

September 2021

Project LION - Learning In Our Neighborhood: A Community Partnership

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Recommended Citation

Beckers, G. G., & Knight, K. L. (2021). Project LION - Learning In Our Neighborhood: A Community Partnership. *National Youth Advocacy and Resilience Journal*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2021.050105>

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Project LION - Learning In Our Neighborhood: A Community Partnership

Abstract

Project LION (Learning In Our Neighborhood) was a community partnership between a local University, a Charitable Foundation, the City, and the Parish (County) School System that provided affordable after-school academic and enrichment activities for students who are at risk in grades 4 through 8. The multiple-year foundation grant provided program development and fee waivers that allowed a broad participation among low-income students with low educational attainment levels. The program goal was to improve middle school student outcomes by providing programming that focuses on school engagement, academic performance, and social-emotional skills while enhancing real-world opportunities for preservice teacher candidates to work with diverse populations, as well as build after-school program sustainability.

Keywords

After-School Program, Community Partnership

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Cover Page Footnote

Running Head: Community After-School Program Project LION – Learning In Our Neighborhood: A Community Partnership There are no known conflicts of interest. Financial disclosure: This program was partially funded through a Entergy Charitable Foundation Grant

Rationale

According to The Big Picture of “Out-of-School Time,” 80% of a student’s waking time is spent outside of school (Davis & Farbman, 2002). In 2014, the Afterschool Alliance reported only 15% (115, 540) of the state’s students participated in an after-school program and 19% (147,333) of the state’s students were without adult supervision between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m. Project L.I.O.N. (Learning in Our Neighborhood) is a community partnership that provides an affordable after-school program for high need, low income middle school students within their neighborhood to improve academic outcomes by providing programming that focuses on school engagement, academic performance, enrichment, social-emotional skills while enhancing opportunities of preservice teacher candidates to work with diverse populations of students.

After-school programs impact the workforce. 67% of parents who work full-time must arrange for their children’s care after school before they come home from work because only 64% of a full-time workers’ standard work schedule is covered by the hours children are typically in school, and 35% of the U.S. labor force are affected by parental concerns about after school time (Barnett et al, 2009; Gareis & Barnett, 2006). Working parents can be more successful and productive at work when they know their children are safe in the hours after school. 84% of parents said out of school time programs would allow them to stay focused on work during the hours that their kids are out of school (Indiana Afterschool Network, 2016). Working parents can also be present at work more often. Research shows that working parents miss an average of eight days per year due to a lack of affordable, high-quality after-school care (Barnett et al, 2009; Gareis & Barnett, 2006).

After-school programs impact student development. For starters, the academic achievement gap between low-income and high-income students was eliminated when after-school participation was high among low-income students (Pierce, Auger, & Vandell, 2013). This suggests that the participation of low-income students in after-school programs should reduce the number of these students that have to repeat a grade. Furthermore, evidence is mounting that where and how youth spend their time outside of normal school hours has important implications for their social-emotional development (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Carnegie Corporation, 1992; Larson & Verma, 1999; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002; Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001). It is estimated that more than 7 million children in the United States are without adult supervision for some period of time after school (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). This unsupervised time puts youth at risk for such negative outcomes as academic struggles, behavioral problems, drug use, and other types

of risky behaviors (Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001). Positive, structured opportunities help youth develop and apply new skills while they explore their personal talents (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Carnegie Corporation, 1992; Larson & Verma, 1999; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). Evidence shows a significant improvement in their feelings/attitudes, school performance, and indicators of behavioral adjustments when engaged in after-school programming (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

After-school programming can also impact child and community safety. Violent crimes against juvenile victims ages 6–14 are at their highest on weekdays are between 3 P.M. and 6 P.M (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Unsupervised youth that are not attending after-school programs are three times more likely to commit a crime, be a victim of a crime, use drugs or drop out of school (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2002; LaFrance & Twersky, 2001; Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001). Based on violent crimes reported to law enforcement, juveniles were 140% more likely to be victimized between 3 and 4 p.m. on school days than in the same time period on weekends and the summer months (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). This is reflective of the lack of supervision often present during this time on weekdays versus the presence of a supervisor on the weekend verses. Additionally, juveniles were over 90% more likely to be violently victimized in the 4 hours between 3 and 7 p.m. on school days than they were in the 4 hours between 8 p.m. and midnight (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The timing of these crimes - i.e. the after school “peak” hours where children often go unsupervised - suggests the importance of supervision after school.

