



Harvard Family Research Project

OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME EVALUATION SNAPSHOT

A Review of Activity Implementation in Out-of-School Time Programs

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Harvard Family Research Project's series of Out-of-School Time Evaluation Snapshots distill the wealth of information compiled in our Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database¹ into a single report. Each Snapshot examines a specific aspect of out-of-school time (OST) evaluation. This Snapshot examines the range and scope of activities being implemented in current out-of-school time programs to set a context for understanding the links between program activities and positive outcomes for youth.

As the need grows for quality programs during nonschool hours, there is increasing evidence that out-of-school time (OST) programs are associated with positive outcomes for youth. However, to date, most evaluators have examined OST programs as a whole without taking into account the specific activities they offer. As a result, the processes by which these programs influence child outcomes are not yet well understood. This *Snapshot* surveys the range of activities being implemented in OST settings across the country in order to understand and promote effective OST programming.

Why Examine Activities in OST Programs?

There are multiple reasons for examining the range of specific activities in OST programs. First, there is an increasing demand for research that links specific program activities with children's outcomes. These links can help answer the question of what defines quality in OST programs and can contribute to the creation of optimally effective programs. Before such links can be explored however, it is necessary to understand the components of existing programs. Secondly, research on voluntary extracurricular activities suggests that the specific types of activities in which youth engage make a difference for youth outcomes (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Which OST Programs Evaluate Activity Implementation?

We culled the data for this review from profiles of evaluations of out-of-school time programs included in the Harvard Family Research Project Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database (see box on page 2). As of summer 2003 when we collected the data, 27 program evalua-

tions included information about activity offerings and therefore were included in our analysis. These programs range in size from small single-site programs to national multisite programs. This *Snapshot* only includes information on program activities, but many programs also assessed youths' developmental outcomes and we address these findings in the first *Snapshot* in this series (available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/index.html). Furthermore, this analysis reports only on activities for children and adolescents (although some of these programs also offered services for adults). We provide a list of all the programs we reviewed in the appendix.

How Do Evaluators Assess Activity Implementation?

Evaluators have used a variety of methods to assess the spectrum of OST activities. Of the 27 programs in this review, 23 reported the methods they used to collect activity data. Among these programs, *observations conducted by researchers* constituted the most frequent strategy for evaluating activity implementation (14 programs). *Reports from OST program staff* were also common (9 programs used staff surveys and 7 programs used staff interviews). Some programs collected *reports from youth participants* (9 used surveys and 4 used interviews) and *reports from parents* (2 used surveys and 1 used interviews). In addition, eight programs used *reviews of program documents*, such as activity logs and attendance records. Many program evaluators employed multiple data sources to report on the types of activities being provided.

What Is the Scope of Activities Provided by OST Programs?

Not surprisingly, this review confirms that OST programs range in scope from targeted, single-activity programs to programs offering a diverse array of activities. The majority of programs reviewed (19 programs, approximately 70%) offer multiple activities, while eight programs (approximately 30%) focus on only one type of activity. Of the single-activity pro-

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HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM EVALUATION DATABASE

The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database contains profiles of out-of-school time (OST) program evaluations. Its purpose is to provide accessible information about previous and current evaluations to support the development of high quality evaluations and programs in the OST field.

Types of Programs Included in the Database

Evaluations in the database meet the following three criteria:

1. The evaluated program/initiative operates during out-of-school time.
2. The evaluation(s) aim to answer a specific evaluation question or set of questions about a specific program/initiative.
3. The evaluated program/initiative serves children between the ages of 5 and 19.

Types of Information Included in the Database

Each profile contains detailed information about the evaluations, as well as an overview of the OST program/initiative itself. Electronic links to actual evaluation reports, where available, are also provided, as are program and evaluation contacts.

How to Use the Database

The database is located in the OST section of the HFRP website at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html.

The search mechanism allows users to refine their scan of the profiles to specific program and evaluation characteristics and findings information.

