

# Getting It Right



*Strategies for After-School Success*

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Rebecca Raley, Jean Grossman and  
Karen E. Walker

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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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Strategies for After-School Success

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# Introduction



When after-school programs began gaining popularity in the early 1990s, researchers, policymakers and funders had high and broad aspirations for these activities as a way to improve young people's academic performance, strengthen their social skills and keep them safe while reducing risk-taking behaviors and providing child care. Political pressure for these programs to produce academic outcomes became particularly acute in the late '90s, especially for school-based programs. Recent evaluations suggest that strong after-school programs might help participants academically, socially and behaviorally, but not all programs produce these benefits, and in those that do, the benefits are often modest (Dynarski et al. 2003; Dynarski et al. 2004; Grossman et al. 2002; Huang et al. 2000; TASC 2003; Walker and Arbreton 2004).

These findings have sparked a vigorous debate about the programs, their evaluations and the allocation of public funds (Granger and Kane 2004; Halpern 2004). In this environment, funders, policymakers and practitioners face critical questions about programs' goals and strategies.

To help policymakers and program directors run effective programs and avoid problems highlighted by evaluations, we have synthesized the last 10 years of findings from Public/Private Ventures' (P/PV) and other researchers' work on selected after-school programs. We focus on a demanding challenge—how to run effective programs that are funded to produce specific policy-relevant outcomes.

We acknowledge from the outset that many after-school programs, such as those provided by city recreation departments or Boys & Girls Clubs, are simply intended to provide engaging safe havens for a broad range of community youth. Although the programs may have elements that aim to improve young people's educational outcomes or keep high-risk youth off the streets, they exist largely because their founders believed that they would provide positive environments for young people. For such programs, the strategies we discuss here may prove neither appropriate nor needed. Our recommendations are best suited to programs that intend to produce measurable benefits in young people who are at risk of adverse outcomes. Often these programs are located in schools. School-based programs have been the fastest-growing area of the after-school field in recent years and the focus of some of the most visible evaluations.

## What Are the Right Goals?

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As the evaluations clearly show, programs that try to fulfill too many goals are likely to achieve none. Those who run programs need to answer two crucial questions. First, “what can and do we want to achieve?” In answering this question, programs need to consider what they can reasonably expect given the available resources—both human and financial. For many programs, this means making difficult but important choices. For example, while a program may want to both increase academic performance and promote civic engagement, it may have the resources to do only one of these well. Rather than trying to achieve both goals, it may be most effective to allocate limited resources to activities that promote decision-making skills through civic engagement and youth-advocacy projects. Similarly, if a small program has the resources to provide a safe haven, basic homework help and a few recreational activities, it should choose a specific, achievable goal, such as improving social skills and teaching conflict management, rather than claim to increase academic performance.

The second question programs need to ask is, “Are our strategies in line with our goals?” Too often program staff ask themselves the first question but neglect to think comprehensively about the second. Do the offered activities all intentionally work toward the goal? To achieve a goal, a program must serve the “right youth” with the “right stuff” for the “right period of time.”

## Who Are the Right Youth?

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Every program needs to attract ready recruits—youngsters who are eager to participate voluntarily or those with parents who actively support their involvement. These young people give programs a well-rounded culture, making all youth feel welcome. They also provide legitimacy to programs that might otherwise be viewed as selectively serving troubled youth. However, outcomes data suggest that even when the most easily recruited youth meet conventional standards of being high-need (that is, coming from low-income families), some may not benefit significantly from programs because they already receive support from parents or teachers and need little help in the areas programs address.

To achieve strong outcomes, targeting those who need a program’s specific supports is important. Whatever group is thus identified, programs need to practice creative, persistent and aggressive recruitment efforts that focus on word of mouth and include contact with parents and school staff, especially in the case of school-based programs.

## What Is the Right Stuff?

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Individual activities should operate according to a few basic principles: They must be interesting to participants and doable at participants' current level of skill or knowledge but intentionally and incrementally challenging to help them grow. Many programs achieve this mixture of fun and challenge by providing a range of activities, some focused on their goals and some more purely on youth's interests. For example, a program designed to strengthen young people's leadership skills might offer a youth-led community-service project alongside open-court basketball, dance or mural arts. Some youth may initially participate only in sports or arts (in which leadership opportunities are embedded) but later be encouraged to join the more formal leadership activity as their comfort level with peers and staff grows. Offering a variety of activity choices enables staff to broaden the experience of the youth by encouraging them to move beyond their comfort zones and explore new areas. Our research suggests participating in different types of activities is associated with positive outcomes—and helps guarantee that young people will remain in the program as their interests shift with time.

We also recommend that “lesson plans” or “curricula” have a strong theoretical base and that programs are developmentally appropriate for the young people being served. Given the variety of program goals and different developmental needs of youth as they age, this report does not examine specific activity content. However, the questions raised by the report and the general advice provided about how to focus on selected goals will help practitioners evaluate whether the content of their programs fills their needs.

## How Do Programs Keep Young People Long Enough?

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Evaluations suggest that the longer a young person participates in a variety of activities, the better the outcomes. The nature of this relationship is not well understood: Are the youth who are already on a positive trajectory likely to participate over time and in a variety of activities? Or does participation in a variety of activities contribute to young people's positive outcomes? Some evaluators look to goals theory, which suggests that time spent on a task is critical to mastery, signaling that the length and intensity of required participation depends on the program's objectives. Achieving significant academic progress, for example, takes longer and requires more intensive participation than does achieving significant improvement in social skills.

Well-organized activities staffed by attentive adults are essential to retaining youth. Establishing the right staff-to-youth ratios is a key part of this formula. Limiting the total number of participants to 20 per activity helps focus the adults' attention, but youngsters also benefit greatly from activities that offer closer contact with adults. Strong relationships with staff members and a range of engaging activities keep youngsters coming back month after month.

## What Are the Right Management Choices?

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Given limited funding and the importance of strong staffing, program administrators face difficult decisions. Which management strategies can promote a stable staffing structure? With staff having different levels of expertise and availability for meetings, which staff development practices are most effective at enhancing skill sets? When it comes to programming, what types of activities merit the most dollars? And which strategies help practitioners monitor and strengthen the quality of the activities?

Having permanent staff is the most critical factor for creating the program's culture and climate. But having a staff that shares a common vision and relates well to young people is also essential. Hiring, supervision, activity monitoring and careful allocation of available resources all contribute to strong programs.

## How Do the Factors Work Together?

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The “right” goals, the “right” young people, the “right” staff, the “right” period of time and the “right” management choices: All are intertwined. To attract the right young people, programs need enthusiastic participants to spread the word. To excite participants and keep them coming back, programs need a variety of well-organized activities. To offer well-organized activities, programs need a stable staffing structure that minimizes turnover, and this, in turn, allows children and youth to develop trusted adult relationships—another factor that motivates young people to come back month after month. When program components work, they build on one another to form a strong foundation. But a problem in one area can have a domino effect, hurting the program as a whole and weakening the benefits to children and youth.