Furthermore, after-school programs impact community expenditures. Every dollar invested in out-of-school time programs can save taxpayers approximately \$3, not including the savings from reduced crime (Brown et al., 2002). For starters, \$50-\$300 billion dollars are lost annually in healthcare and lost job productivity due to worker stress, which could be drastically reduced by increased access to affordable after-school programs (Barnett et al, 2009; Gareis & Barnett, 2006). Additionally, research shows that it costs about \$10,000/year for a student to repeat a grade; whereas, it only costs approximately \$1,500/year for a student to participate in after-school programming (Pierce et al., 2013; Indiana Afterschool Network, 2016). As previously mentioned, an increase in affordable after-school programs should reduce the number of low-income students that have to repeat a grade, which would save money. This is also the case when looking at the cost of juvenile crime. It costs \$87,235 to incarcerate one youth for one year (Indiana Afterschool Network, 2016). Clearly providing affordable after-school care can potentially save money.

Overall, more importance should be placed on after-school programs. Young people benefit when they spend time engaged in structured pursuits that offer opportunities for positive interactions, encourage them to take initiative by

contributing in any way they can, and contain engaging but challenging tasks (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Carnegie Corporation, 1992; Larson & Verma, 1999; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). However, there is a current lack of affordable, high-quality, well-managed programs that are offered consistently and persistently over time (Lauer et al., 2006; Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). Out of the after-school programs that do exist, even fewer programs use evidence-based skill training approaches that are consistently successful in producing multiple benefits for youth (Durlak & Weissberg). Pierce, Auger, & Vandell (2013) identified three key factors in high-quality after-school programs: 1) Quality interactions with adults and peers, and student's interest in activities; 2) Duration, sustained participation over time versus one-time activities or experiences; and 3) Intensity, one hour per week is not as good as two hours, and two hours is not as good as three hours. Students attending fifteen hours per week show more benefit.

Project L.I.O.N.: A Community Partnership Background

The lack of affordable after-school programming was a concern in the local community. In 2013, the recent data reported 31.5% of the city's citizens—more than twice the national average of 14.9%—lived in poverty, despite being the fastest growing city in the Parish and the fourth fastest growing city in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This astonishing poverty rate has remained fairly consistent throughout the years with the most recent report stating that 31% of the persons are in poverty (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2019). Many of these individuals could not afford after-school care offered nearby causing them to leave their children unattended for these hours. Among this population, underserved diverse populations made up the largest segments: 38.4% are African American; 30% are Asian; and 25.4% are Hispanic. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). There is currently a gap in achievement between children from low-income and/or culturally diverse families and their peers that is exacerbated by the academic drop phenomena (Hodges, McIntosh, & Gentry, 2017). This data and concern became a top priority of the Hammond Youth Alliance to develop an after-school program. The Hammond Youth Alliance members consisted of stakeholders within the community who had the ability to contribute within an area of expertise. It was their goal to reduce this exacerbation found in the local community by providing high-quality, culturally inclusive, community-based after-school programming for low-income families through the creation of Project L.I.O.N.

Project L.I.O.N.

Project L.I.O.N. served students between 1st and 8th grades. Middle-school students from low-income families with low educational attainment levels were targeted for the Project L.I.O.N. after-school program. Long-term goals of the after-school program to decrease both drop-out rates and juvenile related crimes. It was reported that 31% of students drop-out of the only public high school, and 23.5% did not earn a high school diploma or equivalent by the age of 25. Within the city, school attendance rates fell dramatically in grades 6-8. Suspension rates increased during high school, and of all the arrests made in 2013, 227 were juvenile related. Many students lacked positive role models and had scarce opportunities (State of Louisiana Office of Juvenile Justice, 2014; Louisiana Department of Education, 2014). Although the local schools were classified as Magnet, they were significantly underperforming based on state school performance measures, with half earning grades of D on the 2014-2015 School Report Cards (Louisiana Department of Education, 2014). These poor performance scores indicated a need for greater assistance based on proven after-school intervention models.

The primary purpose of Project L.I.O.N. was to facilitate a community-based after-school program to improve at-risk middle school students' outcomes by focusing on school engagement, academic performance, as well as social-emotional skills while enhancing real-world readiness for preservice teacher candidates attending a local university. The secondary purpose of Project L.I.O.N. was to help the local city build and sustain a community after-school program.

Project L.I.O.N. began during the spring semester of 2015, took place in a centralized City Community Center on Monday-Friday from 3:00-6:30 p.m and was funded through community partners. The base funding was through a Charitable Foundation Grant awarded to a local University's College of Education. The total 3-year funding was \$125,000. The majority of funds were used to pay scholarships for middle school level students. Priority was given to siblings of younger students enrolled in the after-school program. Nonconsumable items such as Kindle eReaders and athletic equipment were purchased, and funds were allocated for extracurricular field-trips and guest instructors to enhance program curriculum. The City covered the cost of the facility and facility related expenses, the salaries of the supervising certified teachers, and Community Center staff. The local school district provided funding for transportation of students from four Pre-K through 8th grade schools to the centralized location of the Community Center. Government assistance was obtained to provide snacks and main dinner meals. Preservice teacher candidates were coordinated through the College of Education Office of Field Experiences and gained real-world readiness experience working with culturally diverse students.

