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Leveraging the After-school Value Added

Well-supported programs can bring student gains and public favor

By Terry K. Peterson

In too many schools today, 3 p.m. marks a daily missed opportunity to meet the tougher achievement demands placed on students and school districts.

For many children, it's when learning effectively stops and when opportunities for inappropriate behaviors line up to take their place. It's when many parents worry, rightly, that their children aren't sufficiently supervised. It's when community, youth, arts and law enforcement groups *could* become potential allies with the school district in helping keep children on track and learning.

Ironically, it's the hour when many of the school district's investments in learning resources and facilities sit idle.

But in more and more school districts around the nation, it has become the time of day for new and creative learning opportunities, offered in settings where children are supervised by professional educators and community partners. By most assessments, today's after-school programs make a positive difference in the lives of students and improve the climate for school and district success.

Accordingly, after-school programs are very popular with the public. A series of annual voter surveys conducted by the Afterschool Alliance shows public support consistently running in the 90 percent range, with 76 percent of voters even going so far as to say they'd be willing to pay additional taxes if more after-school programs resulted.

Because after-school programs offer the unique opportunity to engage the

public and community organizations with schools, dynamic programs build public support that can advance many of a school district's priorities.

With today's increasingly rigorous academic standards, many students need additional learning time. The public understands as much: In the 2004 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 94 percent of those surveyed support increasing instructional time. At the same time, rapidly changing workplace demands mean that many working parents need additional help during after-school time to keep children on track.

These two factors played a vital role in the growth of after-school programs throughout the 1990s. But tight local, state and federal budgets have halted the growth of programs in many districts.

So it is fair to wonder whether we are on the verge of missing a unique, even historic, opportunity to fill the hours immediately following the end of the school day with a treasure chest of academically enriching activities and expanded learning opportunities, provided by programs that help build connections with and support from taxpayers and voters.

Multiple Effects

Today's superintendents face stern challenges. Boosting student performance and increasing school safety are constant concerns, as are building public support and modernizing school buildings. With critics of public schools growing ever more vocal and shrill, finding adequate financial and other support to provide students with the breadth and depth of learning opportunities is more and more difficult.

While some superintendents see after-school programming as just another burden, most seem to regard it as an opportunity to address many of the most vexing challenges school districts face. Many of these superintendents are leveraging existing school district resources, personnel and facilities to significantly increase learning time, while recruiting and rallying more allies outside the schools to the task of expanding learning possibilities. In turn, the effort demonstrates to taxpayers that their tax investments are being efficiently used—both building support for public education and drawing more of them into the district's schools.

It is perhaps little surprise that those in the business of creating more after-school opportunities believe the current flat-lining of after-school funding is a very bad mistake. To advocates and practitioners, the benefits from after-school programs are in plain evidence, and study after study by independent academics have demonstrated their value. Researchers have examined the impact of programs on students' achievement, social interaction

and safety. They've looked at short- and long-term effects. They've examined a broad variety of programs in a range of settings. Results vary somewhat from program to program, but the weight of the research evidence tells us that after-school, done right, lives up to its promise.

To hear Arne Duncan, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools tell it at a May 2003 press briefing: "If you look at results—and we do have to be bottom-line oriented—our test scores jumped to all-time highs, our mobility rate dropped to its lowest point ever, our truancy rate dropped to its lowest point ever, our graduation rate is at an all-time high.

"For the first time ever, we have 8th graders beating national norms; that has never happened before. In a district where 85 percent of our students live below the poverty line, that was a huge real and symbolic accomplishment. And part of the reason—we can't say this is the only reason, but part of the reason—we think we did so much better is [that] last year we added about 50,000 students to our after-school programming. ... So [after-school] is a core, a core part of our educational strategy."

Duncan and other school leaders see after-school programs as an opportunity to meet escalating state requirements and No Child Left Behind standards. And their framework for fixing what ails public education reaches beyond the school system's immediate resources to involve the broader community—volunteers, sponsoring businesses, the faith community, civic organizations and the philanthropic community.

