

RESEARCH SYNOPSIS

ENGAGING OLDER YOUTH

Program and City-Level Strategies to Support Sustained Participation in Out-of-School Time



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Harvard Family
Research Project



Public/Private Ventures

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Research Synopsis

Overview

Out-of-school time (OST) programs represent a vital opportunity and resource for learning and development. There is growing recognition that OST is important not just for elementary school students, whose parents need supervision for their children when they are not in school, but also for middle and high school youth,¹ whose participation in OST programs can help keep them connected to positive role models and engaged in their education at a time when many are beginning to disengage from schools.

Further, evidence suggests that once older youth have enrolled in a program, meaningful and sustained participation is a key factor in attaining positive outcomes, including developmental and learning outcomes.² However, despite the well-documented benefits of OST participation for older youth, their participation wanes with age. OST programs struggle with how to recruit and retain older youth and continue to look for guidance on how to do so more effectively.³ There are also real discrepancies in access to and participation in OST programs by location and socioeconomic status.⁴ Predictably, youth from lower-income families and neighborhoods have fewer OST opportunities than their more privileged peers, and many low-income and minority families report unmet need for high-quality and accessible programming.⁵ The lack of opportunity for some youth is especially problematic given our nation's increasing dropout rates. If, as research suggests, OST programs have the potential to support graduation and postsecondary success, then better access to quality OST programs may have the potential to help address educational inequalities, particularly in urban areas.

In response to the evidence pointing to the benefits of out-of-school time, coupled with the lack of access in many urban neighborhoods, many cities are creating citywide infrastructures to support networks of OST programs, with one goal being to support participation.

These nascent OST city initiatives are attempting to build the capacity of programs to deliver better-quality programming by engaging in one or more of the following efforts: supporting professional development for providers, providing funding, implementing quality improvement efforts, establishing data tracking systems, and connecting OST programs to one another and to other community institutions. All of these efforts can directly or indirectly support improved access to and sustained participation in OST programs.

Given the potential of city-level OST initiatives to support participation, and against the national backdrop of inequitable access to quality OST programs for older youth from disadvantaged communities, The Wallace Foundation commissioned HFRP and P/PV's recent research study on older youth and OST participation, which this brief summarizes.⁶

To understand how to promote sustained participation in OST programs, the study examined the program characteristics—both program practices and structural features—associated with high participation and retention that were employed by OST programs, primarily serving disadvantaged youth, in six cities that have worked toward building OST initiatives. In particular, the study addressed how OST programs keep middle and high school youth engaged over time (i.e., the duration of participation) and how the supports that city initiatives provide can help foster youth participation, with the assumption that programs can have a potentially greater impact if they are able to work with these youth over an extended period of time.

We examined three key questions:

1. What are the characteristics of high-participation OST programs that support sustained participation as measured by retention?
2. How do these characteristics differ for middle school and high school youth?

3. What strategies are city initiatives implementing to support access to programs and sustained participation, and how do OST programs perceive the usefulness of city-level strategies for achieving their participation goals?

Research Strategy and Methods

Using mixed-methods research strategies, the study design brought together both survey data from a large sample of programs and in-depth interview data. This design allowed for both breadth and depth in our understanding of critical issues related to access to and sustained participation in OST programs for older youth. We collected and integrated these qualitative and quantitative data and used an iterative analytic process, weaving together findings from both sets of data to confirm, augment, and challenge our understanding of program characteristics—both program practices and structural features—and support from city initiatives and how they help to explain the sustained participation of older youth.

The six cities in the study—Chicago, Cincinnati, New York, Providence, San Francisco, and Washington, DC—were chosen because they have an intermediary or government agency coordinating funding and providing services for OST programs, a management information system (MIS) or database to keep track of attendance and participation, extensive programming aimed at middle and high school youth, and a focus on low-income youth and distressed neighborhoods. The initiatives in these cities all provide a set of supports to OST programs in the community, and they are making efforts to raise the profile and increase understanding of out-of-school time in their cities; they are also all relatively new, having been founded between 2004 and 2007.