Project L.I.O.N participants arrived at the community center by district school bus around 3:30 pm and received a healthy snack. Instruction followed

which included both traditional academic activities such as homework completion and one-on-one tutoring based on individual needs. Participants spent a minimum of five hours per week devoted to self-exploration activities in areas such as the arts, athletics, and literacy. The self-exploration activities were developed to increase awareness of and interest in extracurricular activities available within the community. Preservice teacher candidates worked alongside certified teachers to obtain diverse, direct contact field experiences per semester. Guest instructors provided advanced opportunities in areas such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), music, art, and athletics. Field trips were scheduled several times a month to local areas of interest within the community. Dinner was provided to each participant at approximately 6:00 pm. At 6:30 pm participants were picked up by parents or guardians or they were provided transportation home via district school bus.

Program Outcomes

Over a three-year period, 147 at-risk middle school students, who come from underserved, low-income families participated in the program. Project L.I.O.N. funded the after-school program for 50 students by offering 50 full scholarships per year. In Year 1, only 47 scholarships were awarded; however, Year 2 and Year 3 saw full participation. Project L.I.O.N.'s success was measured by after-school program attendance, school attendance, grade point averages, and discipline referrals. Program attendance was taken daily by the community center staff. School attendance, grade point averages, and discipline reports were documented through the school systems database. Excessive absences or inconsistent attendance were documented, and parents and/or guardians were contacted. In severe cases, the school district truancy officer was contacted to ensure the student's safety and well-being.

The program's attendance was an average of 42% over the three-year period. The program attendance rate showed a consistent increase from Year 1 to Year 3. The school systems database showed overall increases in school attendance and grade point averages as well as an overall decrease in disciplinary referrals. In calculating academic impact, the grade point average (GPA) was evaluated on students who attended the after-school program 50% (69 days) or more. General statistical analysis on pre-program GPA average (2.58) and post-program GPA average (2.77) data was completed using a dependent t-test. There was a statistically significant increase in the GPAs of the students attending 50% of the year or more. This suggests that the students regularly attending after-school programming through Project L.I.O.N. improved their academic performance. The graduation rate of economically disadvantaged students attending the one centrally located public high school increased from 63.9% in the

2014-2015 academic year to 90% in 2018-2019 academic year (Louisiana Department of Education, 2014; Louisiana Department of Education, 2019). Although this cannot be directly correlated to Project L.I.O.N. it shows an overall improvement in graduation rates of the targeted program participants.

Additionally, classroom teacher and preservice teacher data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. Classroom teachers reported improved classroom behavior and performance of the students who are at risk that attended Project Lion's after-school program compared to their non-attending peers. An average of 44 preservice teacher candidates participated from the local University's College of Education earning an average of 244 hours of direct teaching experiences per academic year with diverse populations of students. Preservice teacher candidate hours, activities, and demographics of students served were documented through a required electronic portfolio system.

Community Impact

Project L.I.O.N.'s main goal was to improve middle school student outcomes by providing high-quality, affordable programming that focused school engagement, academic performance, and social-emotional skills. After much reflection on the program, there were areas that could be improved such as increased attendance since the outcomes show a positive trend in academics and behavior for the students who attended the program on a regular basis. More data could have been collected on student attitudes and parent satisfaction. This data could have been used to conclude if the project improved job productivity and child and community safety during the after school hours. However, the student outcomes documented thus far from Project L.I.O.N. suggests that Project L.I.O.N. was overall successful in improving middle school student outcomes and providing opportunities for preservice teacher candidates to gain diverse field experience. This data supports the research that after-school programs have a direct and positive impact on academic outcomes and social-emotional growth of students.

Additionally, Project L.I.O.N. strived to provide diverse field experience opportunities for preservice teacher candidates and build after-school program sustainability. The preservice teacher candidates that participated in the after-school program obtained valuable experiences working with diverse populations of students that will impact their future as an educator. They will be able to use their experiences and activities planned to guide them in teacher-student interactions. The project was successful at building after-school program sustainability. After Project L.I.O.N. funds were exhausted, the after-school program continued to provide high-quality, affordable after-school care to low-income students in grades PreK-8th until it was interrupted by a pandemic in

March of 2020. Currently, affordable virtual opportunities are being researched to be able to continue providing after-school program options. Furthermore, the success of Project L.I.O.N. has prompted other nearby communities to begin after-school programs (Ponchatoula Times, 2017). Project L.I.O.N. had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the community and surrounding areas therefore achieving the Project L.I.O.N. secondary goal. Through community partnerships Project L.I.O.N. achieved its goal of developing a successful, sustainable after-school program for middle school students who are at-risk as well as becoming a model for surrounding communities.

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