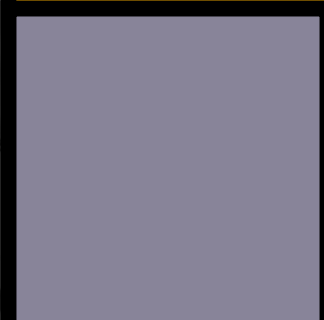


Quality Time After School

WHAT INSTRUCTORS CAN DO TO ENHANCE LEARNING

Jean Grossman
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

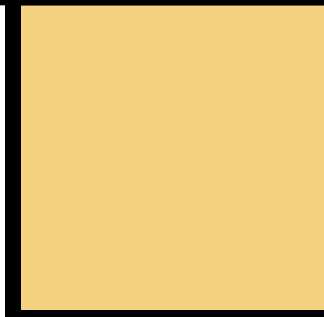
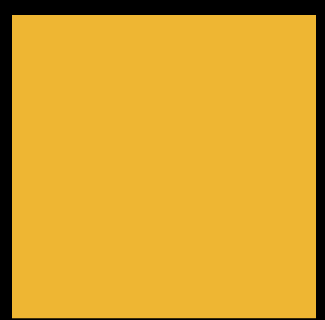


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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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Executive Summary



Amidst a national push to establish standards for quality after-school programs, the field is working harder than ever to articulate the ingredients of high-quality activities. This report aims to build on existing knowledge about what constitutes engaging after-school programs in which youth of all ages learn and grow. The study was designed to detail key activity characteristics linked to youth engagement and learning and to provide instructors with a road map for how to create engaging learning environments in after-school programs. Specifically, we examined three related questions:

- What conditions lead youth to want to attend the activity?
- What aspects of an after-school activity, such as the staff's behaviors and the activity's structure, lead youth to be highly engaged?
- What conditions lead youngsters to feel they have learned in an activity?

We addressed these issues by examining youth's experiences in five of Philadelphia's Beacon Centers. Beacon Centers are school-based community centers, providing a range of services to all community members and emphasizing after-school opportunities for youth. Every Beacon has two goals: First, they function as community resource centers for families and adults by offering services such as parenting groups, English as a Second Language classes and medical and mental-health referrals. Second, they seek to provide academic enrichment for youth, as well as leadership opportunities, recreational and cultural arts activities and employment training, with after-school activities serving as the cornerstone of this youth programming.

In 2002, the City of Philadelphia opened 10 Beacon Centers, and by 2004, 24 centers were strategically located in high-need neighborhoods. The centers are overseen by a managing agent, Philadelphia Safe and Sound, and every center is individually operated by a lead agency located in each neighborhood.

Research Methods

During school year 2004-05, P/PV collected three types of data at the five Beacons. We surveyed youth to collect rich data on the youngsters' perceptions of various activities—including, for example, how interested participants were in the activity, how engaged and challenged they felt, and how much they thought they learned—as well as information on the staff's interaction with the participants and their behavior in the activities. We surveyed staff to examine what types of staff, in terms of their past experiences, training and demographic profiles, are best able to execute various components of quality. Through activity observations, we also focused on adult/youth and peer relationships, instructional and presentation methods, behavior management, youth decision-making and youth input to further describe what occurred in each activity.

In total, we collected 402 youth surveys and 45 staff surveys, and we conducted 50 activity observations.¹ Additionally, to explore the issues of staff practices and activity quality more deeply, we conducted open-ended interviews with 16 instructors whom P/PV staff had identified as "strong" during our observations. Site staff also identified 22 teen participants for us to interview about what they thought made a strong instructor.

Because this study is not designed to measure program impacts, we did not directly measure how much the participants learned. Alternatively, we have concentrated on understanding what staff characteristics, instructional practices and activity components contribute to engaging educational activities from the youth's perspective.

Major Findings

Based on our quantitative analysis, the two most important things staff can do to increase engagement and learning are to effectively manage groups in ways that ensure youth feel respected by both the

adults and other youth, and to positively support the young people and their learning process. The better these tasks were done, the more deeply youth engaged and the more they felt they got out of activities.

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 that they learned more than youth in less well-managed activities.

Our observations of activities 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 were broken. Ultimately, good instructors provide just enough structure to help activities run well, and remain calm and consistent when presented with challenges.

Positive adult support is critical to enhancing youth learning and engagement. Youth who experienced positive adult support enjoyed their experience more, felt more engaged and perceived they learned more than those who experienced less adult support. Engagement and perceived learning for students of all age groups were similarly affected by adult support. However, students' desire to come to the activity and their level of enjoyment were affected differently by adult support, depending on the students' age. Among middle and high school youth, positive adult support increased their desire to attend an activity. This is an important result given that low after-school participation rates are a chronic problem among older youth. The level of enjoyment was most highly associated with adult support among middle school youth.

Our observations of the Philadelphia Beacons bore out the importance of both emotional and instructional support. Beacon instructors expressed emotional support for youngsters by forging trusting relationships somewhat similar to friendships or tutorships, learning about youth culture, allowing for informal socializing and taking the time to talk with individual youth when special needs arose. Effective instructional support occurred through careful one-on-one instruction; it 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.

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

The effects of cooperative peer learning did not differ by age. However, 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).

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 into pairs or small groups. Third, they placed youth in formal peer tutoring and mentoring relationships whereby youth with greater expertise were asked to guide more novice participants through a task.

The more input or voice participants felt they had in shaping an activity, the more engaged they felt and the more they liked the activity. However, in this study we did not find a correlation between participants' perceptions of having input and their perceived learning or their desire to attend an activity. Nonetheless, other studies have found that youth input appears to strengthen both engagement and enjoyment, which is important because these factors may lead to stronger participation and increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for youth (Weiss et al. 2005; Herrera and Arbretton 2003; Walker and Arbretton 2004). In our study of the Beacon centers, the positive association between youth's level of enjoyment and engagement and how much input they felt they had was similar across age groups.

Youth input in the form of “youth voice and choice” was most obvious in our observations of 18 activities specifically designed for high school students. Making youth-driven activities effective at the high school level requires considerable skill on the part of instructors. Our observations revealed a common threefold 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 project or solution. Third, instructors stepped back in to recognize progress and support next steps for carrying the project to completion.

About half of the interviewed staff said they encouraged youth input and made their session plans flexible enough for changes, while the other half did so only occasionally. In describing the challenges of integrating youth input, instructors noted that the time they had to teach a skill, both during the session and across the total number of sessions, limited their ability to incorporate input. Instructors who described feeling pressed to get through a certain

body of material suggested that they either did not recognize or ignored opportunities for input. Additional support around how best to integrate youth input may be useful to some instructors.

Conclusion

After-school and out-of-school-time programs are extremely diverse—not only in focus, location and the types of youth they serve, but also in terms of quality. Some are engaging learning environments that teach life and social skills, athletic skills and academic skills, while others remain little more than supervised care. While all program directors, families and funders aspire for programs to be the former, it has not always been clear what staff should do to improve program quality and create effective learning environments. This study and others are beginning to make headway in identifying the key features, such as good group management and positive adult support of learning. Now funders, parents and program operators must all step up to the plate. Program staff must focus intensively on adopting high-quality instructional methods. To this end, directors must dedicate more time to supervising and coaching their staff. Most importantly, the public and funders have to recognize that quality costs money. Programs can only improve if someone pays for the extra time that quality-enhancing measures entail.

Summary Endnote

- 1 For the youth, this was 90 percent of youth attending the identified activities at the time of the survey. For staff, the response rate was 60 percent.



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