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Afterschool: An Ally in Promoting Middle School Improvement

The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the first in our latest series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. These issue briefs feature: how afterschool programs can aid in school improvement efforts; digital learning opportunities for middle schoolers; family engagement; and arts enrichment. They examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

According to the Department of Education, there are approximately 5,000 chronically underperforming schools across the country, making up roughly 5 percent of all schools in the U.S. These schools are in all community types, with half in big cities, close to a third in rural areas and the rest in suburbs and small towns.ⁱ Many of these schools have developed an immutable reputation in their communities as unsafe and to be avoided if at all possible. High schools receive much of the blame for the 7,000 students who drop out of school every day,ⁱⁱ but many middle schools are also failing to help students succeed. In 2005, middle schools were overrepresented on the list of failing schools, constituting 37 percent of Title I schools identified for improvement, but only 14 percent of all Title I schools.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, the middle school years can often be the first step in students falling off the track toward high school graduation. Eminent drop-out researcher Bob Balfanz found that sixth graders who failed math or English/reading, attended school less than 80 percent of the time or received an unsatisfactory behavior grade in a core course had only a 10 to 20 percent chance of graduating from high school on time.^{iv}

Additional supports are needed to help these schools and the students attending them become successful. In response, the Obama administration has put in place several highly-funded grant opportunities to help struggling communities turn around their most underperforming schools including Race to the Top, the Investing in Innovation Fund and School Improvement Grants. Along with funding, support from surrounding communities is also crucial. New leaders need to arise, not only in schools in the form of principals and teachers, but community-wide with parents, businesses and local governments stepping to the plate to provide additional assistance to help the nation's middle schoolers thrive. Most notably, afterschool programs can offer an environment that reinforces the new atmosphere developed in an improvement school and provide new opportunities for children in need of innovative, active learning experiences. Afterschool programs also present an avenue for community involvement in school improvement efforts and have been proven to increase academic achievement, improve students' attitudes toward school and reduce antisocial behaviors,^v all of which are keys to successful school turnaround. With dedicated funding from the Department of Education in place, it is important that expanded learning efforts, such as afterschool and summer programs that include community partners, are seen as a vital element in middle school turnaround across the country.

For more information, visit www.afterschoolalliance.org

Afterschool Programs: Proven, Effective Models for Middle School Development

The number of studies proving afterschool's effectiveness in not only enriching students' experience outside of school, but also improving their attendance, grades and behavior in school continues to grow:

- Ninety-four percent of middle school students attending 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) programs in Pinellas County, Florida, maintained or showed growth in language arts (compared to 59 percent of non-participants), 84 percent maintained or showed growth in math (compared to 62 percent of non-participants) and 85 percent maintained or showed growth in science (compared to 40 percent of non-participants).^{vi}
- An evaluation of THINK Together afterschool programs in Santa Ana, California, conducted by University of California, Irvine found that the more THINK Together afterschool opportunities a student participates in, the more likely they are to experience significant standardized test gains in math and English/language arts.^{vii}
- Students in Washington, D.C., attending Higher Achievement's intensive year-round middle school afterschool and summer learning program significantly improved their standardized test scores.^{viii}

"The unique opportunities for innovation presented while working in a turnaround school have been exciting for me as an English Language Development and Reading Interventions teacher. Through the afterschool programming and the guidance provided by the turnaround grant, I have been able to offer students extra support before and after school that would not be available otherwise."

—Katie Estabrook, teacher at Rachel B. Noel Middle School in Denver, CO

However, if afterschool programs across the country are going to be successful allies in school improvement efforts, it is imperative that they strive toward the highest level of effectiveness. In their analysis of 68 afterschool studies, researchers Joseph Durlak and Roger Weissberg identified four evidence-based practices that were associated with significant improvements in students' self-concept, relationship with school and positive social behaviors, while also reducing negative conduct and drug use, and improving test scores and attendance rates. The four practices formed the easy-to-remember acronym SAFE:

- 1) Use of a *Sequenced* set of learning activities to achieve skill objectives;
- 2) *Active* learning techniques to help participants acquire targeted skills;
- 3) *Focused* attention and time on skill development; and
- 4) *Explicit* objectives for the skills being taught.^{ix}

Even when programs strive toward this level of effectiveness, they are too often viewed as add-ons that are not essential to regular school day learning.^x High-quality afterschool programs, as exemplified above, can provide an unparalleled opportunity for schools to create partnerships that help enrich student learning and boost school improvement efforts.

