
Quality Time After School

By Jean Grossman, Margo Campbell and Becca Raley

Throughout the late 1990s, policymakers became more insistent that after-school programs focus intensely on academic outcomes. The passage of No Child Left Behind in 2002 codified this trend, with after-school programs being asked to enhance school-day learning and strengthen reading and math scores. Yet practitioners and youth development experts have continued to back a more comprehensive array of programming—one that avoids a narrow focus on homework or testing and instead seeks to promote initiative, leadership, teamwork, persistence and task-based, active learning. In tomorrow's world, they argue, children will need not only high test scores but mastery of a broad range of skills they can use in a variety of settings.

As P/PV takes stock of the field, we appreciate the tension practitioners face in considering where to place the greatest programmatic emphasis. Some choose a strict focus on academics (increasingly common because funding is often tied to academic programming), while others remain committed to a wider array of recreational, social and skill-building activities. P/PV's new report, *Quality Time After School: What Instructors Can Do to Enhance Learning*, provides lessons and insights that will be valuable for both types of programs. It identifies characteristics that are linked to youth engagement and perceived learning across a broad range of activities, suggesting a roadmap for policymakers and program operators for how to create engaging learning environments in after-school programs.

During the 2004-05 school year, with funding from the William Penn Foundation, P/PV conducted in-depth research at five Beacon Centers managed by Philadelphia Safe and Sound. Beacon Centers, which were

launched in Philadelphia in 2002, provide a range of enrichment activities in education, career development, arts and recreation, leadership and health. Our researchers observed, surveyed and/or talked with more than 400 youth (ages 8 to 22)—and their instructors—who were participating in approximately 50 activities. We then examined this data, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to determine how youth's perceptions of the activities and their instructors linked to youth's reported levels of engagement, learning, enjoyment and desire to attend the activity; we also examined how staff's backgrounds related to youth assessments.

Findings

Our research showed that **group management is one of the most important factors in promoting youth engagement, learning, enjoyment and regular participation.** When youth of all ages rated an activity as well managed, they reported getting more out of the activity at each step in the learning process: They enjoyed the activity more, were more engaged in the day's tasks and in turn felt they learned more than youth in less well-managed activities.

Our observations revealed many successful strategies for managing groups. Four simple behavior-management techniques surfaced as particularly effective: 1) setting reasonable ground rules; 2) providing ongoing positive reinforcement through encouragement and praise; 3) being consistent and fair in reinforcing expectations; and 4) remaining firm, but not harsh, when ground rules are broken. Ultimately, good instructors provide just enough structure to help activities run well, and remain calm and consistent when presented with challenges.

We also found that **positive adult support is critical to enhancing youth learning and engagement.** Youth who experienced adult support enjoyed their experience more, felt more engaged and perceived that they learned more than those who experienced less adult support.

Positive support was more than staff just being sympathetic or “nice.” Our observations of the Philadelphia Beacon Centers found that emotional and instructional support were both important. Better-rated Beacon instructors allowed some informal socializing and took the time to talk with individual youth when special needs arose, thus forging trusting relationships (somewhat similar to friendships or mentorships); they often used youth culture as a point of connection. However, positive support extended beyond these techniques: Effective instructional support was also critical, occurring through careful one-on-one teaching or coaching. Staff challenged youth to move beyond their current skill levels by attempting new tasks and provided balanced feedback that included a mix of positive reinforcement and critical assessments of progress.

Engagement and perceived learning for students of all age groups were similarly affected by adult support. However, students’ desire to come to an activity and their level of enjoyment were affected differently by adult support depending on the students’ age. One of the most notable findings was that, among middle and high school youth, positive adult support increased their desire to attend an activity. This is important given that low after-school participation rates are a chronic problem among older youth.

Our quantitative analysis did not find a direct link between youth reports of peer affiliation (liking) or cooperative peer learning and their level of engagement or their perceived level of learning. However, we did find that **the more participants reported that staff encouraged youth to work together, the more they enjoyed the activity and wanted to return.**

Through our activity observations, we saw how Beacon instructors played three key roles in facilitating positive peer interactions. First, they modeled and set the tone for positive social interactions across the group, intervening as needed to ensure that all youth got along. Second, they brought youth together to work on projects collaboratively by placing them in pairs or small

groups. Third, they placed youth in formal peer-tutoring and mentoring relationships in which youth with greater expertise were asked to guide more novice participants through a task.

