

AFTERSCHOOL ALERT

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Afterschool: The Natural Platform for Youth Development

"We can, and must, build on the extraordinary resources already in place: resources that are flourishing in some few instances, but that are usually underfunded, undervalued, and largely unknown; resources that are almost always run by underpaid staff and dedicated individuals and groups of volunteers. We must do everything that is within our power to do, so that all of today's adolescents enjoy equal opportunity to become the workers, parents, and leaders of tomorrow."

*--Wilma S. Tisch, Co-Chair of Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs
for the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development*

Youth Development Addresses the Needs of Youth

Since the 1900s, leaders of our nation have worked to address the needs of our society's children and youth. Social services, educational resources and health organizations have targeted the needs of youth. Every decade of the 20th century, the White House has brought together prominent scholars, social workers and community leaders to address the contemporary needs of youth. The emphasis of these events varied from President Theodore Roosevelt's 1909 White House Conference on Dependent Children addressing neglected and destitute youth to President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1960 Golden Anniversary White House Conference On Children and Youth focusing on the impact of the nation's "moral decline" on youth, juvenile delinquency, school failure and juvenile drug use. While Roosevelt's efforts paved the way for The Children's Bureau, a federal agency promoting child welfare established in 1912, Eisenhower's conference resulted in no action despite 670 recommendations. As one scholar summarizes, "Some of the presidential gatherings were catalysts for significant and enduring reforms in child welfare, while others produced few lasting results."¹

Despite this long history of youth programming, the youth development field is a relatively modern movement. It began in the late 1980s as research on prevention and intervention approaches in youth programming that did not attain desired results. Many publicly funded prevention or intervention programs assumed that the "problem" resulted from a fault or deficit in a young person rather than considering the complex environment. These prevention and intervention programs attempted to "fix" problems by offering youth corrective knowledge or skills, all of which proved unsuccessful and indicated that "social engineering" was limited. The new youth development movement advocates for a more holistic approach - one that emphasizes supporting the development of youth, rather than the "fixing" of youth. This new orientation focuses more on building strengths as a way to reduce weaknesses. As one report states, "The movement's fundamental assumption—one receiving increased corroboration both from the study of human behavior and program evaluations—is that enduring, positive results in a youth's life are most effectively achieved by tending to basic needs for guidance, support and involvement, and not by surgical interventions aimed at removing problems."² This new youth development movement steadily gained more recognition in the field of youth programming, as evidenced by a 1997 Presidential Summit for America's Future. At the summit, three American presidents, nearly 30 governors, 100 mayors, 145 community representatives, dozens of prominent business

Principles of youth development, according to the National Governors Association Youth Policy Network:

- ▶ Youth development approaches are directed at all youth.
- ▶ Youth development is asset based.
- ▶ Families are essential to supporting healthy youth.
- ▶ Youth development is holistic and developmentally appropriate.
- ▶ Youth development strategies are place based and reflect local needs.
- ▶ Youth are involved in decision making.

leaders and several thousand citizens gathered to declare their support for youth development. The summit highlighted examples of programs designed to enhance social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth of youth in structured, supportive and safe environments.

Although support for youth development increased, many called for more research and evaluation, beyond anecdotes and glowing compliments from empowered youth, to document its ability to deliver positive outcomes. Recent scientifically based research appears to validate the strengths of the more comprehensive youth development approach. Commenting on a recent National Research Council study, developmental psychologist Richard Lerner states, "The nature/nurture debate is simply out of date. The developmental community has rejected these reductionist notions for fused, integrated models."³ He notes that the shift away from a deficit model of young people's development to a strength- or asset-based model signals a new era in the study of adolescence.

Youth Development as Key Strategy in Afterschool

Amid the wave of youth development came the pivotal 1992 Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development report, *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Out-of-School Hours*, which highlights the modern needs of youth and communities in light of the growing number of "latch-key" kids. The report described how communities failed to adapt to significant changes in the workforce, leading to a new era of risk for youth. Some changes identified by the report included:

- **More single-parent families**
One in five white adolescents grows up in a one-parent family, while 30 percent of Latino and 50 percent of African American adolescents live in such families.
- **More youth living in poverty**
In 1992, more than one in five young people lived in poverty - an increase of five million more youth in poverty than in 1972.
- **Increased health risks**
Increasing suicide and teen pregnancy rates in addition to youth experimenting with drugs and sexual activities at younger ages.
- **Increasing global competition in the workforce**
American youth were not gaining the knowledge and skills needed to be competitive with other industrialized nations.

