

How Municipal Leaders Can Make the Connection Between Education Reform And Afterschool Initiatives

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Moving education forward for all children pre-kindergarten through high school is no easy task. It is a set of complex problems, challenges and most importantly opportunities—state-by-state, community-by-community and school-by-school.

Yet, we have a bevy of new reports and studies about what works and makes a positive difference. *It is not hopeless and we are not helpless.*

We particularly are becoming knowledgeable school by school and after school by after school about how to turn them into continual improving and high performing organizations.

What we don't have yet is a lot of evidence about how to do this community by community, or municipality by municipality. One report, “Hope for Urban Education,” put it this way: *“Districts (and municipalities) can play important roles...unfortunately, there has been little research directed to understanding th(ose) role(s)”* But that report was from 1999, and since then we have some good new work giving us new information.

That is why each of your teams and work is so important! And that is why you have the other panelists here, too. They are the big-picture people who know how to “go to scale.”

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Clearly the current education reform agenda at all levels is based, forcefully and hopefully, on achieving much higher expectations. Many schools are being called upon to do dramatically better in raising student performance and meet much tougher accountability standards. And they are being asked to do dramatically better for all students regardless of their background.

This means classrooms and schools must do a much more effective job in both educating and motivating many more students to achieve to these higher standards. Teachers, principals and school districts are being pressed to find new and better ways to do their work. The most recent issue of the “Harvard Education Letter” online calls this, “Moving Instruction to Center Stage.” Mike Cohen and Warren Simmons can give you a lot of good advice about how to create an environment and infrastructure to encourage, help and equip schools to take on these challenges across your municipalities.

For some students, there is growing evidence that they need and can benefit from more learning time and extra support and positive connections beyond the regular school day and year.

The head of the Public/Private Ventures research team in the October 23 issue, 2002, of *Education Week* writes, “***given the increasing challenges to children’s lives and the more complex sets of skills and abilities that are required for success in the 21st century, after-school programs are an effective, affordable way to invest in our nation’s children.***”

We also know low-income students who are not involved in formal learning activities in the summer actually fall behind. A recent report of the Southern Regional Education Board was appropriately called, “The Lost Promise of Summer School” in response to cutbacks in funding quality summer programs last year due to budget cuts.

The Boston “2:00 to 6:00 After-School Initiative” states that “(a)fterschool programs provide a unique opportunity for children to shine – to find their passion, whether it is arts, parents, science, or drama.”

And what do parents think about this? In the *latest, bi-partisan poll on after school*, released in October, 2002, **ninety-two percent of parents whose children are enrolled in after school say, their children do “better in reading, writing and math since attending an after school program.”**

Just as there are unfortunate wide disparities among schools in their quality, performance and effectiveness, there are disparities among after school and summer programs.

The Public/Private Ventures study summarized quality programs in these ways:

“(t)he best programs we saw offered a range of interesting engaging activities—not just homework help and tutoring....these programs pull low-achieving students in the door with the enticement of learning in a fun way, and get them to say for a rich mix of academic and nonacademic learning...”

“We found that activities of all types—academic, enrichment, community service, or sports—provided children with valuable learning opportunities, as long as staff members created a supportive yet challenging environment. Good staff actively motivate students, pushed them to achieve beyond the students’ initial expectations, encouraged them to persevere, and praised their accomplishments...”

In a recent meeting of organizations working to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of after school programs, the chairman of a panel working on summarizing recent studies, described them this way:

Afterschool learning is most effective when it uses projects that deploy skills from the school day based on themes, interests, and concerns that really engage young people and their families and community. The projects would be sustained over a month or more, engage students working in groups, and result in an end product, performance or exhibit.

In addition to the direct impact of quality and intentional after school programs can have on children, they also can be deployed to address at least two other ingredients of successful school reform efforts—two more ties to the two sets of teams here today:

Increasing parent and family involvement and their education levels
Expanding community support and engagement

Let me briefly discuss both opportunities with you.