After we identified the six cities for inclusion in the study, we then identified a large number of programs in these cities with high participation rates among middle and high school youth, based primarily on MIS data gathered by the city-level OST initiatives, and administered a survey to program leaders, asking about program activities and features, staffing, youth participants, family involvement, use of data, recruitment

and orientation practices, practices for fostering and supporting engagement, and involvement with the OST initiative in the city.⁷ Out of the sample of programs that returned a survey, we selected a smaller subset of programs to interview in depth.⁸ The survey sample had an average program-level participation rate of 70 percent, and the interview sample had an average program-level participation rate of 79 percent. We also selected a group of city-level respondents to be interviewed for the study.

Altogether, we analyzed data from 198 program surveys, 28 program interviews, and 47 city-level respondents. Our quantitative analysis focused on the program practices and structural features associated with retention (i.e., duration of participation) of youth in programs. To identify characteristics that were significantly associated with higher rates of retention among older youth participants, we first examined which of the numerous individual program practices and structural features from the survey data were significantly more common in high-retention programs than in lower-retention programs. For this study, we define high retention as retention of 50 percent or more of a program's youth participants for 12 months or more. We then conducted a regression analysis of retention to isolate which of the many competing practices and features were uniquely associated with the variation in retention rates, even when taking into account other practices and features.

Analysis of our interviews, in addition to document review, enabled us both to identify program practices that respondents cited as relating to greater retention and to create a picture of what it takes in programs and at the city level to keep youth engaged in programs over time, using a grounded theory approach. We focused on the major themes present across programs related to the successes and challenges of achieving high participation and retention rates and what program practices or features were linked to these efforts. We also analyzed program data to understand how programs participate in OST initiatives. Throughout the analysis, we cross-walked findings from the interviews and the survey against each other to refine our understanding of participation.

6 Engaging Older Youth

Major Research Findings

Five program characteristics (two program practices and three structural features) were identified that set apart the programs that were the most successful in supporting high retention (see Table 1):

Providing many leadership opportunities to youth in the programs

The number of leadership opportunities offered by a program was the strongest single predictor of retention in our study, taking into account all the others examined. Interviews with providers confirmed the importance of leadership opportunities for retention. These leadership opportunities may contribute to retention by giving

urban youth a voice, a sense of belonging in programs, and a highly visible role in the programs—important connections they do not necessarily get elsewhere.

Having staff keep informed in several ways about youth outside programs

Staff members in high-retention programs go out of their way to develop relationships with youth and stay connected to their lives by using significantly more of the strategies we asked about to keep informed about youth outside of the program than do staff in lower-retention programs. High-retention programs go far beyond merely providing opportunities to interact with staff informally and one-on-one. They make school visits,

TABLE 1

Key Program Practices and Features Corresponding to Higher Rates of Retention in Programs

PRACTICES AND FEATURES	Betas
Greater number of leadership opportunities offered	.25***
Programs are located in a community-based organization	.24***
Staff members have discussions about programs at least twice a month	.20**
100 or more youth enrolled per year	.20**
Greater number of ways staff members keep informed about youth	.16*

Note: This table presents standardized regression coefficients, or “betas,” from the final step of a backward stepwise regression analysis using the full survey sample to predict the proportion of youth retained 12 months or longer. The full set of variables that were included in the first step were: # parent engagement activities, # leadership opportunities, # ways staff members keep informed about youth, staff-to-youth ratio, # strategies to build youth-staff relationship, # opportunities for peer interaction, # rewards & incentives, staff discussions about the program, # recruitment strategies, data used for staff development & training, # activities, # services, served 100+ youth, # months open, # days open, serve older youth only, and community-based location.