The Current Wave of Afterschool Programs

Similar to youth development, afterschool is a relatively new field and intersects with many traditional social service fields. Initially, afterschool programs played a significant role in this country during World War II when the Lanham Act provided federal funding for programs to care for youth while their mothers entered the workforce. After the war, most programs disappeared until the 1970s when the feminist movement brought women in large numbers back to the workforce and the number of single-parent families increased. Although the landmark 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, highlighted the need to improve public education and initiated a wave of education reform efforts, it was not until the 1984 National Conference on Latchkey Children that out-of-school time was considered an issue separate from education reform. In the 1980s, more federal and state funds were made available for child care and school-age care. The Carnegie Council's 1992 report shifted the focus from extracurricular and school-age care programs toward academic achievement and youth development.

The purpose of afterschool programs has evolved to include one or more of the following:

- ✓ **to provide constructive, supervised activities for youth**
- ✓ **to provide caring; relationships with adults and other youth; and**
- ✓ **to provide accessible safe places for youth.**

- Corporation for National Service and National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 1997

The increased attention on out-of-school time, which has become more popularly known as afterschool (but refers to programs that operate in the hours before school, after school, in evenings, and during weekends and school breaks), led to the creation of the first legislation and federal funding stream solely dedicated to such programs. This legislation created the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative. Since 1998, this Department of Education program has grown from a \$40 million program to a \$1 billion program reaching all fifty states.

Despite the rapid growth in afterschool programs, the need for afterschool programs is not met in most communities. The Afterschool Alliance reports that nearly two-thirds of voters say they have difficulty in finding quality, affordable programs.⁴ Other sources indicate that the amount of afterschool programs available meets only half the demand among elementary and middle school parents.⁵ Communities need more programs to engage youth after school and transform a time of risk into a time of opportunities for growth and development.

Mutually Appropriate Contexts

Afterschool programs are not an extension of the school day. Youth need and want a change of environment and structure after spending their day in the classroom. Youth need relationships with adults that do not only involve authority and approval. Grounding afterschool programs in youth development provides youth with structured yet empowering environments and offer opportunities to develop relationships with adults based on mutual respect and cooperation. Afterschool and youth development programs both strive to balance structure and support. Research finds that afterschool programs "are effective in meeting the developmental needs of youth precisely because they can quickly shift, modify, and transform their way of working to better fit the changing circumstances, strengths, and needs of youth."⁶ Schools typically follow set curricula and often operate on a rigid schedule in sync with grading periods and standardized tests. These factors can create an unforgiving school system for youth that struggle with a certain subject matter or fall behind for other reasons. Afterschool programs, on the other hand, have more flexibility to cater activities more to the needs and circumstances facing youth.

Sharing Outcomes - Beyond Prevention and Academics

Evaluations of major afterschool initiatives, including the 21st CCLC initiative, show that quality long-term programs with youth development elements increase positive outcomes and decrease negative behaviors among youth. Collectively these studies indicated:

Youth improved their interpersonal skills, peer and adult relationships, self-control, problem solving, cognition, self-efficacy, commitment to schooling, and academic achievement. There were also reductions in problem behaviors including drug and alcohol use, school misbehavior, aggressive behavior, violence, truancy, high-risk sexual behavior, and smoking.⁷

Afterschool programs and youth development programs share a laundry list of positive outcomes for youth. Afterschool programs have shown schools and education groups first-hand the value of strengthening youths' developmental assets in conjunction with their academic skills. Afterschool programs reinforce the learning that happens during the school day with activities and assistance after school. Emerging research shows that "youth participation in quality out-of-school time activities leads to better social and emotional health as well as improved cognitive skills. These outcomes are truly, but indirectly, tied to improved academic achievement."⁸