In the next chapter, *Getting the Right Youth*, we address specific recruitment strategies to draw the targeted set of young people. The third chapter, *Keeping Youth Long Enough*, examines the qualities that make activities attractive and

that motivate participants to come several times a week and, perhaps more importantly, over an extended period of time. The fourth chapter, Developing Strong Management, looks at infrastructure, from the staffing structure to supervising the staff's performance. The final chapter answers a question that ties the previous chapters together: What are the fiscal realities and management priorities for after-school programs?

## Programs Profiled

This report draws on key research findings from several major evaluations and a demonstration project conducted by P/PV. Brief summaries of the four initiatives discussed most frequently are presented below.

**Philadelphia Beacon Initiative:** Launched in 2002, the Philadelphia Beacon Initiative consists of 23 school-based community centers. Modeled after a program in New York, each Beacon center is designed to serve as a safe haven for children and families and to offer academic support and opportunities for youth development. Activities range from arts and crafts, homework help and double Dutch classes for younger children to drill teams, youth counsels and college-readiness classes for older youth. Adult aerobics, GED classes, employment support and family events are designed to serve whole communities. P/PV's three-year evaluation of the first 10 Beacon centers to open in the city took an in-depth look at the practices that help create engaging activities for teens and enriching learning activities for youth of all ages.

**San Francisco Beacon Initiative:** Begun in 1996, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI) operates comprehensive after-school programs in six middle schools, one elementary school and one high school. Programs offer an array of activities in five core areas: education, arts and recreation, career development, leadership and health. P/PV's extensive evaluation of the initiative consisted of youth and staff surveys, interviews, focus groups, activity observations and MIS data analysis—all aimed at assessing whether the initiative was successful in meeting the goals set forth by its theory of change (which states, in essence, that if Beacon centers provide safe and welcoming settings with high-quality activities, young people will participate, have positive developmental experiences and ultimately benefit).

**Extended-Service Schools:** In 1997, the Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund launched the Extended-Service Schools Initiative (ESS), supporting the creation of 60 after-school programs in 20 communities across the country. Though sometimes modeled quite differently, each program sought to promote academic and non-academic development of young people during out-of-school time. P/PV's evaluation of this large-scale initiative was conducted in partnership with MDRC. Together, we assessed patterns of and motivations for youth attendance, characteristics of high-quality activities, benefits to participants, and program costs and finance strategies.

**YET Centers:** Philadelphia's 30-plus Youth Education for Tomorrow (YET) Centers are after-school and summer literacy programs operated by community- and faith-based organizations throughout the city. Each center serves 25 low-achieving young readers and is led by rigorously trained teachers, who follow a daily regimen of literacy activities that vary with age and reading level. Initially designed as a demonstration project, YET has had encouraging early results. Thanks to the generous support of the U.S. Department of Education, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The James Irvine Foundation and the City of Philadelphia, the model has now expanded to more than 425 after-school classrooms in 11 cities. P/PV continues work to measure YET's benefits to youth, document characteristics of high-quality centers, improve practice and expand program availability.



# Getting the Right Youth

After-school programs can achieve success only by attracting young people and keeping them interested. This may seem like a simple, perhaps even self-evident, statement. But things become more complicated when you consider the question that naturally follows: How do programs attract the youth who need them in sufficient numbers to be worthwhile?

## Year-Round Recruitment

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Whether programs are in their first year or their tenth, the task of recruitment is ongoing. Seasonal shifts in programming—and youth’s changing interests and annual grade promotions—mean that programs continually seek to reengage old participants and attract new ones.

Recruitment is usually at its peak in the fall, but efforts to fill a smattering of slots can be necessary year-round. When youth are fortunate enough to have a choice of several after-school programs in one neighborhood, those programs may end up competing for their participation. On the other hand, the still-limited availability of affordable, engaging summer activities for most working families means that demand for services often increases in the summer months. Programs may undertake major recruitment campaigns in the spring—for both staff and youth; the early planning allows them to accommodate a wider community of youth than they serve during the school year. Whether grappling with over- or undersubscription, establishing effective recruitment strategies is key.

## To Target or Not?

The young people most likely to come through the door first and stay the longest are those with a personal motivation to join or those receiving regular encouragement from a parent or teacher. Although these youth might need the program the least because they already receive outside support, research shows that the presence of such youth is vital to attracting and keeping needier youngsters. Otherwise, a program serving only the most vulnerable youth can carry a stigma that brands participants as “problems,” subjecting them to ridicule from classmates and deterring attendance.

This dilemma can be overcome by blending general strategies that welcome all youth with targeted strategies that attract more vulnerable participants. However, identifying a target population with the catchall moniker of “high risk” or “at risk” is ineffective. For example, most low-income children are not high risk because

many benefit from valuable familial, community and educational resources. By answering the question “At risk of what?” (e.g., academic failure or delinquency), programs can begin to craft effective strategies. Below, we suggest an array of strategies for both general and targeted recruitment.

## General Recruitment Strategies

Time and time again, staff members at successful programs identify “word of mouth” as their best recruitment strategy, highlighting the importance of tapping personal networks for outreach efforts. Keeping parents, teachers and youth informed about the program builds interest. However, a note of caution is in order. If programs are not yet attracting their desired youth population—whether that is a mix of targeted and nontargeted youth or just targeted youth—word of mouth will likely be ineffective because existing participants simply attract peers similar to themselves.

Programs seeking to attract youth similar to those already enrolled can build on word of mouth by:

- **Actively Informing Parents**

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Parents often play an important role in getting their children into after-school programs, even with teen participants. Standard approaches to informing parents include placing advertisements in newspapers, posting ads at nearby churches and community centers, sending fliers home with youngsters and hosting kickoff events or community fairs that attract both youth and adults. The director of a Philadelphia YET center posted fliers at local doctors’ offices and beauty salons. Such mass advertising efforts can effectively broadcast program offerings. However, program directors continually tout word-of-mouth outreach as the most effective way to hook parents—phone calls and in-person meetings make the difference.

- **Targeting School Staff**

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With the No Child Left Behind Act pushing schools across the country to improve student performance, the number of academic remediation programs has multiplied, and many urban school districts now host their own extended-day programs. This highly competitive environment for recruitment demands that programs treat school staff members as allies. While outreach often begins with a school superintendent, principals hold great influence. Selling principals on a program’s outcomes and offerings is vital,

as is connecting with school staff who work most closely with youth, particularly underperforming youth. Specifically asking school staff to identify and refer youth to the program is critical, and there are numerous ways to encourage referrals. Directors in the Philadelphia Beacon program made announcements at school staff meetings, left monthly newsletters in teachers' mailboxes and met individually with teachers and school counselors to tell them about program offerings. Some also hosted teacher breakfasts. Monthly meetings with principals or school liaisons can generate ideas about recruitment and keep principals abreast of programming.