Betas allow comparison of the relative importance of each variable in explaining retention rates. Thus, for example, the number of leadership opportunities is associated with larger changes in retention than being a community-based program. The five variables that are listed in the table with corresponding betas were included in the model along with three other control variables that were not significantly associated with retention once all of the other variables were in the model (i.e., number of months open; number of days open; and serves older youth only). Apart from these three control variables, if the beta is not presented, then that factor did not explain a significant amount of variance in 12-month retention once the other variables were accounted for and was thus dropped from the regression model. Collectively, the five key factors in Table 2.1 accounted for 38 percent of the variance in 12-month retention. See Appendix E in the full report for more details on how the regression analysis was conducted.

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

collect report cards, contact parents regularly, and know about and recognize the accomplishments of youth program participants outside of the program. And in more than two-thirds of the program interviews, providers suggested that their program works in large part because of the relationships developed between staff and youth.

Being community-based

The community-based location of high-retention programs may be important because in many urban areas, youth are not spending time hanging out at school, even though in other areas schools can be a boon to OST program recruitment and to making connections with youth. High school students in particular have freedom to travel and, as some providers suggested, are not inclined to stay at their schools after the last bell. Finally, for many youth who feel disconnected from their schools, community-based programs can offer strong alternative learning environments.

Enrolling 100 or more youth

Being a larger program enrolling 100 or more youth per year might indicate a stronger organizational infrastructure and better resources that in turn contribute to programs that are better able to sustain older youth participation over time. A larger program may also provide more opportunities for youth to stay involved in the program as their interests change as well as more opportunities for peer interaction and new friendships.

Holding regular staff meetings

Regular staff meetings represent an intentional focus on program planning and management that may suggest intentionality in other facets of the organization, including the program's focus on youth retention. In addition, these meetings could provide opportunities for problem solving, professional development, and staff interaction that may boost staff members' morale and encourage them to stay involved with the program longer, which some providers suggested can keep youth engaged over time. Finally, these meetings provide a way for all staff members to know about issues that may have arisen with particular youth or activities. This awareness in turn allows staff members to support youth collectively.

There is an additional set of retention and recruitment practices that, while not statistically related to retention when we account for other factors, were consistently reported as being important in engaging older youth. High-retention programs often employ these practices.

Providers reported that the following strategies were important to retention in their programs. These additional strategies may be statistically associated with engagement and/or participation frequency; more research is needed.

Retention practices

Fostering a sense of community through connections to program staff and peers

Providers pay a great deal of attention to how they make youth feel in their organization. According to more than half of the OST program providers we interviewed, helping youth feel connected to the program through creating a sense of community, shared norms, and safety is a factor in keeping youth engaged over time. Connecting youth to community resources and providing meaningful opportunities for peer interaction are also important. Middle school programs in particular have reported that cliques can be either a powerful mechanism for keeping youth involved in the program or a powerful deterrent.

Providing developmentally appropriate activities and incentives

In addition to providing participants with opportunities to build strong connections to the program and to peers, providers in this study shape their programs in ways that are interesting, relevant, and developmentally important for older youth. They recognize that program approaches that work for an elementary school population may not work for middle and high school students and therefore tailor their programming to that age group. In addition to leadership development, they provide a diverse set of activities and services aimed at older youth, offer opportunities to develop skills, and provide developmentally appropriate incentives.

Engaging families

Most of the programs that we surveyed reported that they use multiple techniques to engage parents, includ-

8 Engaging Older Youth

ing interacting with parents informally, sending home information, or calling parents when appropriate. While some providers told us in interviews that they saw family engagement as “essential,” they also noted how difficult family engagement is for both programs and parents. The providers who did emphasize the value of family involvement to OST program participation reported that parents are critical in part because they can communicate the value of participation and the importance of consistent participation to youth. Among these providers, the overarching theme in their efforts to connect with families is their determination to encourage youth success and foster parents’ recognition of that success.