The Neutral Umbrella Concept

Practitioners, researchers, scholars and community leaders agree that youth today need an array of programming and opportunities to meet their diverse needs. The NRC report clearly outlines the differing developmental needs for youth as they transition from early to late adolescence and emphasizes that programs need to adapt structures and activities to address these differences, particularly for the transition from early adolescence, usually ages 10 to 14, to older adolescence, ages 15 to 18. In addition to age, other factors contributing to the diversity of the youth population and the complexity of their environments need to be considered. In addition to increasingly multicultural communities, especially in light of the boom of foreign-born residents currently totaling 28.4 million, youth today vary in sexual orientation, educational ability, health and socioeconomic status. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, several socioeconomic characteristics of today's youth represent inherent risks to their future success. For example:

- 19 percent lived with a parent or guardian who never completed high school;
- 5 percent of all 16- and 17-year-olds were not enrolled in school;
- 3 percent of 16- and 17-year-old girls had given birth to and were living with one or more children; and
- 15 percent of the nation's children were living in households receiving cash assistance or food stamps.⁹

To meet the diverse needs of today's youth, our nation and communities need an array of youth programming. All sectors of community life need to pool resources to effectively serve our youth. Afterschool serves as a neutral umbrella for these sectors and varying groups to gather under to work on a comprehensive approach to support youth. The 1992 Carnegie Council stated, "Many sectors of the society must be involved in a renewed national initiative to turn the out-of-school hours into rich resources for the full educational and healthy development of young adolescents. This notion is echoed in the more recent NRC report that states, "Adolescents who spend time in communities that are rich in developmental opportunities for them experience less risk and show evidence of higher rates of positive development. A diversity of program opportunities in each community is more

likely to support broad adolescent development and attract the interest of and meet the needs of a greater number of youth...Even with the best staff and the best funding, no single program can necessarily serve all young people or incorporate all of the features of positive developmental settings."¹⁰

Utilizing Community Facilities and Resources

Programs today are shifting in a direction that "places children and adolescents once again at the center of neighborhood and community life."¹¹ Using afterschool programs as the focal point to gather and leverage community resources for youth can lead to increased effectiveness and efficiency. Pooling community and public resources such as funding, facilities, equipment and personnel time reduces duplication and waste. Overlap among various organizations' and agencies' goals and capacity can be managed to maximize their use, especially for expensive resources such as transportation, equipment and specialized expertise.

The modern afterschool movement has been propelled in part by community school advocates who believe schools, as accessible public resources, should serve as the hub for activities and services related to youth and their families. Many community school models exist, including those supported by the National Center for Community Education in the tradition envisioned by philanthropist Charles Stewart Mott, settlement houses replicated by Children's Aid Society, and the Beacon Centers established in New York City and San Francisco. These models, which all include afterschool programs, have proven to increase parent and volunteer participation, expand the number and breadth of business and community partnerships and maximize use of public facilities such as schools.

Another way that youth development and afterschool programs efficiently use public resources is by preventing youth from entering costly punitive or corrective institutions such as juvenile detention centers. Although many youth advocates do not rally behind this negative perspective of youth, research supports the argument that current investment in positive youth development and afterschool programs can reduce potential costs to taxpayers resulting from negative youth behavior. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention states that preventing one adolescent from turning to a life of crime can save society up to \$1.8 million.¹² School districts can save money if programs prevent youth from repeating grades or being placed in special education. For example, a Cooperative Extension program reports that it reduced grade failures by 16 percent, saving the school district more than \$1 million.¹³

Fosters Family, School and Community Connections

Partnerships are essential to provide quality youth development and afterschool programs. In 1992 the Carnegie Council stressed the value of partners by stating, "Community organizations and their programs constitute invaluable resources that can revitalize neighborhoods through partnerships with schools and families to support the education and healthy development of young adolescents." Partnerships are important for reasons beyond the cost-effectiveness of sharing resources as described previously. Partnerships help foster a connections among organizations and members of a community to ensure that all needs and concerns are met.