- **Going Directly to Youth**

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Getting permission for after-school staff to visit classrooms and maintain a presence in the school during the day allows staff members to extend personal invitations to youth. Some after-school programs also leverage “peer-to-peer” marketing, offering incentives for youngsters to bring their friends. For example, a Philadelphia YET center hosted a one-week special when all youth who brought a friend to the program received \$5 and then earned another \$5 if the friend participated regularly.

## Targeting Older Youth

Teens' increasing set of responsibilities and interests, along with a growing freedom to choose how they spend their time, make them savvy consumers of youth programming. If teens deem a program uninteresting, they simply will not participate. Programs successful with teen recruitment practice two key strategies:

- **Matching Activities with Interests**

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As a general rule, teens—much like adults—focus on the bottom line: What will I get out of the activity? As teens begin thinking about jobs and higher education, they are drawn to programs that offer paths to employment—exposure to career options, paid work and academic credit—and preparation for college exams. Having the flexibility to build activities based on teen input (within a framework anchored by funder requirements) is optimal.

- **Offering Less-Structured Activities**

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With older youth, drop-in activities can serve as an entry to more structured activities. The George Washington High School Beacon Center in Philadelphia offered a lunchtime drop-in program that allowed teens to spend time on the

## **Soliciting Youth Input**

Whether adopting an academic, recreational or cultural-enrichment focus, programs must be designed to fit youth's interests and needs. Too often, funding requirements or the skills and interests of available instructors derail this simple goal. Informal discussions with young people, surveys and focus groups are all effective ways to learn what youth like and to shape what is done before activity sessions start, during activities and even after they are completed. Parents, teachers and community members may also have suggestions about the types of activities that will benefit their community.

Beacon's computers, play games and socialize. Staff connected with youth informally during the drop-in and encouraged them to join other Beacon activities. Youth-directed, youth-designed events such as dances and fashion shows can also attract new teens while presenting valuable leadership opportunities for the young people coordinating them.

## **Targeting Higher-Risk Youth**

Activities targeting youth who perform poorly academically or behaviorally can lead to the largest effects. Staff members who want to attract this challenging population need to frame recruitment strategies positively and pursue them aggressively.

- **Recruiting Academically At-Risk Youth**

Youth who perform poorly in school often resent the idea of spending extra time in reading and math activities after school. Even when schools or parents require youngsters to attend, getting them in the door and keeping them there present challenges.

In marketing programs to underperforming youth, staff members need to offer straightforward information about the overall goals of a program while framing the activity as a fun opportunity for academic enrichment, not remedial education.<sup>1</sup> For younger youth, advertising the fun side of programs is particularly important—programs might emphasize special trips, events or celebrations. For older youth, practical incentives such as academic credit, makeup credit for failed classes and GED support can often sell themselves.

Remaining sensitive to the potential stigma of a remedial program is critical. The director of a YET program for teens explained her approach: “When you’re working with something as sensitive as low reading levels with high school

students, you have to let them know they can trust you with something that could be so embarrassing for them.” For this reason, she built relationships with teens and attracted them to her program by talking with them as they walked home from school, rather than in a more formal setting. She also carefully selected sophisticated reading materials, such as teen novels, political cartoons and articles from *The New York Times* and fashion magazines. In outreach and in content, academic programs should meet youth at their level.

- **Recruiting Behaviorally High-Risk Youth**

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Programs are often ambivalent about bringing in behaviorally high-risk youth. On one hand, staff may wish their programs could help these young people; on the other hand, higher-risk youth are behaviorally more difficult to handle and can negatively affect the experiences of fellow participants.

Even when programs make honest commitments to include them, behaviorally high-risk youth are not easily attracted to after-school programs. First, these teens listen to and trust adults less than others because they often have experienced more unstable adult relationships. Thus, they respond poorly to initial staff recruitment efforts. Second, many high-risk youth feel that traditional programs offer nothing of interest to them and often lack parental encouragement to give activities a try. This makes them less likely to test out new activities in the first place. In P/PV’s examination of community-based organizations serving juvenile offenders, we learned much about effective recruitment efforts. While some strategies focus on serving only juvenile offenders, others can work for programs serving mixed populations:

*Making Outreach Efforts Aggressive.*

Even when judges order juveniles to attend a program, getting them in the door requires persistence. Staff at Roca, a community-building organization outside Boston, maintained a presence on the street and showed up at youth hangouts repeatedly, even when unwanted. They understood that convincing tough youth that programs want them and offer worthwhile activities takes time and trust. Roca staff saw street outreach as an essential part of their services and programming. They also realized that outreach strengthened retention efforts because staff members knew exactly where to find participants who dropped out for a few days.

Aggressive outreach also means getting to adjudicated youth early, ideally before they leave the system. When young people experience supportive

## Easing Enrollment Challenges

Staff at the Philadelphia Beacon Centers, largely funded through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), faced significant challenges getting parents to complete extensive enrollment paperwork required by the federal government. In response, they developed several strategies:

- Beacons held enrollment parties and dinners for parents during the evening so they could complete the paperwork with staff assistance.
- Beacons designated individual staff members to be responsible for enrollment—a job that required vigilant follow-up with parents, usually by phone.
- Beacons offered gift certificates to parents who completed paperwork on time.
- One Beacon director began making one-on-one appointments with parents to help them fill out the enrollment paperwork. She found that while parents often missed group enrollment sessions, they rarely missed individual meetings.
- One Beacon Center simplified enrollment paperwork by developing a general enrollment form for parents to complete. The staff then transferred relevant information onto the more complicated TANF form.

These creative, diligent efforts improved participation rates.

relationships during incarceration—undoubtedly a difficult time in their lives—trust in program staff deepens. Youth should always be given an easy way to reach staff after they are released from incarceration so they can have continued support during the transition.

Targeted referral systems offer another key component of aggressive outreach. P/PV's study of the Boys & Girls Clubs' Gang Prevention Program revealed that relatives referred a third of the youngsters to programs and school staff members another 18 percent (Arbreton and McClanahan 2002). In these ways, efforts to communicate program offerings to adults in the community can bolster participation rates. Maintaining relationships with the police, courts and probation officers also is essential for referrals.

