



THE SCHOOL
Administrator
May 2005

Features

Finding the Right Hook

Strategies for attracting and sustaining participation in after-school programs

By Sherri Lauver and Priscilla M.D. Little

Many middle school and high school youth recognize the value of participating in organized activities outside school, yet too often they limit their involvement because of busy schedules and family lives, disinterest in existing activity choices, lack of motivation to attend organized activities or the lure of freedom or relaxation over structured activities.

However, it is during the critical transition from elementary to middle school—a period in youths' lives when they continue to need opportunities to learn new skills, time to socialize and attention from caring adults—that interest seems the lowest. School administrators can play a critical role in ensuring that the school-after-school link is strong, creative and productive to promote higher attendance in after-school programs.

We have discovered important insights for attracting and sustaining youngsters' participation based on more than 60 recent evaluations of out-of-school time programs in the Harvard Family Research Project Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Database, which identified recruitment and retention strategies especially relevant to school leaders. ([See additional resources.](#))

A Brighter Future

Recruiting students to participate regularly in after-school programs is a marketing challenge. A critical first step in selling after-school programs is helping youth and their families understand the benefits of frequent participation. Benefits of after-school programs for elementary and middle school-age children include not only a safe, supervised environment, but a chance for them to receive

homework help from teachers and to participate in enrichment activities.

A diverse set of enrichment activities ensures there is something for everyone to enjoy. The Fort Worth, Texas, Independent School District's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program includes an engineering club, small group instrument lessons, a Tae Kwon Do club, a hip hop dance club and an arts club. Every club is involved in competitions, exhibitions or tournaments, which allow children to demonstrate the skills they've learned.

While the opportunity to try new activities may be a selling point for elementary and middle school after-school programs, older teens often must be convinced their participation will lead to a brighter future: better education and employment opportunities or an advantage in the job market. Toward that end, they may be enticed by community service activities, assistance in completing college applications and help with job-seeking skills.

School administrators can make informed decisions about developing and marketing after-school programs by conducting a needs assessment to determine the interest in, need for and availability of various activities in the community or school. Simply put, a needs assessment helps define the gap between the need for a service and the existing efforts, resources and programs currently in place.

School administrators can assess needs in various ways, including surveying youth to see what they would like to do in their nonschool hours and/or meeting with parents to understand what experiences they would like their children to have after school.

It also is important for those developing and marketing after-school programs to understand what else is available to young people in the community in the afternoons.

Building Connections

School administrators can increase and sustain participation in after-school programs by helping the program staff develop buy-in from and relationships with school-day teachers and parents. An article by Christopher Wimer, Margaret Post and Priscilla Little in the Spring 2004 issue of *Afterschool Matters* suggests the first step in developing positive school-after-school relations is to help the school-based after-school program establish a real presence in the building.

Other key strategies that will promote these relationships may include: employing a few school-day teachers in the after-school program to provide continuity from school to after-school; including after-school program members in schoolwide meetings where they can share information about their activities and opportunities; asking the after-school program director to participate in other

schoolwide teams and committees; and allowing participants in the after-school program to demonstrate skills learned in the program during school performances, exhibitions or other outlets.

As a result of these efforts, teachers and other school staff members made aware of the program can encourage students to participate in the variety of activities available in the after-school programs.

Involving school-day teachers in the program as staff members has both strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, school-day teachers and students are able to interact in a more informal setting in after-school programs, enabling close relationships that may transfer to the school day. On the other hand, the school-day teachers' involvement in after-school programs may suggest they are an extension of the school day, thus deterring student participation. Our review of the literature suggests that including both teachers and other community members as after-school program staff provides the needed balance.

The youth already participating in after-school programs are often the most effective recruiters or ambassadors for the program. Some youth shun after-school programs because they believe that the activities are boring, that they will be treated like children or that after-school programs are geared toward troubled youth and students who are not doing well in school. Current program participants will offer an honest account of program activities and what new participants can expect. Taking on this recruitment role also allows youth to build their leadership skills.

A solid relationship between school personnel, parents and community members is also essential to encourage student participation in after-school programs. A key role of the school administrator is to convince parents and community members of the value of children's regular involvement in after-school programs. This may be a particularly tough challenge in low-income areas, where, according to a 2004 Public Agenda survey, parents are less often satisfied with after-school options. Fewer than half of the parents surveyed believed the available activities and programs were high quality, were interesting to their child or were run by adults they could trust.

A compelling message for low-income families, then, is one that counters those perceptions with a high-quality, engaging after-school program. In many low-income communities, only after-school programs give children exposure to the arts, to workplace skills, to social skills and to safe physical activities. Yet parents will only hear these messages if they are made to feel welcome at their child's school.

The Polk Brothers Foundation's Full Service Schools Initiative in Chicago builds positive relationships with families by holding special events, such as an annual

picnic, and including parents in advisory committees. Other schools reach out to parents and the community with signs and messages in community centers and churches. If parents believe in the program's quality, they will go the extra mile to make sure their son or daughter participates.