Partnerships also provide youth with access to build relationships with various members of the community that they otherwise might not come into contact with. As Patricia Hersch describes in her book *A Tribe Apart*, which traces the struggles a handful of adolescents face in daily life, "The most stunning change for adolescents today is their aloneness."¹⁴ Hersch describes the struggles, challenges and victories of adolescents developing into young adults alone -- isolated from their families, their communities and often their peers as a separate "tribe." Citing several studies, she asserts that such separation is not just a problem for families, but for communities. "The effects go beyond issues of rules and discipline to the idea exchanges between generations that do not occur, the conversations not held, the guidance and role modeling not taking place, the wisdom and traditions no longer filtering down inevitably." More quantitative research also supports this notion. An initial report on the first phase of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, also referred to as Add Health, states, "Adolescents' connections to family and school make a big difference to their health and well-being."¹⁵ Youth who report feeling connected to their families and schools are protected against several different types of health risks, including emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, drug and alcohol use, violent behavior and sexual activity. For these reasons, the connections to family, school and community that afterschool and youth development programs create are invaluable.

Recommendations for Moving Forward

These afterschool programs demonstrate that using youth development principles during the critical hours after school produce benefits for youth, families and communities. However, the Forum for Youth Investment (FYI), a youth policy think tank, reports that currently only about one-third of American youth are in afterschool programs. American communities need the resources and support necessary to provide afterschool programs for all youth. As national and community leaders look for ways to

address this critical need, they should consider the emerging research and lessons learned from practitioners. FYI advocates the following principles for addressing youth development during the out-of-school hours:

- Young people need and deserve supports throughout their waking hours, which includes mornings, school day, after-school hours, evenings and weekends.
- Young people need and deserve investments throughout the first two decades of life.
- Young people need and deserve investments that help them achieve a broad range of outcomes.¹⁶

The growing body of knowledge about youth development, both in research and in practice, clearly demonstrates that communities can successfully meet the diverse needs of the youth through afterschool programs. While individual communities need to take steps to meet the unique needs of youth during the hours after school, national leaders and federal agencies need to work together to build a supportive infrastructure of funding opportunities, technical assistance and research efforts to make a significant and long-term impact for our nation's youth.

¹ Baker, Dwayne A., and Hamlin, Laura M, *History of Youth Development Initiatives: Michigan and the United States*, Department of Park, Recreation, and Tourism Resources at Michigan State University, work in progress. Available at <http://www.prr.msu.edu/baker/dab%20reports/Youth%20Initiatives-%20Michigan%20and%20National%20ver%203.pdf>.

² Connell, James P., Michelle Alberti Gambone, and Thomas J. Smith, *Youth Development in Community Settings: Challenges to Our Field and Our Approach*, Community Action for Youth Project (A cooperative project of Gambone & Associates/Institute for Research and Reform in Education).

³ The Forum for Youth Investment, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development: Implications for Research, Practice and Policy*, A Meeting Report of the Pre-Session at the 2002 Biennial Meeting of the Society For Research on Adolescence, April 2002.

⁴ Mott Foundation/JCPenney Poll, *Afterschool Poll Report Poll*, Flint, MI: Author, 2001.

⁵ National Opinion Research Center, August 1998.

⁶ Marczak, Mary and Rachel Moreau, "Positive Out-of-School Time Hoopla: Why Should We Care?" *The Center*, Out-of-School Time Special Issue, Minneapolis: Center for 4-H Youth Development, University of Minnesota Extension Service, Summer 2002, page 15.

⁷ Marczak, Mary and Rachel Moreau, Summer 2002, page 14.

⁸ Stevens, Pam, "Talking Out of School," *The Center*, Out-of-School Time Special Issue, Minneapolis: Center for 4-H Youth Development, University of Minnesota Extension Service, Summer 2002, page 8.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Census Brief: America's Children at Risk*, Washington, D.C.:Author,1997.

¹⁰ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002, page 11.

¹¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002, page 3.

¹² Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, *Juvenile Offenders and Victims:1999 National Report*, 1999.

¹³ National Institute on Out-of-School-Time, "Fact Sheet on School-Age Children's Out-of-School Time," 1997.

¹⁴ Hersch, Patricia, *A Tribe Apart*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.

¹⁵ Blum, R.W., P.M. Rinehart, *Reducing the Risk: Connection that Makes a Difference in the Lives of Youth*, Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health, University of Minnesota, 1997.

¹⁶ Pittman, Karen and Joel Tolman, "Toward a Common Vision: Naming and Framing the Developmental Imperative," *The Forum for Youth Investment*, 2002.