The Scans for This Snapshot

For this review, we conducted two scans. First, we checked off the box on the search page marked “Activity Implementation” to obtain a list of all of the evaluations in the database that reported any information on implementation (including specific program activities, the degree to which programs conformed to their stated goals, and challenges to implementation). Next, we conducted a manual scan of these evaluation profiles in order to find those that reported specific activities offered in the OST programs.

grams, six (75%) focus on academic activities, one on fostering positive adult relationships, and one on the development of positive self-concept. Thus it appears that while most OST programs are multicomponent, the single-component programs tend to provide academic enrichment activities.

The majority of the multicomponent programs give youth a choice of activities and youth often participate in more than one activity per day. In the single-component programs, activities are more likely to be mandatory. In these programs, the broad activity category (e.g., academics, self-concept) remains constant, but slight variations in activities do occur. Sometimes this variation occurs within one day. For example, in the Extended-Day Tutoring Program, which aims to improve literacy skills in elementary school children, each session begins with a listening and reading comprehension task, proceeds to a workbook exercise, and concludes with time for a variety of other activities, including partner reading, book reports, and computer skills.² In other programs, activity variation occurs from one session to the next. For example, in the SECME Raising Interest in Science and Engineering project, which is designed to promote girls’ self-confidence in math and science, each session has a specific focus, ranging from technology to engineering to the process of applying to magnet schools. These examples illustrate an important point about OST program activities—even in the single-component programs, like those that provide academic enrichment, there can be variation in the types of activities offered.

What Are the Specific Activities Offered by OST Programs?

Table 1 summarizes the specific types of activities offered across the OST programs in this review and the number of programs that offer each activity, listed in descending order of frequency. While some programs operate at only one site, others operate at multiple sites.

TABLE 1
OST Program Activities and Their Frequency

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Number of Programs Offering Activity</i>
Academics*	21
Arts	14
Recreational sports/exercise	14
Computer skills	13
Community service	8
Field trips	7
Positive youth development*	7
Career skills/exploration	6
Unstructured play	4
One-to-one adult mentoring	2

* Specific examples are given in the box on page 3.

In many of the multisite programs, activities vary slightly from one site to another. For this analysis, a program is considered to include the activity if any of its sites offers the activity.

It is clear from Table 1 that this set of OST programs offers a wide range of activities that target several goals. While the majority of programs offer some sort of academic enrichment, many programs also offer arts, sports, and community service as well as services that may be otherwise unavailable to program participants, including academic tutoring, career counseling, and computer skills training. A few programs in this set are primarily focused on prevention of substance abuse and teen pregnancy (for example, Owensboro Public Schools 21st Century Community Learning Centers and Children's Aid Society Carrera-Model Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program). These findings demonstrate that many OST programs serve a larger need than basic childcare or recreation; for many families and communities these programs can also provide important services and skills training.

What Are the Challenges to Implementing Activities?

Only a few programs reported the major challenges they faced in implementing activities. Program staff and evaluators cited poor time management, inadequate staff training, lack of resources (including space, materials, and adult volunteers), and the need to provide after school snacks in order to sustain participant energy and interest. Uncovering these implementation challenges is a necessary component of documenting OST program activities and improving OST programming.

How Does Activity Implementation Information Lead to Better Programs?

Collecting activity implementation data (also known as service documentation) is a critical first step in evaluation and program improvement for all OST programs.³ First, monitoring a program by systematically documenting the services and activities it provides enables programs to gather information for multiple stakeholders. Most funders, including the U.S. Department of Education through its 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants program, require activity implementation data as part of their accountability requirements.

Second, all programs need to understand what services they are offering and to whom in order to build organizational capacity for self-assessment and program modification. They can then use this information to begin a process of self-reflection, comparing their original program goals and objectives with the activities they offer as part of their continuous improvement efforts.

Finally, service documentation is a necessary precursor to determining which aspects of a program lead to positive youth outcomes. Currently, most of our research and evaluation has examined the relationship between program partici-

pation (i.e., whether the individual was in the program) and outcomes.⁴ However, these studies fall short of defining the elements or services within the programs that brought about individual change. Moving forward, it is essential that programs conducting outcomes studies collect activity implementation information that will help identify more specifically which elements of the program are or are not leading to positive outcomes for its participants.

