

Lights on After School

Position Statement on After School Programs in Connecticut

Vision

All Connecticut students should have opportunities to participate in safe, enriching, quality after school programs that support academic excellence and enhance social, physical and emotional development.

After school programs provide a learning environment where students, staff, parents, and other stakeholders learn together as full partners. These partners share responsibility with schools for ensuring that every child can become a healthy, confident, imaginative, lifelong learner. After school programs provide a bridge between formal learning in school and informal learning at home and in the community. They provide unique opportunities for stimulating curiosity, instilling a love of learning, and nurturing a sense of wellness and confidence, in order to lay the foundation for future successful learning in school and in life. Therefore it is critical that all students have after school opportunities to expand and apply new learning, explore particular interests, take risks and be challenged to reach their full potential in a safe environment where they feel they belong. The learning environment of after school programs must nurture students' unique interests and talents at different stages of development, and respect, value and incorporate the diversity of their experiences.

There is no one size fits all approach to after school. Successful programs differ widely from district to district and neighborhood to neighborhood as programs must respond to the variable and changing needs and interests of the students and communities they serve. However there are certain characteristics and elements which quality programs have in common.

Elements of Quality Programs

The term after school programs, here, refers to all out-of-school-time programs, including before and after school, vacation and summer programs. All such programs should provide the following essential components:

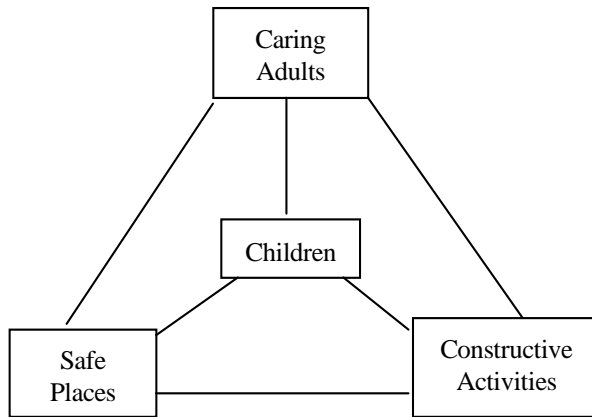
Caring Adults

A low adult/child ratio should be maintained. Staff might include parents, counselors, teachers, coaches, volunteers, interns or other older youth, tutors or mentors, foster grandparents or other involved seniors. All staff working with children must be trained and supervised.

Safe and Nurturing Learning Environments

Programs must maintain healthy, clean, safe learning environments where students and families are encouraged to grow and feel they have a comfortable place conducive to the development of positive peer relationships. Such environments may be created in schools, community centers, outdoor parks and playgrounds and within other community facilities such as libraries.

NECESSARY COMPONENTS OF AN EXEMPLARY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM



From *Web of Support*, Save the Children, 2000

Constructive Activities

After school programs should be safe environments for more than just the development of physical, social and emotional skills, but also for increasing academic achievement. The desired outcomes should be broad enough to include progress in all aspects of development required to succeed as a healthy individual in school and in life. Activities should be varied, developmentally appropriate, and suited to varied learning styles. Possibilities include academic assistance or other activities in reading, math, science, computer literacy, or world languages; arts and cultural programs; health, wellness or nutrition programs; service and service learning; youth leadership projects; sports and recreational activities. A high priority should be placed on youth involvement in selecting programs and activities.

Characteristics of Quality Programs

Although the above components are essential, they will not by themselves ensure success. Researchers have identified a number of critical characteristics of successful programs:

Programming

Programming must be flexible. In addition it must be culturally sensitive and inclusive. It should provide varied activities that incorporate student input, and different learning styles and strengths.

Evaluation

Program evaluation must be ongoing to ensure programs meet local needs, support learning that takes place during the school day, and meet the characteristics described herein.

Collaboration

Collaborations must link programs with school and school-time learning. Programs must partner with parents and the community to increase consistency of messages and increase number and capacity of learning opportunities. Collaboration with the community can maximize funding, and link children and families to other community supports such as language and literacy services, recreational opportunities, and health services.

Management

Strong leaders must set clear goals, maximize a variety of funding sources, and provide ongoing, appropriate professional development that continuously enhances staff skills, in order to provide an organized, safe and sustainable environment for consistent quality over time.

Staff must be culturally competent, skilled and qualified, and receive ongoing professional development to build on their knowledge and abilities. Professional development should improve skills and understanding around safety, youth development, mentoring, quality standards, and academic support.

Benefits of Quality Programs

After school programs foster a community's ability to care for its children so that they can realize their full potential as responsible, contributing, caring, healthy citizens. Programs need to provide a learning environment that includes caring, competent, and consistent adults; access to enriching learning activities that allow multiple alternate avenues for success; access to safe and healthy, supervised environments during out-of-school time; and consistent messages and support between schools, families and communities. Quality after school programs:

- Protect children and strengthen families and communities;
- Divert youth from the juvenile justice system;
- Help close the achievement gap;
- Reduce teen pregnancies, teen violence, and substance abuse, and other risk behaviors;
- Increase early development of health promoting knowledge, behaviors and attitudes;
- Decrease drop-out rates and increase numbers of students pursuing further education or training;
- Lead to higher grades and test scores, as well as development of useful, marketable skills (e.g. computer, literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, teamwork);
- Support working families;
- Increase community involvement;
- Foster student and family self-esteem, self-confidence, and cultural awareness;
- Improve attitudes toward school and attendance rates;
- Help students and families bridge the digital divide;
- Help families be more involved in their children's learning and more effectively guide their development into successful adults; and
- Help children reach their full potential and enjoy lifelong learning.

Many benefits of quality programs are documented by research.