Lessons Can Be Learned from Expanded Learning

While awareness of the importance of expanded learning has grown over the past 10 years with the success of the 21st CCLC initiative, many school reform efforts have yet to take full advantage of expanded learning opportunities to better engage students. Most notably, expanded learning opportunities and the additional time they offer can have impacts on academic, developmental and health outcomes, which help youth in the program to be more prepared and ardent learners.^{xi} Additionally, schools can benefit from partnerships with afterschool and summer learning programs in the following ways:

- Expanded learning offers an opportunity for enrichment activities that may be cut from the regular school day in an effort to maximize time for core subjects;
- Expanded learning opportunities, especially summer programs, help students successfully navigate transitions into and out of middle school;
- Afterschool and summer programs can improve school culture and community image through parent engagement, public events and performances; and
- Afterschool and summer staff, volunteers and mentors can assist school day staff and help support in-school learning.^{xii}

With these benefits in mind, expanded learning opportunities should be key to school improvement efforts going forward, and lessons from effective afterschool enrichment should also be used to inform all aspects of improvement efforts for middle schools nationwide.

School Improvement Grants: Where Does Afterschool Fit In?

School Improvement Grant (SIG) dollars represent the most direct attempt by the Department of Education to help turn around America's lowest performing schools. Since entering office in 2009, the Obama administration has dedicated more than \$4 billion in School Improvement Grants to more than 1,200 schools.^{xiii} Previously the grant program had been funded modestly, but in 2009, utilizing additional funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Obama administration dedicated more than \$3 billion to SIG and has funded it with more than \$500 million each year since. The intent of the grants is to boost academic attainment in the country's lowest-performing five percent of schools. The Department of Education is required to award grants to each state based on the proportional share of funds it receives under Title I, and then states provide subgrants to eligible school districts. When eligible low-performing schools apply, they are required to demonstrate their commitment to advancing achievement by utilizing one of the following improvement models as defined by the Department of Education:

- *Turnaround Model* – School districts would replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff, adopt a new governance structure and implement a new or revised instructional program.
- *Restart Model* – Districts would close failing schools and reopen them under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an educational management organization selected through a rigorous review process.
- *School Closure* – Districts would close a failing school and enroll the students who attended that school in other high-achieving schools in the district.

- *Transformational Model* – Districts would address four specific areas: 1) developing teacher and school leader effectiveness; 2) implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies; 3) extending learning and teacher planning time and creating community-oriented schools; and 4) providing operating flexibility and sustained support.^{xiv}

Twenty-one percent of schools implementing one of the four SIG models are middle schools.^{xv} Expanded learning opportunities—like afterschool and summer learning programs—can arguably be a strategy in all of these reform models for middle schools. The transformational model has been the most popular among grantees, accounting for almost 75 percent of SIG schools to date.^{xvi} This option offers the most flexibility in terms of staffing and programming, and afterschool efforts fit nicely with the directive to extend learning and create community-oriented schools. In addition, many afterschool programs are currently situated in the same communities as SIG schools: 1 out of every 3 21st CCLC programs is located in a low performing school and 1 in 4 SIG-funded schools also has a 21st CCLC grant.^{xvii} With afterschool programs already located in some of the nation’s highest-need communities, it makes sense for them to partner in school improvement efforts, especially in schools utilizing the afterschool-friendly turnaround, restart or transformational models.

In Partnership with Schools, Afterschool Programs Can Aid Improvement Efforts

Many successful school improvement efforts have taken steps to more fully integrate the afterschool programs into the learning community being developed in turnaround schools. In such efforts, programs and partner schools should look to:

- Align school and afterschool curricula;
- Create a position for a teacher liaison that facilitates coordination between the school and the afterschool program;
- Utilize afterschool staff to supply summer and intersession programs; and
- Include afterschool staff in school meetings and professional development opportunities.^{xviii}

Aligning school and afterschool improvement endeavors can provide a full learning experience for children that need more time to learn, as well as support from the community and a diverse array of enrichment opportunities. Of course, there are challenges inherent in adopting afterschool initiatives into a School Improvement Grant:

- The SIG process is fast-moving, complex and subject to confusion.
- Afterschool is mentioned in the

“School improvement comes about when schools have the tools they need to improve and their focus on student achievement is front and center. The E. Greenwood Leadership Academy is a great example of that. Harvard has been a critical partner, providing everything from afterschool support and homework help to parent engagement, leadership training, and professional development for teachers. It’s partnerships like these that have a huge impact on teaching and learning.”

–Boston Public Schools Superintendent Carol R. Johnson

guidance but only as a permissive component rather than a requirement, meaning many schools can overlook afterschool as a component in turnarounds.

- With new players involved in school improvement efforts, including education management organizations and charter organizations, afterschool leaders need to build new relationships.
- A radical turnaround in a short period of time can cause tumult and immense change in the programs involved.^{xix}

“This is an opportune time to strategically consider how school improvement initiatives taking place in thousands of sites can be complemented by the educational and youth development practices that are the hallmark of effective expanded learning programs.”