Many schools and students could benefit from increased family involvement in education. The regular school day staff has a major role in increasing this involvement in the school, in the community and at home. For example, schools need to be welcoming, teachers need to communicate regularly and in understandable terms with parents—and not only about “bad news,” and the school staff needs to find ways to tap the interests of their parents and engage them in the effort to improve instructional and learning in the school.

In addition, *after school, evenings, and weekends are good times to gain better parent-school connections. Parent resource centers should be part of solid afterschool initiative as should adult education and English as Second Language classes.* A teacher last week told me how powerful it is to have a parent working to get a high school diploma at the same time their child is in the afterschool program.

As part of one middle school afterschool initiative, beginning computer classes were offered for parents. Fathers who had never before been in the school ended up participating in the computer classes in the evenings. And then the school folks engaged the fathers to be involved in other regular school day activities.

In another middle school, students in the afterschool program were taught measurement, the steps in solving problems, and Italian culture, through their afterschool Italian cooking class. Boys and girls loved the course because they got to eat the fruits of their labor at the end of each class. The afterschool program cleverly used the Italian cooking class to sponsor a family Italian dinner evening.

Normally this middle school's PTA meeting could have fit in the janitor's closet. But the student sponsored and cooked Italian dinner draw so many parents they had to set up tables in the hallway. As part of the dinner program, the families and their students were involved in an interesting presentation on pathways to college and how to pay for college.

In Shooting for the Sun: The Message of Middle School Reform, Hayes Mizell, recommends "encouraging and preparing nearly all students to enroll and succeed in high school courses leading to post-secondary education" as one critical step in achieving middle schools. This is yet again another tie between the school reform and afterschool movements. However, sometimes you have to do it through indirect means, like an Italian dinner.

In addition to increasing parent and family involvement in education, engaging the broader community in educational improvement is essential. The afterschool, evening, weekend and summer hours add a whole set of new opportunities to build support for better education in the schools and in the community. *All types of sectors in a community can be assets in helping develop successful afterschool and summer programs and serving as tutors and mentors:*

***Senior citizens and grandparents;
Employers and employees;
Artists, cultural groups, and museums;
Colleges and college students; and
Middle and high school students themselves doing community service.***

Clearly this community collaboration and partnership should reinforce and support the regular school day and instructional program. But sometimes it is easier to initiate this collaboration and coordinate it from the afterschool program.

I have summarized some of the key elements of successful afterschool into a simple rubric. I call them the "6 E's of Successful Afterschool!" They are:

Engaging—Afterschool and summer programs should connect to the regular school day but not be "drill and kill."

Enriching—Parents and students should expand their learning opportunities and positive connections to other caring adults and community institutions afterschool and summers.

Extra hands and hope—college students, senior citizens, employers/employees, civic and faith-based groups should provide personal attention as well as encouragement and motivation.

Provide Expertise to the school and broader community—an effective afterschool initiative makes learning come alive in the school and its community thorough service-learning, volunteerism and keeping the school and its partner institutions open as community learning resources.

Expectations for excellence--afterschool programs should connect students to career and higher education opportunities and showcase the work of students in the school and community.

Enthusiastic and expert staff should be the core of the program even at 5 PM in the afternoon and in the middle of the summer.

In my opinion, the much more rigorous standards and test results we want from our students and schools can't be achieved without changing both the regular school day and taking advantage of the after school, weekend and summer hours for many of our students.

Let me describe the powerful impact of all this one school. In this school, the principal and teacher and parent leaders “moved instruction to center stage” during the school day and transformed the afterschool program into a robust community learning center. This school-- Hand Middle School-- was Time magazine’s 2001 middle-school-of-the-year.

Its selection was almost a shock to me because all five of our children attended that school but that was 12-18 years ago. It was an OK school then; however, somewhat isolated from the community at times and a little disorganized.

