool conditions (ALEKS versus comparable teacher-led mathematics teaching). In the teacher-led condition, White males and females and African American males and females coming from schools of two levels of socioeconomic status performed differently on the math state test. In contrast, in the ALEKS condition, students with different individual differences performed similarly on the state test.

Newell, Zientek, Tharp, Vogt, and Moreno (2015) investigated the impact of a semester-long afterschool intervention utilizing an inquiry-based infectious diseases curriculum (designed for use afterschool) on 63 urban students' content knowledge and aspects of their attitudes towards science. The results of the study suggested that students' content knowledge increased by 24.6% from pre- to posttest.

Pruitt (2013) explored the relationship between afterschool programs and standardized assessment results of schools in Texas. The predictors were afterschool 21st Century Community Learning Center campuses and non-21st Century Community Learning Center campuses. This study found no statistically significant differences in the percentage of students meeting state standard between schools with afterschool programs and those without afterschool programs on the math TAKS test.

Afterschool Alliance Organization (2013) reported about a number of different types of evaluations over several years (almost a decade). Some evaluations collected data on whether programs have been structured as they were originally intended, how well they have done at meeting attendance and staffing goals, how they "fit" in the school environment and more. Others explored student outcomes: the effects afterschool programs have on the children who participated in them, their parents and even the communities at large. In general terms, the findings of those evaluations suggested that quality afterschool programs have a positive impact on a number of measures of student academic achievement, positively affect behavior and discipline and help relieve parents' worries about their children's safety.

Additionally, attempts were made to design measurements for routinely monitoring the effectiveness of afterschool programs. For instance, Ellis, Taggart, Martinz, Lepley, Jamal (2017) developed a brief questionnaire that can be used to routinely monitor the quality of structured experiences for youth (i.e. discrete periods of time in which youth gathers for an activity under the supervision of adult or youth leaders). Four-item measures of perceived value and engagement were created. The instrument seems to show high reliability.

Limitations in Afterschool Program Research

A few things seem to create the limitations of research on after school programs. First, the students who volunteer to attend after school programs may be different from those who do not choose to do so. Second, it does not seem that all student subgroups are equally represented in the studies found (the results of the studies do not seem to generalize to minority students). Third, very little research has been conducted on the type of service provided, the kinds of students who attend the different programs, and what the programs themselves entailed. Fourth, it seems that the studies on the effects of specific afterschool programs is scarce, and those studies that are found seem to have yielded inconsistent

outcomes. Fifth, it seems that afterschool programs and regular school-day programs are not directly connected, so studying the effects of the afterschool program on regular schooldays academics seems to be difficult. This challenge has been noted by Blanton, Mayer, & Shustak (1995) and Fashola (1998) as well.

Conclusion

The discussion above suggests that afterschool programs seem to have different content, and focus on different aspects of student learning. Additionally, different impacts of afterschool programs were measured. However, the results of previous research on after school programs do not seem to be easily generalizable to student populations, which leaves room for conducting more research. With all the listed limitations, after school programs seem to benefit those who participate, which leads to the thought that there is no reason to think of discontinuing afterschool programs. But because the participation in the programs is voluntary, students are probably not held accountable for attendance in most cases. It seems that afterschool program research might benefit from exploring more structured programs because they will also pose certain expectations for student attendance and participation. Regular student attendance and participation should help research to make stronger arguments about program effectiveness.

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