Recruitment practices

Using peers and staff as recruiters

Almost all OST programs in our sample, regardless of their retention rates, use word-of-mouth peer recruitment techniques, but our survey sample revealed that significantly more high-retention programs also had staff reach out to youth in the community. Helping youth and parents understand an OST program’s environment and reputation is a key strategy for staff in recruiting older youth to the program. At the same time, program providers have the sense that parents are sometimes less concerned with what the program is providing than with who is supervising the activities; thus, among the providers interviewed, communicating the program’s reputation is critical for recruitment.

Using organizational relationships

Interviews revealed that programs that successfully recruit in schools devote time to developing relationships with teachers, principals, and, when one exists, the school’s after-school liaison. Relationships with principals are particularly important, according to program staff. Providers reported that teachers’ approval of and efforts to support school-based programs can also improve recruitment. Based on their relationships with schools and individual teachers, some OST program providers are able to use school-day classroom time to make connections with youth.

Matching program attributes to youth needs

Two-thirds of providers interviewed reported that specific features of their programs are helpful for recruitment. Three features stood out: filling a gap in learning or available activities, offering youth their own space within the program setting, and distinguishing program time and activities from what happens in school.

The study found that the same five program features and strategies were significant in understanding how programs retained middle and high school youth, yet program leaders reported that there were also important differences geared toward meeting the needs of each age group.

The factors that were quantitatively linked to retention were the same across the two age groups—keeping informed about youth participants’ lives, providing many leadership opportunities, and the presence of certain structural features. However, our interviews with the 28 high-participation programs allowed us to better understand how these and other practices manifested themselves differently when working with middle or high school youth.

Successful middle school programs give youth opportunities to interact with peers, create structures and routines to make youth feel comfortable and safe, and take advantage of their participants’ willingness to try new things, particularly through peer interaction. Middle school programs also reported that eighth graders need a different type of programming than sixth and seventh graders, which is discussed in more detail on page 10.

High school programs focus their programming more on providing formal and informal opportunities to explore and prepare for college and other postgraduation plans; giving youth more responsibility through job-like programming, apprenticeships, and mentoring; and offering the content and the particular skills older teens want to learn.

City-level OST initiatives employ a set of common recruitment and retention supports, but it is less clear that these efforts have made a difference in programs’ abilities to recruit or retain older youth.

City initiatives provide a set of services to support participation aimed at increasing OST participation broadly rather than solely for older youth. These supports include:

Engaging in citywide recruitment efforts

Programs in the six research sites are using market research, social marketing, and recruitment fairs to target youth for the programs and get youth input on desirable programming.

Coordinating information about programs across the city

Cities' coordination efforts include the use of program locators as outreach to parents and youth and opportunities to help programs network. Information about where programs are located helps cities address barriers to participation such as gang territories, transportation challenges, and school rivalries. Networking OST providers through city initiatives can help programs learn about other organizations' offerings, share best practices, and solicit help with challenges, all of which in turn can address issues of participation and retention.

Collecting and using data on OST programs

A critical component of each city-level effort to connect and improve programs is an MIS used to track attendance and participation in the initiatives' funded programs. These databases have been crucial for understanding participation because they increase knowledge about attendance patterns within programs and across initiatives. In addition to using citywide management information systems, OST initiatives in this study support and encourage programs to conduct their own evaluations and in some cases broker relationships between researchers and programs.

Supporting quality improvement efforts

Each of the cities in this study is involved in efforts to improve program quality through the development and implementation of quality assessment tools, from using an existing tool to creating its own standards. While all of the cities in this study have quality improvement efforts in place, they have developed different strategies

to incorporate quality assessment into the life of programs. Some use incentives for programs to go through the process, some use targeted support for programs' areas of need, and others use the results in grantmaking decisions.

Providing professional development and technical assistance to programs

Providers reported that professional development and technical assistance offered by city initiatives were indirectly helping programs with recruitment and retention, often by using the results of quality assessments to identify areas to guide staff development. The majority of initiative-level professional development opportunities are organized around the core principles of youth development. City-level investment in program staff through professional development is designed to support both youth retention in programs and the sustainability of the programs themselves. Respondents from every city noted that staff members who received training were more likely to remain with an organization long term, leading to continuing and successful relationships with the youth in the program.