It's natural for administrators to fall into the habit of looking inward, first and last, tightening the curriculum and the school day and working to get the very best from their principals and teachers. Those are very important efforts, but the focus needn't be limited to what happens between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. Children's minds don't stop at 3 p.m., and neither should their learning. So their schools and community partners should not stop teaching.

Learning and Growth

Well-structured after-school programs effectively expand learning time for students. Children get individual tutoring along with lessons and activities that reinforce the day's class work and the night's homework. And they have an opportunity to develop the kind of team-building and leadership skills so often squeezed out by the increasing focus on test scores, as well as what some call "21st century skills"—exploration of college and career possibilities, engagement in art, music and science projects, and increased civic responsibility and self-discipline from service learning. (See <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/> for more ideas.)

The results are positive and multifaceted. According to the California Department of Education, an evaluation of the statewide After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program released in 2002 found "large improvements in achievement among the most high-risk students," as well as "a direct relationship between gains in math and amount of participation in the program." Students who participated for 7.5 months or more demonstrated improvements in math scores that were more than 2.5 times those found statewide. School attendance also improved, especially among students having the highest number of absences prior to participating in the program.

Looking down the road, Huron Valley, Mich., Superintendent Robert O'Brien, who was his state's 2003 Superintendent of the Year, points to the significant long-range benefits from after-school. "Research shows that children involved in sports or other after-school activities do better academically, socially and emotionally," he told the *Detroit News* in December 2004. "They are also less likely to become involved in risky behaviors such as drugs."

Noting that the middle school years play an important role in the transition from child to young adult, "this transition is made easier if students learn problem solving, teamwork, leadership and experience new things," O'Brien said.

South Carolina State Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum agrees. "High quality after-school programs don't just keep children away from trouble," she says. "In today's educational world, where the expected level of achievement keeps rising, after-school opportunities provide the extra time and help that many children need. These programs can play an important role in students' academic success."

The significant outlier in the research base is a government-funded examination of pre-NCLB 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs. The timing of the study is of particular significance because researchers' findings that the studied programs created no significant academic gains was almost certainly the direct result of the pre-NCLB reality that the programs weren't required to make academics a priority.

But the federal study paddles upstream against a fast-flowing current of studies with opposite, far more positive findings. And it would be difficult to persuade Shirley Prince, superintendent in Scotland County, N.C. Despite being in a low-wealth, rural school district, Scotland County's students are performing close to or above the state averages in reading and mathematics, largely due to their participation in Scotland SCHOLARS, the district's after-school program.

On 23 of 26 reading and math performance indicators, SCHOLARS students showed greater gains than non-SCHOLARS students on their 2004 state end-of-grade exams. "SCHOLARS gives struggling students the time, attention and nurturing they need to succeed," Prince said.

Her experience has been repeated over and over in various places. So the real questions confronting school leaders are not whether after-school is worthwhile but how to afford it and how to do it well.

A Resource Question

Of course, school districts would be significantly assisted in their efforts to expand after-school by an increase in funding for the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers. No Child Left Behind authorized \$2 billion for the current year, but Congress and the president have provided only \$1 billion of that. Separately, states could provide a big boost by including after-school funding in their state school finance formulas. Educators are well advised to advocate for such increases.

That said, however, many school district leaders have found a solution to the funding problem in capitalizing on their own resources to leverage the involvement of community, law-enforcement, youth, parks and recreation, and faith, cultural and civic organizations to help sponsor and deliver quality after-school programs. District facilities, classrooms, computer and language labs, libraries, and arts and sports facilities keep students learning after 3 p.m.

Some resources for the expansion of quality after-school programs can be found in the school district itself. Federal Title I and Safe and Drug Free School monies are good resources to deploy in buying more "safe and smart time" after-school and in the summers. The Scotland County, N.C., schools plan to tap other resources, the result of district administrator Anne Crabbe's push to have after-school programs licensed as child care centers by the state Division of Child Development. Children at licensed centers are eligible for Department of Social Services subsidies to cover their attendance.