The effects of cooperative peer learning did not differ by age, but the effects of peer affiliation did. Among elementary school children, the more participants liked their peers, the more they felt they learned. Among middle school youth, the more they liked their peers, the more they wanted to attend the activity. For high school teens, liking peers played no role in any of the four variables (engagement, learning, enjoyment and desire to attend).

The more input participants felt they had in shaping an activity, the more engaged they felt and the more they liked the activity; however, input did not seem to be related to their perceived learning or their desire to attend.

Youth input was most obvious in our observations of the 18 activities geared to high school students. Making these youth-driven activities effective requires considerable skill on the part of instructors. Our observations revealed a common pattern to successful integration of youth input. First, instructors began by setting clear expectations about the type of youth input and direction required to complete a task. Second, instructors removed themselves from the decision-making process, granting considerable responsibility to youth to craft their own unique projects or solutions. Third, instructors stepped back in to recognize progress and support the next steps for carrying a project to completion.

The challenge to incorporating youth input that was voiced most commonly by instructors was the limited time they had to get through their material. Time-pressed instructors either did not recognize or ignored opportunities for input. This finding indicates that additional support and training on how best to integrate youth input may be useful for some instructors.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Our research has illuminated the connection between staff practices and how much youth feel they learn in after-school activities. However, given real-world limitations on time and resources, how should program directors—and the field—proceed?

Many program managers seek to strengthen their activities by hiring strong staff. Unfortunately, our research was not able to provide much guidance on this front. We examined how staff characteristics, such as having a college education or specific work experience, related to youth's assessments of staff skill (their group management ability, the amount of positive support given, etc.). Almost none of the characteristics that could be assessed with simple screening tools were significant. Of course, directors should continue to use their good judgment to assess the complex set of characteristics that create strong instructors. However, more research is needed to determine if there are simple ways of screening for highly skilled staff.

Training staff once they're on board is another option for promoting quality programs. But the field must move well beyond one-time training and focus more on ongoing staff feedback.¹ Program directors can support quality by integrating regular instructor supervision, staff learning opportunities, staff-to-staff mentoring and program assessment into daily practice.² Staff meetings can be used to get advice from peers, learn more about effective instructional strategies and brainstorm solutions to new challenges. Because there are so many part-time and independent contractors working in after-school programs, coordinating times for staff development and training can prove difficult; however, given the difference that staff practices make in program quality, the extra effort is almost certainly worthwhile.

Finally, there are comprehensive program assessment tools being developed by organizations such as High Scope and the Search Institute that can be used by staff to periodically assess and reflect on program effectiveness and areas for improvement. These techniques and many others, when applied regularly, can be used to promote and sustain quality.

Unfortunately, however, quality is chronically undercut by shortages of both funding and paid staff time to carry out these types of activities in an intentional and consistent way. Quality will only increase if program funders and policymakers do their part to ensure that supervision and time for professional development activities are integrated into program budgets and expected goals.

While all program directors, funders and the families whose children are served aspire for after-school programs to be engaging learning environments, it has not always been clear what staff should do to improve program quality and foster engagement and learning. This study and others are beginning to make headway in answering these questions.³

Funders, parents and program operators all have a role to play in applying the lessons of this work. Program staff must focus on adopting high-quality instructional methods, being willing and available to engage regularly as a program team and buy into best practices for program monitoring and professional development. Directors must dedicate more time to supervising and coaching their staff. Funders must recognize the true costs of quality programming, and the public, including parents, must support such programs. With a solid and growing understanding of the practices that promote learning, we should accept nothing less for our young people.

Endnotes

- 1 Research has found that one-time training is often ineffective (e.g., DuBois et al. 2002) and its effects fade quickly (Blau 1997; Philips et al. 2000; Clarke-Stewart et al. 2002). However, some research has found that serious upfront training can have lasting positive effects (Herrera 2000; Smith et al. 1979, 1993). (For full citations, see *Quality Time After School*, available at www.ppv.org.)
- 2 A forthcoming P/PV report (Hopkins and Sheldon, 2007) describes a model for continuous program improvement in the after-school setting, including ongoing staff training, program monitoring, data collection and feedback.
- 3 See also Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2007). *The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

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