### *Minimizing Requirements.*

Many programs require a parent or guardian to provide personal information to demonstrate a young person's eligibility. If a parent neglects to finish the paperwork, the program is forced to exclude the youth or to offer the services without reimbursement from the state or federal government. To ease the paperwork burden on parents, programs have begun developing a

myriad of practices to assist them with enrollment (see “Easing Enrollment Challenges” on page 15). Minimizing and helping with paperwork stands to maximize participation for youth who may benefit most. Since the cumbersome paperwork often results from state and federal requirements, this recommendation merits the greatest attention at the government level.

### *Changing Attitudes.*

Institutional attitudes about “problem” youth represent another barrier. For example, if principals and teachers view participation in an after-school program as a privilege, they may fail to refer certain youngsters and might even ban them from the program. As one principal explained:

*I don't send them (the kids who cause trouble) because I don't want to do that to them (program staff)... I'll refer the child who's a good attender but falling short of benchmarks and needs more focused instruction—it's a child who would benefit from a smaller environment. (But) I'm reluctant to recommend the kid who's a terror the whole year. I don't want to give up the space for those kids. The teachers support this.*

Staff at another after-school program reported that their school's detention policies limited the participation of youth who are often in trouble. To avoid similar problems, after-school staff should work closely with schools to communicate the program's outreach goals and develop plans for improving youth behavior. If principals seek academic and behavioral outcomes as well, knowing that the neediest youth reap the largest gains may persuade them to make programs more inclusive.

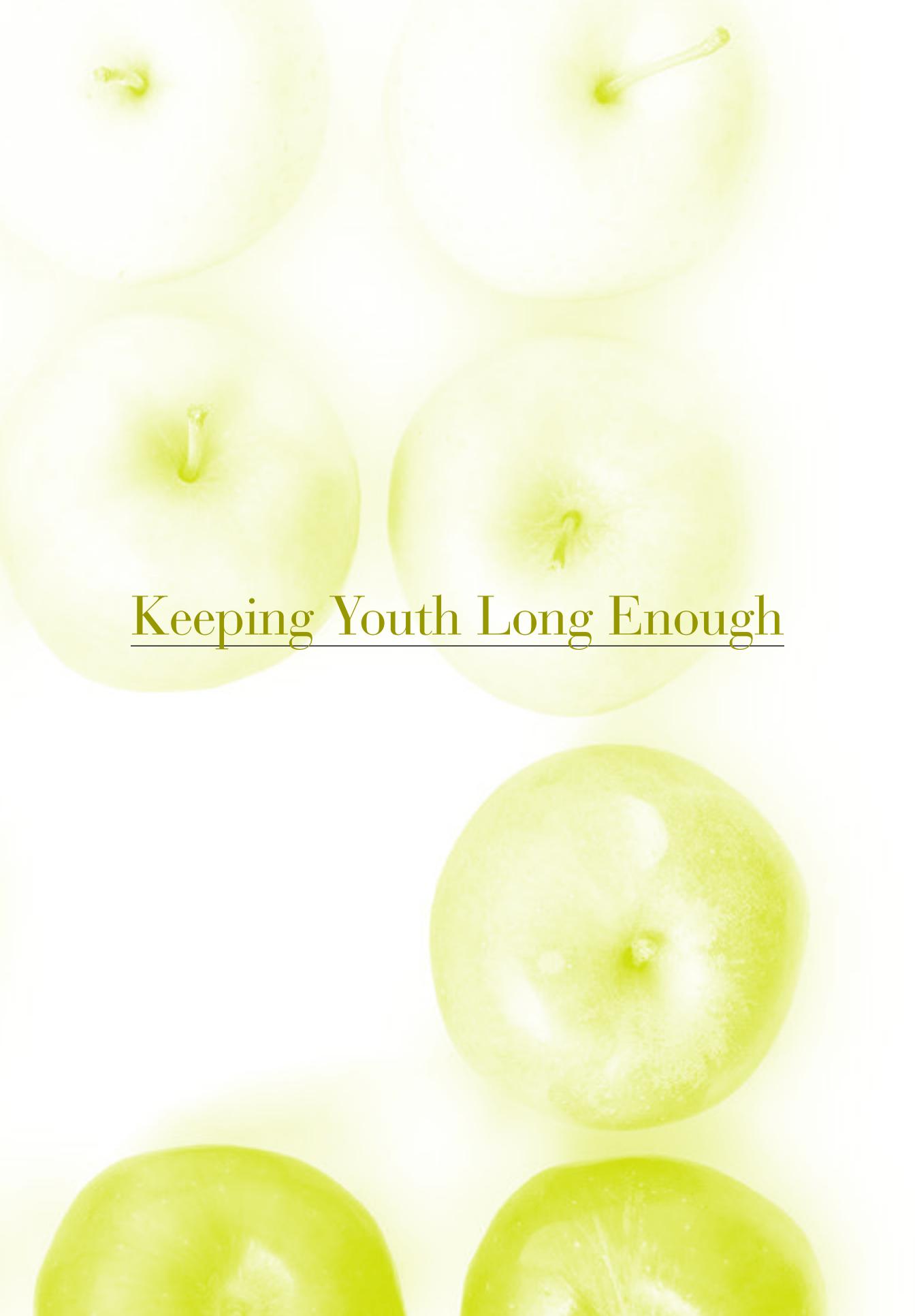
## Facing Oversubscription Problems

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Staff members abhor the idea of turning away any youth, but as programs reach capacity, the question of whether to concentrate on the highest-risk youth becomes more pressing. A program that makes little effort to seek out the neediest youth—sometimes because staff members consider all young people in the school needy—means underserving those who stand to benefit the most.

In response to this problem, many programs have developed a mixture of targeted and inclusive enrollment strategies. One program in Minnesota accepted most youth on a first-come, first-served basis but reserved four to five slots in each activity for youth referred on a need basis. Another program, overwhelmed by applicants, held open enrollment for a week, then placed all the names in a lottery and randomly selected youngsters. The week-long lottery gave youth who enrolled an equal chance of getting into the program and into an activity of their choice. To increase the number of enrollment slots, the program arranged its schedule to offer a wide variety of activities on just one or two days a week.





Keeping Youth Long Enough

After-school programs can achieve their goals only if they can convince youth to stay long enough to benefit from their services. This raises two questions: First, what's long enough? Second, what strategies increase the likelihood of retention?

The answer to the first question varies depending on program goals. In a typical after-school program, participation at least two days a week over 12 to 18 months appears to be sufficient to achieve positive behavioral outcomes and improve young people's attitudes about school (Grossman et al. 2002). But research suggests that far more intensive participation may be necessary for sustained academic gains. An evaluation of the LA's BEST initiative linked long-term involvement (at least four years) at an 85 percent participation level to test-score improvement (Huang et al. 2000). Clearly, programs must fit attendance goals to desired outcomes.