Initiatives were also beginning to foster relationships with school districts and to work with families on a citywide basis.

The data collected for this study, however, provided little evidence that accessing these city-level supports (which were deemed useful by the programs surveyed) was directly related to the retention rates of individual programs. Helping programs to network, providing training in youth engagement, and helping with evaluation were three of the supports used by the greatest number of programs surveyed. Both high- and lower-retention programs, however, reported similar patterns of use of these and many other supports that they were asked about on the survey.

In addition, programs reported that being part of a city-level initiative created new challenges having to do with data management, program competition, and tying participation numbers to quality within a high-stakes funding environment.

Implications

Our findings can help programs move toward a more nuanced approach to recruiting and retaining older youth and help cities understand their role in supporting participation. In addition, these findings have implications for future investment and policy decisions about OST programming for older youth. Therefore, we offer a set of implications aimed at key decision makers—city leaders, funders, and others—whose goal is to continue to improve access to and participation in OST programs as part of their overall efforts to support learning and development and to create pathways of opportunity for older youth.

The program practices distinguishing programs that achieve high rates of retention among older youth from those that do not can help guide the actions of program directors and city leaders as they try to improve participation within a context of limited resources.

Our findings about the two practices that set high-retention programs apart—providing many leadership opportunities to youth in the programs and having staff members keep informed about youth outside programs in several ways—can give other programs an idea of where to direct scarce resources. Because we know these practices support retention, city initiatives can target professional development and technical assistance efforts to ensure that these practices are implemented effectively.

The other practices that high-retention programs use, even though they did not prove to be significant in the regression analysis, warrant further attention. Although we do not know conclusively whether these practices promote retention in other settings, we do know that they were reported by the programs in our study (both on the survey and in interviews) as being part of an overall “participation package.”

Cities should consider offering a variety of specialized activities for high school youth.

Choice is an important program component and a key feature of youth development, but it seems to matter in different ways for middle school and high school programs. Our interviews with program staff suggested

that youth become more focused in their interests as they move into high school, which often means that they are in more specialized or single-focus programs. As a result, while activity choice within programs is developmentally appropriate for middle and high school students, high school students may also benefit from choice across a variety of more specialized programs. Cities can work toward this objective either by providing programs with funding to add specialized activities or by creating a variety of specialized OST opportunities for high school youth.

OST programs’ attention to developmental changes can support continuing youth engagement in OST programs.

Understanding developmental growth can help programs retain youth longer as well as support program participants’ transition from middle school to high school. High-retention high school program providers reported that their participants want programming to help them meet concrete goals, such as taking the SAT. Middle school programs reported that, particularly around eighth grade, youth stop attending because they want a program that feels “older.” OST programs can use this finding as an opportunity to create programming for eighth and possibly ninth graders that includes more responsibility and skills aimed at having a successful ninth-grade year. Cities can support these efforts by bringing OST providers and school staff together to create curricula for transition programs and establish a team approach to the transition. By supporting youth in transition from middle to high school, this collaborative effort could lower the dropout rates for particular schools.

Family engagement matters for older youth participation.

Program and city-level respondents alike clearly understand and value family engagement as a strategy to recruit and retain older youth, but are challenged as to how to implement effective family engagement strategies. Further, though family engagement practices were not statistically related to retention (once taking into account other program practices and structures), high-retention

programs in this study reported using more strategies to engage families than did lower-retention programs. Our findings have implications for city-level professional development efforts, which could be designed to include training on working with families. They also have implications for recruitment strategies, which should include reaching out to families in a variety of ways to persuade them of the value of OST participation for older youth.

Supporting school–program partnerships can help recruitment efforts.