Leveraging Resources

As Wimer, Post and Little point out in *Afterschool Matters*, students are more likely to participate in an after-school program when school leaders are able to leverage the resources necessary to ensure a quality program. That includes access to physical resources, including the library, computer rooms, gym, outdoor areas, office space and, possibly, a few school-day classrooms. If the space is limited to only the cafeteria or gym, participants may grow bored or frustrated and stop participating.

The program schedule is also an important consideration—especially when resources are limited. When developing the program schedule, administrators should consider a variety of factors, such as program goals, youths' ages, needs and interests and competing extracurricular opportunities. Because school leaders are aware of the various after-school options for youth at their school, they play an important role in making the transitions among the different school-based activities smoother and safer.

For example, a school involved in the Plus Time New Hampshire program recognized that participation in the after-school program plummeted during intramural basketball season. The program directors worked with the school to broaden the scope of the after-school program to include the basketball program, therefore offering a continuity of programming for the children, higher participation and potentially better outcomes as a result of the physical activity.

Ensuring that the after-school program does not feel like more school is critical to attracting and sustaining youth participation. While staffing and other limited resources may determine program activities, school administrators should aim to offer students a variety of activities that are different from those in which they participate during the school day.

Many urban after-school programs that serve older youth try to walk the fine line between an academic focus, which minority and low-income families want, and an engaging program that meets participants' other non-academic developmental needs and interests. Some programs embed academic exercises within project-oriented activities, such as a putting on a play that participants write and produce themselves. Students will tolerate academic activities if other exciting activities are offered that motivate them to come back.

Think Flexibly

External factors, such as needing to take care of siblings or earn money, may decrease attendance among older youth. Many of these youth may only attend programs when the schedule is flexible—they can sign up and/or drop in as fits their schedule. The programs involved in the Extended-Service Schools Initiative, which supported the creation of 60 after-school programs in 20 communities around the country, have found rolling admission (with no fixed start or end date) to be a successful recruiting method.

At the "Drop Zone" at Community Bridges Beacon in San Francisco's Mission District, young people come to the after-school program simply to hang out with friends. This often serves as a natural bridge into structured after-school programming. Other after-school programs stay open late some evenings or on Saturdays to give students a safe place for physical activity or socialization.

School administrators may consider offering students a high-quality summer program with the goal of sustaining their involvement through the following school year. The 2004 Public Agenda survey on out-of-school time suggests parents have overwhelming concerns about the lack of enriching summer activities for their children. In low-income communities, virtually two-thirds of the parents stated that their children did not have enough good options. Almost 70 percent of low-income students were interested in a summer program that would help them prepare for schoolwork in the next grade. Because youth have more free time during summer to participate in out-of-school activities, summer programs might be the necessary link to keep them coming back once school is in session.

Realizing Benefits

School-based after-school programs offer school leaders the opportunity to extend young people's learning and development beyond the school day.

However, success requires that young people be motivated and engaged enough to want to stay at school after the bell rings. Effective recruitment and retention strategies vary depending on the age of the participants, the programs available to youth in the community, the program schedule and the specific activities offered. Therefore, school leaders should develop recruitment and retention strategies that work for their particular community. Regardless of the appropriate strategies, a critical first step is helping youth and their families understand the benefits of participation.

Sherri Lauver is a consultant to the Harvard Family Research Project, 3 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: slauver@comcast.net. In July she begins as an assistant professor of education research at the University of Rochester. Priscilla Little is associate director of the Harvard Family Research Project. E-mail:

littlepr@gse.harvard.edu

Additional Resources

For more information about promising strategies to attract and sustain young people's participation in after-school programs, Sherri Lauver and Priscilla Little recommend these resources:

- "Moving Beyond the Barriers: Attracting and Sustaining Youth Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs" by Sherri Lauver, Priscilla M.D. Little and Heather Weiss, *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation Briefs*, July 2004. This serves as a longer version of this article, complete with a full discussion of five key barriers to enrollment.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/index.html#moving.

- "Leveraging Resources to Promote Positive School-Community-Based Organization Relationships" by Christopher Wimer, Margaret Post and Priscilla Little, *Afterschool Matters*, Spring 2004. Understanding the issues related to shared space is critical in overcoming obstacles that can impede after school participation. This paper examines how after-school programs and schools can work together to leverage resources.

- *Participation in Youth Programs: Enrollment, Attendance and Engagement*, No. 105, edited by Heather Weiss, Priscilla Little and Suzanne Bouffard. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. This volume represents the latest research and evaluation in youth participation, offering research-derived strategies for enrollment, attendance and engagement in after-school programs. Available from Jossey Bass, <http://www.josseybass.com/>.

- *Documenting Progress and Demonstrating Results: Evaluating Local Out-of-School Time Programs* by Priscilla M.D. Little, Sharon DuPree and Sharon Deich. This report provides information about conducting a needs assessment for after-school programs.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief3.pdf.

- Harvard Family Research Project Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation. This study identified a set of recruitment and retention strategies especially relevant to school leaders.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html.

[Back to Top](#)

[View The School Administrator Archived Issues](#)