The second question, how to retain youth, has several more concrete answers, which are the focus of this chapter.

## Pros and Cons of Mandatory Attendance

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One solution to the participation problem is to make attendance mandatory, which several programs—especially those serving younger children—have found successful. For example, youth enrolled in The After-School Corporation (TASC) programs in New York City on a voluntary basis, but once there they were required to attend. Evaluators recorded high attendance rates, with an average of 78 percent of elementary-school children attending three or more times per week. P/PV saw similar rates in programs or activities requiring participation in the Extended Service Schools and the San Francisco Beacon initiatives. The mandatory approach appeals to directors because it prevents poor attenders from taking up slots that could be filled by youngsters ready to make the best of their participation. For programs that are funded on a per-youth, per-day basis, mandating attendance has financial as well as (potential) outcomes benefits.

Yet the mandatory approach is controversial because it risks creaming off the most committed youth while leaving behind the most vulnerable. For programs designed to serve a broader cross-section of youth, including higher-need youth, presenting participants with ongoing invitations to be involved and consistently following up with poor attenders proves as essential as ensuring high-quality programming.

## Providing Valued Services

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Young people go to programs that have opportunities they value and that meet their needs. Such programs share several features: They enable youth to form relationships with adults; they facilitate a cooperative peer environment; they offer a range of activities; and they provide youth with an orderly, safe environment.

### **Urban Artworks: Peer Cooperation**

At Urban Artworks, a community service project for high school youth in San Francisco, young people identified a local problem and devised ways to address it through art. For example, one project involved designing and creating a mural that the youth arranged to install at a mass-transit station. Although primarily engaged in artistic activities, the youngsters also conducted community surveys and identified social problems facing their communities (among them, graffiti). Youth reported high levels of adult and peer support throughout the activity.

#### **What the instructors did to foster peer cooperation:**

- *A mix of individual and group work.* Young people worked individually and together in small groups.
- *Shared problem solving.* Program staff engaged young people in problem solving.
- *Modeling behavior.* Staff members worked alongside the young people and showed obvious respect for them by, for example, not interrupting them.

## Forging Adult/Youth Relationships

Strong, trusting relationships with staff members motivate youth to stay in the program long enough to learn and develop. In the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, young people who found support from staff members were more likely to attend the center for at least one year than young people who failed to form bonds with adults. There are several ways to programmatically foster adult-youth relationships:

- **Have a Consistent Staff**

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To forge relationships, youth need enough time with an adult to get to know that person. Full-time staff and regularly contracted providers are most likely to provide that kind of consistency. Parents and teachers are also more likely to encourage youth to attend stable programs rather than unstable ones.

- **Provide Space for Informal Interaction**

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Offering a dedicated, welcoming space where adults and young people can gather informally encourages strong relationships. School-based programs find this particularly challenging because many schools have no space to spare, and many programs end up using classrooms temporarily. To address this challenge, several Philadelphia Beacon centers allowed their dedicated office space to double as a hangout area for teens. At one middle school, staff members created a rolling cart of snacks, games and electronics to move from room to room.

- **Encourage All Staff to Be Available**

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Office staff, security guards and other adults associated with the program can all build meaningful relationships that make youth feel welcomed and accepted. It is important to ensure that everyone on staff feels comfortable talking with youth and are purposeful in encouraging and allowing time for informal adult-youth conversations. All too often activity providers are exclusively focused on delivering the curricular content, especially when they are pressed for time. But the relationships that are formed between staff and youth are critical to retaining the youth.

## **Fostering a Positive Peer Environment**

Staff members often overlook opportunities to foster group learning and peer cooperation, but both contribute to youth's positive experiences in activities. In the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, young people reported more positive adult support in activities that encouraged peer cooperation, compared with activities that did not.

However, not every activity needs to include cooperative behavior among peers. When young people are first learning a new skill, such as reading, karate or visual-art techniques, they need to learn from knowledgeable instructors. But to practice their skills, cooperative activities (such as working in small groups) give young people important opportunities to interact positively with peers. For example, in a media-arts class at a Philadelphia Beacon Center the instructor asked a youth who had expertly completed his media slide presentation to help a struggling, special-needs youngster complete his work. The arrangement challenged the fairly skilled teen to master his peer teaching skills and made an otherwise overly challenging exercise possible for the slower teen.

Competing interests must be balanced when designing activities. On one hand, young people are attracted to the larger, relatively less supervised groups that enable them to socialize and work together. Research also suggests that intentional, youth-led activities afford youth a greater sense of ownership and empowerment and can heighten the development of leadership and planning skills (Larson et al. 2005). On the other hand, smaller group activities with more adults offer youth the individual adult support that helps them stay engaged and get the most out of an activity. To attract and keep youth while offering them maximum benefits, programs need to provide a mix.

### **Loco Bloco: A Model Activity**

Loco Bloco was a drum and dance ensemble that exposed participants at one San Francisco Beacon Center to African-Brazilian and Cuban dances and rhythms. The youth, primarily from middle and high schools, practiced for three hours at a time. The content of the activity was very interesting to young people, and independent observers and participants both rated it highly. The drummers and dancers practiced somewhat independently of one another but still joined together for performances.

#### **What the instructors did to teach skills and manage youth behavior:**

- *One-on-one instruction.* The staff provided individual instruction to the dancers, which helped ensure that all youth learned the steps.
- *Circulation:* Both the drum and dance instructors circulated among youth, encouraging and helping them.
- *Enthusiasm.* The staff expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for the activity.
- *Manageable segments.* The staff broke the choreographed practice into smaller segments that permitted the dancers to learn one set of steps before moving on to another.
- *Individual engagement efforts.* The young people were very engaged in the activity, but even the most engaged youth lost attention occasionally. When individual young people appeared to be disengaged for more than a short period of time, staff called them to return to the group.

Young people attend after-school activities because their friends do, meaning an increase of just one youth may translate into an increase of two or more as the word spreads. But observation of activities in the San Francisco Beacon evaluation showed that as the number of youngsters increased in an activity, the adults' responsiveness and the quality of adult management dropped (Walker and Arbretton 2004).

Young people also reported a decrease in quality peer relationships. Limiting groups to 20 participants, regardless of the number of adults involved, strikes a good balance.

As mentioned above, research literature places a high premium on the formation of adult-youth relationships, which suggests that having activities with small numbers of enrolled youth and many staff available to focus on them would be a good thing. But again, a delicate balance exists. The San Francisco Beacon Initiative showed that intimate activity settings made young people feel more supported both by adults and peers, as we expected. Unexpectedly, however, attendance was better in larger activity settings that had fewer staff because youth preferred activities where they had more opportunities to socialize with friends. The findings indicate that programs should blend large activity settings with smaller ones, and the ratio of staff to youth should not rise above one adult to five youth.<sup>2</sup>

### Offering a Range of Activities

Research suggests two seemingly contradictory findings: that youth benefit from participating in a diverse mix of activities (Chaput 2004) and that to produce outcomes, programs need to focus intentionally on their main goals. In practice, how do programs accomplish both tasks? The clearest, earliest answers stem from programs focused on academic outcomes.