Initiatives are in a strong position to influence and advocate for partnerships between school and district leaders and OST program leaders. They can increase youth access to programs by actively supporting the establishment and development of these partnerships. The stronger the partnerships between programs and schools, the more energy they can invest in targeted recruitment fairs and strategic marketing efforts during and outside of the school day. City-level initiatives can support partnerships not only by linking and connecting schools with OST providers, but also by helping programs and schools develop mutually beneficial goals and expectations; streamlined tools for data sharing; and clear, two-way channels of communication regarding students.

Resources for organizational capacity are important to support participation.

Our findings suggest that high-retention programs have strong organizational capacity and sound program management. These programs' staff members have time to go the extra mile, attend meetings and plan programming, network with other providers and schools, and attend professional development opportunities. In fact, many of the programs selected for our in-depth study were supported by large OST intermediaries (like Beacon initiatives and Boys & Girls Clubs) that provide this kind of capacity building. These findings suggest that investments in direct service alone are necessary but not sufficient to improve retention, and that resources should be allocated to sufficiently support organizational development, including resources to support the finding that regular staff meetings matter for retention.

Improved data-based decisions can improve participation.

Cities use data in multiple ways to support participation, including data about location of and access to programs, where underserved youth live, participation rates, and quality across the initiatives. Overall, programs reported that the city-level supports that enabled them to obtain and use information were helpful for improving recruitment and retention; they also reported challenges, however, related to data collection and use that cities need to address. Initiatives can work, for example, to ensure that data collection and databases are supporting programs' work and that programs are spending their time managing data in ways that are helpful for participation and are not sapping organizational resources. City initiatives can support programs' understanding and use of participation data in order to improve recruitment and retention. The next step in the coordination of data is to link OST data to other data systems, including those of schools, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of participation and outcomes across all the supports, including schools, available to youth in the city.

City-level initiatives should work with programs for older youth to learn how to better support retention goals.

All of the cities in our study employ city-level supports to improve access to and sustained participation in OST programs; few of these strategies, however, appeared targeted toward the participation of older youth in particular. Rather, the strategies were part of cities' overall initiative-building efforts to support the quality and sustainability of OST programs. Although cities reported using strategies that directly addressed recruitment, such as social marketing, most of the strategies they employed addressed retention only indirectly. Further, none of these strategies supported high-retention programs' participation goals in a statistically significant way. Therefore, applying what we have learned about the high-retention programs in our study—and with the understanding that recruitment and retention are two sides of the same coin—it is important for cities to strengthen their recruitment and retention efforts, finding out from programs what is needed to promote the sustained participation of older youth.

Concluding Thoughts

This research study has enabled us to identify a set of program characteristics that are important for retaining older youth, as well as a set of commonly used recruitment and retention practices that merit further investigation. We have focused our attention on older youth because middle school and high school youth in underserved areas need meaningful opportunities to find their individual pathways, stay engaged in school, and work toward college or other postsecondary education, all of which participation in a strong OST program can support. Our study results underscore the importance of strategic investments to increase and improve youth participation in quality OST programs as a way to support older youth on their pathways to success.

OST programs are increasingly part of an expanded learning approach to education, given the vital role that they can play in getting and keeping youth on trajectories of positive learning and development. Building on recent public- and private-sector investments and interest in expanding learning opportunities that encompass out-of-school time and summer learning experiences, it is more important and relevant than ever to deepen and refine our understanding of how to promote the sustained engagement of older youth in OST programs.

Full Report

Please go to www.hfrp.org, www.ppv.org, or www.wallacefoundation.org to see the full report for more information on our analysis and findings, as well as descriptions of the city initiatives and programs in the study and a list of the study's respondents.

Notes

- 1 Throughout this brief, “youth,” “older youth,” and “adolescent” are used to refer to middle and high school-aged youth.
- 2 See Walker, K. E., & Arbreton, A. J. A. (2004). *After-school pursuits: An examination of outcomes in the San Francisco Beacon Initiative*.

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 - 8 A few interviewed programs were chosen based on recommendations and reputation.



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