



How to Involve Young People in Afterschool Programs

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Educational opportunities in and beyond the classroom shape the expectations young Americans have about their futures. Afterschool programming plays a key role but rarely gets much attention. Given tightening budget constraints, it is more important than ever for such programs to consult low-income, urban youths of color, who have often been left out of educational decisions. What kinds of programs can best meet their needs and aspirations?

Urban Poverty and Challenges for Youth

U.S. cities are engines of economic growth, pioneers in environmental sustainability efforts, and encourage educational and cultural opportunities for all Americans. Yet American cities face many challenges – such as growing economic gaps, marginalization of the poor, declining social mobility and barriers to full civic participation. Afterschool programs for urban youth are especially vulnerable to such trends – and the adverse effects reverberate, because research shows that quality afterschool programs can improve children’s self-perceptions, school achievement, and feelings about school. Afterschool programs have also been shown to reduce problematic behaviors and promote positive social engagement. But such positive effects are not consistent across all groups of students, and are notably inconsistent for already disadvantaged groups. In current forms, afterschool programs do not always meet the needs of the less privileged children and young adults who stand to benefit the most – and such programs have long failed to adequately serve youth of color.

Ensuring adequate funding is the first step needed to meet the needs of underserved schools and communities in disadvantaged urban areas. Community-based afterschool programming may be the best option for engaging young people – especially when it is structured to develop strengths and meet aspirations rather than focused on addressing shortcomings or community deficits.

Community Afterschool Programs Can Fill Gaps

Community-based afterschool programs have been shown to foster positive youth development and reduce truancy, fighting, and substance abuse. The times right after school are often referred to as “critical hours,” because students are typically free from school and family supervision and have time for leisure and homework activities. How young people use this time predicts their general activity patterns and even life trajectories. Participation in quality afterschool programs can improve young people’s behavior, enhance

their social and emotional development, and boost their academic performance. To gain such benefits, however, afterschool programs must be attractive to youth and readily accessible, that is, convened at the right time, easy to access, and relatively low-cost. Careful attention to such factors could increase attendance.

Retention is also a concern for many programs. If students do not feel a strong connection to the program, they may not stay. Interviews reveal that students need to feel part of a community of participants and feel that they have voice and influence in these programs. The general principle is that students should be included in matters that shape their lives. Programs focused on youth must take youth preferences seriously if they aim to enhance positive identities, build leadership and relationships, and enhance skills.

With these considerations in mind, policymakers, educators, and others concerned about their community's educational system have a responsibility to create programs that promote engagement and value the voices of young people. A group of researchers including our team assists afterschool mentoring programs for African-American and Latinx-American youth. We often see that students flourish when they are given a say in planning their own afterschool programs. For instance, at our sites, high school students act as mentors and lead group discussions with their middle school mentees. Empowering the high schoolers in way increased attendance and skills and strengthened the relationships between mentors and mentees.

After asking for more input from participants, we learned that many were interested in additional afterschool programs. Teens said they wanted to see gathering places like a community youth center where they could feel safe and participate in fun activities, and they offered specific ideas – such as “people doing poetry slams” and “anger management classes.” If America's young people are willing to provide such ideas, feedback, and guidance, then they should be directly engaged in afterschool planning. To move forward, cities and other communities should:

- **Include youth and their families in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the afterschool programs.** Separate youth and parent advisory boards should be organized to meet before, during, and after a program is launched.
- **Focus programs on possibilities rather than problems.** Program staff and others involved should engage youth first by listening, learning what they care about, and taking cues from the aspirational needs and desires they say an afterschool program might fill.
- **Use creative recruitment strategies.** Young people may not immediately see the value of joining an advisory board, even if they enjoy an afterschool program. Conveners must make it clear that students' ideas and input are important and will be taken seriously.
- **Involve parents with children in afterschool programs.** Make it easy for parents to attend meetings, offer many opportunities for feedback, and try to mitigate economic and social barriers to participation some parents may face.

In sum, afterschool programs can effectively engage as well as enhance the strengths of low-income youth of color. Helping develop programs teaches youths how to process information, contribute to their schools and communities and improve society as a whole

Read more in Maryse H. Richards, Katherine Tyson-McCrea, Catherine R. Dusing, Cara DiClemente, Kyle Deane, Dakari Quimby, "**Interim Report for the Evaluation of a Cross-Age Peer Mentoring Program for Youth in High Violence Chicago Communities,**" *Office of Justice Programs' National Criminal Justice Reference Service*, (2017).

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