Academic programs are most successful when they meld recreational and academic activities. One strategy is to infuse academic activities with opportunities for recreation. This idea, to make learning fun, is especially important for after-school academics because youth often expect out-of-school time to be different from the school day. Philadelphia's YET Centers offered an intensive reading curriculum that allowed for creative theme development around daily readings. For example, one YET Center created Tongue Twister Tuesdays and Wacky Wednesdays as a way to link fun activities to children's books. When participants read the book *Ira Sleeps Over*, instructors let them wear pajamas during class and served hot cocoa and cookies for snacks. When the children read *Caps for Sale*, they brought in silly hats. A social snack time and prizes for attaining reading goals added to YET's positive, recreational appeal.

On the other hand, recreational activities can be creatively enriched with intentional opportunities for learning. Examples include a baking activity infused with mathematics, an entrepreneurship club designed to teach business-management skills and a travel-writing club. For activities with the goal of improving academic achievement, however, there are few successful models of this strategy in the field—curriculum development is needed.

The third and most common strategy is to offer academic and recreational activities alongside each other. After-school programs often dedicate the first activity hour to academics and allot the remaining time for a creative mix of electives. Soliciting youth input to identify which electives will appeal most is crucial. High-end activities such as karate and swimming—which allow youth to develop skills on many levels—may offer a powerful draw to young people.

Offering a range of activities also allows programs to keep youth engaged as their interests change over time. Younger children may be more interested in activities that offer predictable routines, while older youth value activities that allow them to structure their own time and tasks. A range increases the odds that young people, regardless of their age, will find activities that interest them.

### Providing an Orderly, Safe Environment

In our research, youth attend well-managed activities more often than poorly managed ones (Walker and Arbretton 2004). If activity leaders fail to present material clearly, don't organize daily sessions well and fall short in managing the behavior of the young people in the activity, participants vote with their feet and stop coming to the program.

At the Philadelphia Beacons, good activity management meant having a well-organized plan for each individual session. Instructors arrived prepared to lead youth through varied activities that allowed participants to build on projects or skills they had already begun developing, plus gave youth opportunities to advance or try new things. Good instructors effectively broke sessions down into age-appropriate chunks of material so youth stayed engaged, and they remained responsive to youth's perceived needs, abilities and interests. When youth became bored or distracted, instructors were flexible and creative enough to shift gears and reengage them.

Effective behavior management ensures a positive, safe environment for all youth. Instructors can establish simple ground rules at the start of activities to set a tone for mutual respect. The way instructors treat youth is also critical. In P/PV's observations of Philadelphia Beacon activities, instructors' respectful treatment of youth typically led to youth modeling this behavior by treating each other respectfully. For the behavior challenges that inevitably arise despite best prevention efforts, having center-wide rules with consequences helps ensure consistency across instructors and promotes a sense of fairness among participants. Good instructors can then deal with behavior challenges quickly and move on, instead of harboring grudges. This approach permits even more difficult youth to have multiple fresh starts.





# Developing Strong Management

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A strong staff and monitoring structure serve as the backbone to all successful programs. Without them, programs often collapse, unable to support all the other facets that attract youth and make them want to return month after month. A strong staff structure requires careful hiring, evaluations and ongoing staff development; a monitoring system allows directors to determine whether activities meet the program's goals.

## Developing a Strong, Stable Staffing Structure

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After-school programs face two major staffing challenges: continual turnover and poor professional development and training opportunities. After two decades of fairly rapid growth in after-school programming, the shortcomings continue to jeopardize the overall quality of programs.

Studies of after-school programs identify turnover, especially among part-time staff members, as one of the most pervasive challenges for all organizations serving young people (Spielberger 2001; Watson and Jaffe 1990). Limited funding for salaries represents the biggest culprit, resulting in low wages and reliance on part-time and temporary positions. Staff eventually find full-time, higher-paying jobs, leaving the youth disappointed and burdening the remaining staff members with heavy workloads that foster burnout.

Several strategies beyond the obvious—paying higher salaries—have been successful in retaining staff. They are outlined here.

### Hiring the Right Staff

Hiring is a perennial process, even for top after-school programs. Turnover happens—at a faster or slower pace—in all programs. But programs that invest carefully in recruiting and screening new job candidates stand a better chance of retaining staff members. Staff who have passion, respect and concrete skills for working with young people are the strongest fit for after-school programs. Young people are most likely to connect with these staff members, and the staff members are more likely to find the work rewarding enough to stay. Philadelphia Beacon directors reported recruiting some of their most reliable staff through personal networks. A team approach to interviewing and screening new job candidates may also promote stability because the candidates recommended for hire will more likely fit in with the team. Program staff in another initiative found that hiring

qualified community residents increased stability because of their connections to the youngsters, but focusing on local residents could require additional time and money for training staff members unfamiliar with after-school activities.

### Aligning Staff Skills with Tasks

Effective staff management begins with written job descriptions to help ensure an equitable division of labor and to minimize the inefficiency and resentment that arise from gaps and overlaps. Where possible, good management also means aligning staff members' interests and skills with new tasks. Less-experienced staff may welcome new responsibilities that enhance their skill sets: managing an enrollment database, crafting effective outreach strategies and designing new youth activities are all marketable skills. While career ladders within most after-school programs are limited, directors should determine whether staff vacancies present opportunities for internal promotions. And knowing when to terminate staff members who fail to perform is just as important as efforts to retain top staff. By allowing some work to go undone or be done poorly, weak employees jeopardize overall staff stability.

### Making Training Substantive and Accessible

Staff skills can be expanded either through training or individualized feedback. While state licensing requirements often mandate training in CPR, first aid and child-abuse prevention, research has found that training in child development, curriculum planning and group management are most valuable for enhancing the daily work of instructors. Program directors tend to want training in fundraising, staff management and partnership development.

Even when substantive training is available, two challenges remain: paying for the training and scheduling convenient times for sessions. To reduce costs, some directors look to larger organizations such as schools and partnering agencies to include program staff in training sessions. To address scheduling challenges, some programs set aside staff in-service days. For larger initiatives, coordinating training opportunities citywide can be beneficial. For example, the Philadelphia Beacon managing agency hired a consultant to identify a wide variety of low-cost training sessions offered through the United Way and other local organizations. The consultant created a calendar of the opportunities, and Beacon staff members were free to select trainings that fit their interests, needs and schedules.