I moved away from Columbia, SC, the home of Hand Middle School, ten years ago so I lost touch, but when I went back to visit friends in the past few years when I still lived in Washington, DC, I kept seeing more

and more portable classrooms. In my then-cynical Washington mentality, I blamed it on their disorganization since it is generally in an area of declining student population.

Well the Time story set me straight. Yes, the portable classrooms were there and growing, but not due to disorganization. Quite to the contrary, the school is now so popular and getting such good achievement results that people are moving into the neighborhood. Some parents are pulling their kids out of private school to send their children to this diverse community-learning center.

Time described the school as “enlisting aid from clergy, police, civic groups, parents, teachers and business.” Senior citizens tutor teenagers and preschoolers take computer classes. Hand Middle School, Time reports” keeps hours of a convenience store from 6 AM to 10 PM.”

When I asked the principal, what was the secret to the success? She answered “partnerships, afterschool, and directing all the energy of the adults in the school towards instructional improvement is a powerful combination.”

While we increasingly know what to do, the enormous challenges we face, I think, is developing the *staying power over considerable time and through leadership changes* to success and really make a real difference in education achievement and performance in a lot of schools and after schools.

The other day I had the pleasure of sitting next to a person that leads a bipartisan oversight and accountability effort. She said, "We need to think of the race for dramatically better education as the race between the tortoise and the hare. You can get quick, big results through smoke-and-mirrors. For example, you can get big gains in SAT scores or end of year tests by reducing the pool of students taking the test. Or you can build broad ownership of the agenda, and work harder and smarter together day after day and make a real, sustained difference."

In other words, the education results we need to make in our schools and our communities don't match the election or business cycle. That doesn't mean there should be any less urgency to our work, but it has to do with long-term staying power.

It appears this long-term staying power comes from broad ownership of a multi-pronged agenda among educators, parents and a set of key stakeholders in the community.

And it is you and your municipal leadership team that are uniquely positioned to build this ownership and the multi-pronged agenda.

School folks have to be involved, after all they do much of the heavy lifting. But this is much bigger than the school folks. Parent leaders have to be involved after all it is their children. But, in many communities, 80% of the taxpayers and your potential allies for better education do not have school age children or children in public schools. You are in the position to build that ownership and staying power among diverse community stakeholders, parents and educators.

Dilbert, another American philosopher puts this multi-pronged approach or theory of change to a real life test. He says:

*“Change is good...
You go first.”*

The challenge is not only to get a few leaders to go first, but to bring along with you a bunch of different people from key sectors in a sustainable, effective way.

Your NLC action kits give some good ideas to build an infrastructure and support system to make this happen. Let me mention a few others.

- 1. Before each semester community wide showcases of best practices and successful strategies involving students, teachers, parents, and community groups.*
- 2. Build on-going capacity building networks for more powerful school and afterschool programming:*

*Teacher networks by subject and grades
Instruction leadership networks for principals
Networks of afterschool directors and lead staff
on content issues*

3. *Proactively prepare key people to collaborate and work in partnership:*

For teachers, principals and afterschool directors, develop institutes, methods and materials to effectively engage parents and community, faith-based youth, older citizens and civic groups as well as businesses, the arts and cultural groups and colleges.

For parents and community leaders, develop seminars and workshops to help them engage in and support improvement strategies in schools and afterschool programs.

4. *Make it easy for teachers to use your community as a learning laboratory as well as a way for students to learn and serve.*

5. *Create more obvious pathways to post-secondary education and career opportunities. Conduct aggressive outreach—community walks, ad campaigns—so parents, grandparents, and students know their options and their possibilities.*

6. *Create dollar and other incentives for school and afterschool improvements and instituting best practices and implementing scientifically based strategies, when available. Also have an accountability system that deals directly with low performance.*

Our job—your leadership is needed more than ever -- to provide “the fertile soil” for all of our children to grow and learn well.