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SPOTLIGHT ON ACADEMIC AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

Academic Activities

The widespread public interest in academic outcomes led us to further examine the content of the 21 programs in Table 1 that include academic enrichment. Most programs provide multiple types of academic enrichment. Specifically, 13 programs include homework help, 11 provide tutoring services, 2 offer standardized testing skills/tutoring, and 14 include other types of academic enrichment. It is important for future evaluations to note the variation within this general academic category because each activity targets a *specific* academic purpose and therefore necessitates corresponding performance measures to accurately assess its impact. For example, a program that offers homework help may want to track participants' homework completion rates, while a program that provides general academic tutoring may want to track overall performance in school as reported by teachers, parents, and report cards. A program that offers multiple activities may need to assess the outcomes of its participants in many different ways.

Positive Youth Development Activities

Similarly, due to increased attention to the value of OST programs in developing nonacademic youth skills, we also explored the single-focus programs with an articulated youth development focus. Like other single-focus programs, those that primarily provide positive youth development activities do so in a variety of ways, including leadership skills (3 programs), social and communication skills (2), decision making and life management (2), conflict management (1), and self-concept development (1). Many of these skills are often thought to be inherent in traditional extracurricular activities such as team sports and community service, however, several of the OST programs described here go further and offer explicit training in these skills.

Notes

¹ Our database contains profiles of out-of-school time (OST) program evaluations, which are searchable on a wide range of criteria. It is available in the OST section of the HFRP website at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html.

² For more information on this and other program evaluations included in this review, see the HFRP Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html.

³ For information on service documentation as a phase of the evaluation process, see Little, P., DuPree, S., & Deich, S. (2002). *Documenting progress and demonstrating results: Evaluating local out-of-school time programs*. Cambridge, MA and Washington, DC: Harvard Family Research Project and The Finance Project. Available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/index.html#local.

⁴ See for example Simpkins, S. (2003). Does youth participation in out-of-school time activities make a difference? *The Evaluation Exchange*, 9(1) 2–3, 21. Available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue21/theory.html.

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Appendix: Out-of-School Time Programs Included in the Review

- 4-H Youth Development Program – Cornell Cooperative Extension
- After School Achievement Program
- After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnership Program
- Baltimore's After School Strategy – YouthPlaces Initiative
- Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America
- Cap City Kids
- Children's Aid Society Carrera-Model Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program
- District of Columbia 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program

- Extended-Day Tutoring Program
- Fifth Dimension/University-Community Links
- Fort Worth After School Program
- Juvenile Mentoring Program
- Los Angeles Better Educated Students for Tomorrow Program
- Louisiana State Youth Opportunities Unlimited Summer Program
- Maryland After School Community Grant Program
- New York City Beacons Initiative
- North Carolina Support Our Students Initiative
- Ohio Urban School Initiative School Age Child Care Project
- Owensboro Public Schools 21st Century Community Learning Centers
- Project for Neighborhood Aftercare Program
- Quest for Excellence
- San Diego's "6 to 6" Extended School Day Program
- San Francisco Beacons Initiative
- School-to-Jobs Programme
- SECME Raising Interest in Science & Engineering
- The After-School Corporation After-School Program
- Virtual Y

Additional Resources on Evaluating Out-of-School Time Activities

The 2003 report by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, *After-School Programs in Cities Across the United States*, includes information about programs' activity offerings. www.usmayors.org/uscm/uscm_projects_services/education/afterschool.asp

Afterschool Alliance's Action Kit provides information on creating and implementing age-appropriate activities in OST. (See Section 4: Lend a Hand, on page 9.) www.afterschoolalliance.org/action_kit.cfm

The **Afterschool.gov website's Planning Activities section** offers resources for designing OST activities relating to a wide range of topics. www.afterschool.gov

Beyond the Bell™: A Toolkit for Creating Effective After-School Programs is a practical and easy-to-use reference for those designing after school programs. The toolkit is designed around key decision points in six areas: management, collaboration, programming, linkages with the traditional school day, evaluation, and communication. www.ncrel.org/after/bellkit.htm



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