Because outside activity providers often work only a few hours a week, incorporating them into trainings and staff meetings is important but challenging. Some directors resort to meeting with providers one-on-one; others reserve days at the start and end of activity sessions for group trainings and meetings.

### Day-to-Day Staff Development

Program directors increasingly integrate staff development as a part of day-to-day practice. Whether described as a formal mentorship, informal coaching or modeling approach, top staff can impart the intangibles of youth work in ways that might only be superficially covered in trainings. Novice staff members may be invited to observe high-quality staff in action and work collaboratively with their more senior colleagues to design activities.

A less common but equally worthy practice is the creation of intentional learning communities whereby all staff, including directors, are called upon to craft monthly learning goals—identifying the best practices they intend to master and integrate into their work over the coming weeks. Staff meetings can serve as a time to share personal learning goals, assess progress and even engage in role-play techniques.

Staff evaluations are another format for encouraging staff to reflect on personal progress and areas for improvement. Most programs that incorporate evaluations opt for an informal process, and some are designed as a two-way discourse—allowing staff members to offer suggestions for program improvements. More formal performance reviews combine written job descriptions with established expectations for performance. The strongest and most accepted systems engage staff members in their development and execution.

When done well, staff mentorships, individualized supervision and personnel evaluations help build a strong and effective team by acknowledging good work, supporting professional growth and addressing weaknesses.

## Monitoring Activity Quality

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Systems to monitor activity quality are among the most worthwhile but underused management strategies in after-school programming. When effective supervising improves activity quality, it also stands to increase participation, outcomes and funding. But the daily frenzy of putting after-school activities in place and supporting them through the year often shuffles activity assessment toward the bottom of directors' to-do lists.

Supervising methods include checking in with parents and youth about their satisfaction with the program, either one-on-one or through focus groups, or observing activity sessions. More detailed methods include satisfaction surveys and sophisticated data systems for tracking participation rates and in-program outcomes, such as markers of material learned (for example, the color of one's karate belt). The detailed strategies have a distinct advantage—if documented outcomes are strong, they can be used to attract funds and in-kind resources. Most importantly, however, all methods need consistent follow-up to address the weaknesses uncovered by monitoring.

Larger organizations periodically find it helpful to hire outside consultants to conduct assessments. An impartial outsider can neutralize a sensitive process and ensure consistency for initiatives that operate several programs.

Typically, directors decide which system to use based on the programs' level of development, staff capacity and funding requirements. New, small programs rarely have the staffing and technological resources to maintain a sophisticated monitoring process and database.



# Pulling It All Together: The Budget Challenge

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Most of the recommendations made in this report have budget implications. With limited funding available, administrators face difficult decisions about how to stretch existing dollars to enhance services. All after-school programs must cover several major expenses: maintaining a program space; hiring and supporting staff; buying and developing activity resources; covering standard administrative expenses such as phones and copying machines; and, for most programs, providing snacks. The answer a program operator gives to the question “What expenses are the most crucial?” is where the rubber hits the road.<sup>3</sup>

## What Is The Cost of an After-School Program?

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Not counting the cost of space, the cost of a typical after-school program usually ranges from \$10 to \$32 per youth per day.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a program operating the average number of days (136), serving the average number of youth per day (63), can expect to spend anywhere from \$86,000 to \$300,000 per school-year program. Depending on the generosity of the locality and the skill of the executive director, some of these costs can be “funded” (that is, paid for) by other entities, such as a local youth organization or the school system. Our research suggests that programs typically cover between 50 and 100 percent of services out of their own budgets, thus leaving, in many cases, a hefty remaining balance that is covered by in-kind donations.

This wide range of costs is driven by what programs provide, either by choice or necessity. For example, in one community where youth needed busing, transportation added \$34,000 a year to the budget. Other programs chose to offer a richer or more expensive set of activities. A city’s salary level also affects cost. Thus, there is no “right” cost for an after-school program.

Table 1 shows how costs typically break down for after-school programs. Not surprisingly, core staff and youth activities make up the bulk of the budget, averaging \$8 per day per youth and \$7 per day per youth, respectively.

When using this information to estimate reasonable program costs, it is important to note that some costs are sensitive to the number of youth served, but others—such as core staff, custodians and transportation—are closer to fixed costs. Because costs of space, administrative overhead and baseline staffing remain

**Table 1: Range of Component Costs Across 10 After-School Programs**

	<i>Cost Per Youth, Per Day*</i>		
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>High</i>
<b>Total Costs</b>	<b>\$10.00</b>	<b>\$17.00</b>	<b>\$32.00</b>
Core Staff	\$5.00	\$8.00	\$17.00
Youth Activities	\$3.00	\$7.00	\$9.00
Transportation	\$0.00	\$0.25	\$3.00
Snacks	\$0.00	\$0.33	\$2.00
Custodians	\$0.00	\$0.38	\$2.00
Administration	\$0.00	\$1.00	\$2.00

\* Cost figures were rounded to the nearest dollar, as long as the amount was more than \$1. The numbers in the column labeled "low" are the lowest cost for that item across the 10 sites. The numbers in the column labeled "high" are the highest cost for that item across the 10 sites.

roughly the same whether 50 youth per day or 150 attend, programs serving fewer youth have higher unit costs. For programs that rely on per diem funding, attendance must be sufficient enough to cover the fixed expenses or they run the risk of eventually folding. Programs that serve more than the threshold number of youth, on the other hand, readily thrive.

As mentioned above, almost all programs depend on donated services to cover some of their costs. Approximately \$7 of the average \$17 spent per-day, per-youth is donated.<sup>5</sup> Programs receive limited amounts of free staffing from schools (time from administrative assistants, custodians, grant writers or accounting staff to run payroll), and some schools donate activity instructors. Outside activity instructors, financed through their own lead agencies, often provide “free” activities in exchange for access to programming space and a ready supply of participants. Larger in-kind donations are sometimes developed through strategic partnerships with major city players. For example, in Missoula, Montana, the city’s transit authority offered the free use of city buses during summer months to youth participating in programs. In Philadelphia, negotiations with a new school superintendent resulted in the removal of a fee formerly charged for “renting” each school space where programs were held. Savvy directors and managers can maximize in-kind donations to enhance existing services and stretch program dollars.

## Priority One: Hire a Full-Time Executive Director

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Attracting a good program director who will stay for at least a few years is crucial. The director is the ringmaster and external representative for the program—recruiting youth, planning activities, finding providers, managing staff, providing daily oversight of the program and communicating with key partners. The cost of hiring a full-time director depends on the pay scale of the local economy. Many programs try to rely on part-time directors to save money, but the programs usually find this decision costly in the end. Part-time directors typically spend 15 hours a week merely supervising the program, leaving only five hours for planning and other crucial activities. They rarely have time for important tasks that ensure the program’s survival, such as fundraising and reaching out to other community agencies for services. And since many part-time directors actually put in close to full-time hours, running the risk of burning out, retention becomes difficult.