—Robert M. Stonehill, managing director at American Institutes for Research

To help overcome these challenges at the local level and solidify the role of afterschool in school improvement, afterschool programs are playing a variety of roles to help ensure that expanded learning opportunities are integrated into school reform efforts, including:

1. *Promoting an understanding and positive vision of expanded learning that helps schools realize the worth and value of afterschool programs in a school improvement venture.*

The **Granger Turnaround Model at Castle Park Middle School** in Chula Vista, California, has done well in promoting an understanding of their afterschool program in the four middle schools they work with, showing their value as a rigorous academic program focused on improving student achievement and aligned results. Struggling students are engaged in a variety of core-subject-specific classes after the school day that are designed to bring them up to speed with classmates. This goes a long way in helping school day teachers, who are then able to build on the afterschool classes and provide students with more complex material. This all leads to an enhanced learning environment in and outside of the school day, and a cultural shift from a struggling school to a successful model of improvement with increased student attendance and academic performance, and a decrease in discipline issues.

2. *Encouraging a strategic use of funds for afterschool and summer enrichment that assures the partnering school that their school improvement dollars are going toward activities that will promote the new vision of the school and higher academic achievement.*

Elev8 Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation (GADC) at Perspectives Middle Academy in Chicago, Illinois, has a multitude of learning and developmental programs that are directed toward helping students stay healthy and on-track toward graduation. The program envisions these young people graduating from eighth grade ready to make the important choices of adolescence by providing an engaging learning environment that promotes healthy bodies and minds, as well as offering the support required to succeed in high school and beyond. To accomplish this mission, Elev8 established networks of school and community partners to extend learning with afternoon, weekend and summer programming; create an on-site adolescent-focused health clinic; and provide social supports including mentoring and assistance with high school placement. Through these efforts, Elev8 has demonstrated its ability to use school

improvement funding for directed, high-impact services that help not only the students but the community as a whole, and the results are proving the programs' worth. Since Elev8 GADC's inception in the fall of 2008, the number of students meeting or exceeding standards has increased from 58 to 79 percent in math and 41 to 66 percent in science. Similarly, student health has increased dramatically with 100 percent of the student body receiving immunizations (up from 44 percent before 2008). This program stands as a model for smart, aligned school improvement combining its innovative enrichment activities and its wise use of funding.

3. *Relying on a wide range of partners who can offer a multitude of enrichment activities and academic supports that are linked to school reform efforts.*

The Providence Afterschool Alliance's **AfterZones** in Providence, Rhode Island, stand above the rest in their ability to engage intermediaries in their work. The programs serve 1,400 middle school youth by organizing a network of partners to provide a wide array of enrichment activities to students after school that support school improvement efforts throughout the Providence Public School District. Youth are engaged in opportunities that spark their curiosity, connect them to real world experiences and allow them to explore their interests. Meanwhile, partnering schools that share school improvement money with the AfterZones benefit from the enrichment activities the program provides that could not be offered during the school day, such as sailing, photography, team sports, engineering, veterinary studies, dance and more.

“What is new is that today’s leaders are looking at a wider array of approaches for expanding learning time...Based on a growing sense that schools cannot do this work alone, states, districts, and individual schools are seeking ways to tap the resources of community partners to help ensure that every child is ready for success.”

–Sharon Deich, vice president of the education policy consulting firm Cross and Joftus

4. *Contributing to the research base that demonstrates afterschool programs' worth to school improvement efforts so that schools and funders have a better understanding of the effect that high-quality afterschool and summer learning programs can have on school and student success.^{xx}*

The Parma Learning Center in rural Parma, Idaho, partners with the Parma Unified School District by utilizing both 21st CCLC and School Improvement Grant funding to provide a variety of enrichment opportunities for students. Among other activities, the program offers robotics, a broadcasting class and a creative garden project, which allows students to grow healthy fruits and vegetables while learning about germination, transpiration and the weather cycle. In their partnership, Parma Middle School has benefited from some impressive program results. The number of afterschool program participants who scored at or above proficiency on reading standardized tests has risen 10 percent in the past school year, and afterschool program participants have also been shown to score higher on standardized test scores in all subjects—math, reading and language arts—when compared to matched non-participants. Additionally, the program is linked to improved behavior, with lower discipline referral rates among participants than among the general middle school population. With a bevy of enrichment opportunities and results that demonstrate its effectiveness, the Parma Learning Center is an excellent example of how an afterschool program can provide immense benefits in a school improvement effort.

Conclusion

In communities across the country, afterschool programs are proving their worth in supporting school improvement efforts. Working with community partners, afterschool and summer learning programs are able to complement the learning that takes place during the school day and year and bring new teachers and mentors to the school improvement table. With a wide range of backgrounds, expertise and content area knowledge, afterschool and summer staff are connecting with students and motivating kids to stay on track to school success. One school at a time, afterschool programs are helping kids and schools succeed and building the case that afterschool is a key ally in school improvement.

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