For example:

Need:	Research demonstrates:
<p>The number of families with children under eighteen that lack full-time parental supervision had risen dramatically. This is due to growing numbers of both single parent families and of families in which both parents work outside the home.</p> <p>Yet programs that meet the needs of children while their parents are at work are desperately needed. The number of children and families that would benefit far exceed the number of available slots, especially in our urban centers.</p>	<p>Nine out of ten Americans—both parents and non-parents—think that after school programs should be made available to all youth (<i>Making Afterschool Count—Afterschool Action Kit</i>, National Center for Community Education & The Afterschool Alliance, 2002), and that both Connecticut administrators and parents believe it is important for elementary and middle school children to have after school opportunities at their schools (<i>Before and After School Activities in Connecticut’s Elementary and Middle Schools</i>, Spectrum Associates, 2002).</p> <p>While after school programs, mentoring programs, violence prevention programs and gang outreach programs all provide a safe learning environment, the latest study conducted among American voters found after school programs are perceived to be most effective in keeping kids safe and engaged in fun, learning activities (<i>After School Alert Poll Report</i>, The After School Alliance, 2002).</p>
<p>Good schools alone cannot provide children with all the skills they need to succeed.</p>	<p>In order for children to acquire the skills they need to succeed, they must participate in further learning, sports, arts, and other activities before school, after school, and during the summer (<i>Schools Alone are Not Enough</i>, Mass Insight Education & Massachusetts, 2002).</p> <p>After school programs that involve entire communities encourage families to become more effective partners in their children’s education and development (<i>Making Afterschool Count—Afterschool Action Kit</i>, National Center for Community Education & The Afterschool Alliance, 2002).</p>
<p>Children without adult supervision are at significantly greater risk of poor grades, truancy from school, risk-taking behaviors and substance abuse.</p>	<p>Children who spend even one to four hours a week in extracurricular after school activities are less likely to use drugs and become teen parents than children who do not. And students who participate in out-of-school programs show higher achievement in math, reading, and other subjects than those not in such a program (<i>Web of Support</i>, Save the Children, 2000).</p> <p>Children in after school programs also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have improved school attendance and do their homework more often and better; and • Learn to respect people different from themselves and develop better conflict resolution and social skills (<i>Making Afterschool Count—Afterschool Action Kit</i>, National Center for Community Education & The Afterschool Alliance, 2002).
<p>Juvenile crime rates triple during the peak hours of 3 pm to 8 pm.</p>	<p>Juvenile arrests decreased by 75% when young people participated in an after school skills development program (<i>Web of Support</i>, Save the Children, 2000).</p>

It is clear from the above data that after school programs are an effective way for communities to build their capacity to help their children develop into healthy, responsible, contributing citizens. While serving the growing need for quality school-age child care, after school programs help schools improve student achievement and save money on truancy and student retention. They can serve to decrease the achievement gap, as well as close the digital divide. They bring the arts and cultural enrichment into the lives of students and families, and by providing a safe, informal learning environment to explore and celebrate differences, they can reduce prejudice and improve understanding and appreciation of multicultural societies.

After school programs improve student and family access to other important community resources such as libraries; encourage positive youth development; and help students learn to make healthy choices that decrease the need for expensive juvenile justice and treatment solutions. They help build the workforce of tomorrow by helping students improve their problem-solving abilities and learn important life skills. In short, quality after school programs are essential to the long-term health and success of our communities.

Recommendation

To achieve this vision, the state must create a single, strong, **statewide after school network**, with a private and public governance structure to further draw together policymakers, educators, child care providers, youth development workers, program developers, advocates, students, parents and others interested in supporting children's success through after school programs and school-family-community partnerships. Through a governing council and governance structure, an intermediary will coordinate the statewide after school network to provide a means for joint planning and curriculum development, efficient sharing of resources and best practices, building bridges between federal, state and local initiatives, and forging partnerships necessary to the development of comprehensive statewide after school policies.

This will serve to increase capacity, raise public awareness, and encourage investment of additional resources to expand and sustain quality after school opportunities that improve student outcomes and create life-long learners, particularly among underserved children and families. This intermediary could be a non-profit or for-profit organization, a university or government agency.

Next Steps

Concrete tasks the intermediary will facilitate over the next biennium include:

Coordination of Statewide After School Network:

- Maintain a comprehensive, statewide inventory of available resources and community needs.
- Develop a central relational database system.
- Improve communication and collaboration among network members.
- Expand the number of providers participating in the network statewide.

Assurance of Program Quality:

- Promote quality standards that address key components of after school programming regardless of program makeup, mission and desired outcomes.
- Identify and disseminate information about successful practices and model schools and communities.
- Establish guidelines for age-appropriate constructive activities for after school programs.
- Develop exemplary curriculums that set high standards.

Provision of Professional Development:

- Provide statewide, on-site access to consistent, ongoing, quality professional development, through improved collaborations among public and private agencies, resulting in a credential based on quality standards.
- Develop a statewide calendar of after school related professional development opportunities.
- Promote after school related higher education and other credential courses.
- Ensure professional development opportunities include knowledge and skill building around safety, positive youth development and academic support, especially in math and science.
- Coordinate recruitment and training of mentors, especially in science, technology, math and engineering.

Implementation of Evaluation:

- Develop guidelines for positive outcome measures based on child and youth development principles.
- Develop a common statewide framework for reporting outcome measures.
- Analyze and report on outcomes data in order to both foster continuous program improvement and facilitate expansion of funding based on demonstrated success.

Augmentation of Public Awareness:

- Broaden public understanding of the need for and benefits of after school programs in Connecticut.
- Increase public knowledge about how to get information about available local programs.

Maximizing Funding Resources:

- Identify sources of funding and models of effective funding collaboration.
- Serve as a central clearinghouse of information and ideas for improving program sustainability.