## Priority Two: Balance Costs and Benefits of Activities

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Activities are the heart of an after-school program. They should attract the types of youth the program seeks to serve and support the goals the program wishes to achieve. But how can this be accomplished within a limited budget?

- First, evaluate potential activities in terms of their power to attract and hold on to participants, as well as change them.

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Eliciting the opinions of youth and parents can help programs gauge the popularity of potential activities—poetry, art, homework help, sports. An experienced program operator can judge whether the planned structure and specific content are likely to support the program goals.

- Second, evaluate the per-youth cost of the activity.

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This cost may be set, for example, when an outside provider offers a particular activity for 10 participants at a predetermined cost. In some cases, the per-youth cost can be lowered by getting the provider to accommodate more participants, by enlisting another organization to donate the activity or by having less costly staff deliver the activity. If these cost-saving alterations impinge on the attractiveness and effectiveness of the activity, that trade-off should be noted. For example, choosing to staff activities with one adult and many youth robs participants of more individualized attention that could be critical in achieving program goals. Lower youth-to-staff ratios also create

situations that enable young people to develop stronger bonds with adults and peers that keep participants coming back. On the other hand, as we discussed in the third chapter, having some activities with few adults around enables youth to have more leadership opportunities and engenders more cooperation among participants. Thus, programs should assess activities' costs—in part—by weighing competing objectives.

- **Third, play the balancing game.**

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Given the limited amount of time youth spend in after-school programs, program designers must think carefully about how to fill those hours, mixing elements of fun (interesting things to do, engaging staff, time to socialize and meaningful roles) with rich learning opportunities. Assessing total programming costs and priorities can help programs think through their alternatives more logically so that they can find a mix of affordable activities that will support their individual missions. Generally, programs meet this challenge by:

- Offering a carefully selected mix of large- and small-group activities;
- Encouraging young people to attend a variety of these activities; and
- Working hard to develop collaborative relationships with organizations that can offer effective programming for free or at minimal cost.

### **Priority Three: Hire Enough Permanent Staff**

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A program's content and budget will drive the number and type of staff that will be needed. The executive director's challenge is to fill these positions with quality individuals who will stay with the program long enough to minimize turnover and maximize program stability.

Faced with the challenge of creating a stable staff on a limited budget, programs need to remember that:

- Full-time employees stay longer than part-time ones; and
- Paid employees stay longer and show up more consistently than volunteers.

Part-time staff members cost less because they do not receive benefits, but research indicates that full-time staff offer significant advantages to a program by fostering more peer cooperation among participants, offering more positive adult interactions and providing better structure and management (Walker and Arbretton 2003).<sup>6</sup>

Researchers speculate that instructors who work full time may develop greater skills in interacting with young people compared with part-time staff members or volunteers. In addition, part-time staff and outside instructors are more difficult and costly to supervise, as well as more likely to leave.

Outside activity providers have the highest turnover rates, followed by part-time staff. Staff turnover increases cost and profoundly affects youth participation rates and overall quality.

Successful programs use several strategies to stretch staffing resources. They hire individuals full time who can take on multiple jobs or responsibilities. Office positions and activity assistants can be filled with high school or college students. Volunteers also help fill gaps and permit lower staff-youth ratios.<sup>7</sup>

When opting for part-time instructors or outside providers, it is critical to screen and hire carefully and monitor activities continuously. Hiring part-time instructors with youth development experience might help offset the limitations of their part-time status. Philadelphia Beacon directors found some of their best part-time instructors and outside providers through personal networks, and they sometimes sought to share these valuable staff members with other Beacon centers, essentially offering the providers full-time employment.

## When to Forgo a Senior Administrative Structure

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All donors wish their funds could go entirely into services for the children and youth, but to survive, programs have no choice but to expend sufficient resources to develop and maintain partnerships and create a solid funding base. When a program allocates too few hours in the budget for a senior administrator or leaves the position unfilled for months to save money, the program may fail to grow, or worse, begin to crumble.

While a full-time administrator may not be needed if there are relatively few centers, such an officer plays a crucial role in overseeing programs with three or more centers. This senior administrator sets basic operating policies across the program, facilitates partnerships and works toward sustaining the initiative. A program gains

efficiency when a citywide administrator negotiates with other organizations to provide services or funding for all the centers rather than leaving the responsibility to individual directors. In addition, the administrator can provide assistance when problems arise at individual centers.

The full-time salary of a senior administrator typically ranges between \$34,000 and \$60,000, plus fringe benefits. Occasionally, a sponsoring agency donates an executive's services, particularly if the administrator works only part time, but more frequently a program covers the expense, spreading the cost across all the centers. In some after-school models, the senior administrative role is handled by a small committee of "volunteering or redirected" senior staff from partner organizations. Many programs also hire administrative support for fundraising and technical assistance on a consulting basis or make use of additional senior administrative expertise donated from partner agencies.

## Final Note

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An effective after-school program is much like a jigsaw puzzle: Unless every piece is put into place, the full effect remains hidden. Success hinges on making the "right" fiscal choices and fitting the "right" youth to the "right" programs for the "right" length of time. In accomplishing this work, it is especially important to think hard about ensuring activity quality because participation and desired outcomes depend on it. Investing resources to attract and develop good staff also builds the foundation from which high-quality activities can grow. We know the recommendations we have set out here are no small undertaking, but the path is becoming clearer through practice and research.



## Endnotes

- 1 After-school advocates debate the role such programs can and should play in relation to improving academic achievement. Some view after-school programs strictly as child development institutions and see the trend toward embracing academic outcomes as an inappropriate, misguided expectation (Halpern 2004).
- 2 This does not apply to a one-on-one mentoring model.
- 3 This chapter draws heavily on a recent study of a diverse set of school-based after-school programs operating during the 1999-2000 school year (Grossman et al. 2002).
- 4 Daily costs were calculated by dividing the total school-year cost by the number of days the program was scheduled to be open. The median program in the study served 70 children a day for 134 days per school year. On average, 235 different youth participated during the school year. Costs in high-wage cities (such as San Francisco or New York) are often higher.
- 5 The median value of donated services was \$54,000 (or 40 percent of the total \$135,000 cost), leaving \$90,000 to be covered out of the program's funds (Grossman et al. 2002).
- 6 This study also found that part-time instructors with previous youth development experience were more likely to promote peer cooperation and relationships than instructors with other backgrounds.
- 7 Volunteer recruitment has been most successful at sites with college and university campuses nearby. Isolated programs tend to have a harder time finding volunteers.

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