Combining district and school programs that have a student and community focus into a robust comprehensive program provides richness in after-school opportunities that can entice students to attend regularly. The combination can reduce per-student costs, while expanding programming. Such combined efforts can include tutoring and mentoring programs, college and career access, service learning, literacy and reading assistance, artist residencies, college work-study students, character development, volunteer programs and technology centers, as well as the typical sports, clubs, music and band programs.

After-school programs also can be part of a broader outreach effort to parents that includes General Equivalency Diploma and English as a second language programs in the schools and classes for parents in counseling, computers and more. Explains Arne Duncan, the Chicago schools executive: “[W]e’re teaching young parents how to teach their young children how to read and really starting to engage the entire family. So as our schools become community centers, we’re convinced that it is going to be extraordinarily beneficial to our students long-term.”

Beyond the direct benefit to the students and families involved, the combination of these efforts can create a critical mass of resources to employ full-time or near full-time after-school/community coordinators in schools throughout a district. Such coordinators, working with principals, can be a conduit to identify, rally and coordinate a host of community resources to further strengthen after-school opportunities and thus support for public education. By structuring a program that involves the community in after-school, administrators build support for the public schools themselves. Along the way, they find opportunities to develop new streams of financial support.

For example, many mayors and city council members have embraced after-school programs as a community-building and education-improvement strategy, and they are advocates for local government funding and support for after-school programs.

This after-school-driven transformation of school into community learning centers also builds voter support. A recent poll by the KnowledgeWorks Foundation finds that public support for paying for new buildings in Ohio increases dramatically if the buildings are to be used for comprehensive after-school programs and opened to community members for adult education, recreation and other classes.

As administrators contemplate creating programs, many quickly recognize that after-school is considerably less expensive by the hour than the regular school day. Many of the capital costs, operating costs for the facilities, overhead costs and some of the transportation costs are already paid for. Also the per-hour costs are reduced because quality after-school programs often use a mixture of certified teachers, youth workers, paraprofessionals, college work-study students and volunteers.

These and other factors make an hour of after-school programming cost about a third of what an hour of the regular school day costs. And significantly, after-school programs are often a source of new revenue, as well as a source of enthusiastic community and political support that has systemwide benefits for

the district.

District Progress

The synergies to be found in after-school programming are not limited to the financial side, of course. As *The School Administrator* reported in 2003, Tom Andres, then-superintendent in Sauk City, Wis., worked aggressively to integrate after-school programming into the structure of the school system. Many of the district's after-school employees were regular-day half-timers so they're already known quantities in their schools and know how the system's formal and informal processes work. In addition, program staff are responsible for maintaining solid relationships with other school staff, coordinating after-school curricula and communicating about specific children's progress and needs.

The Greater Latrobe, Pa., school district takes an integrated approach, as well. Assistant Superintendent Stephen Sarokan described the program to the *PittsburghTribune-Review*: "This is not just a social program. It's about academics and it's highly effective." The program's in-home tutoring component matches its 40 teachers with a certain number of students. The approach increases parental involvement because staff go into the homes, Sarokan said.

At the same time, programs can serve as incentives to gain the buy-in of other groups that want to help children and youth develop and stay out of trouble, such as senior citizens. The rapid increase in the population of active seniors provides an opportunity for schools. These citizens often apply their lifetime of experience in service as volunteers, tutors and mentors, and many take advantage of learning opportunities offered in after-school programs to brush up on their technology skills or other interests. In the bargain, they develop lasting connections to the schools.

Increasingly, school leaders are seeing after-school programs as useful tools to accomplish multiple goals: increasing student performance, expanding learning opportunities in a safe setting, and building greater parent and community support for their community's public schools. With strategic leadership from the superintendent and district staff, it is possible to get after-school programs off the ground and keep them afloat even in these days of tightened budgets. Robust and comprehensive after-school programs are one important way to leverage more student success and public support.

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