

KNOWLEDGE IN BRIEF

Findings You Can Use from New Wallace Research

BOLSTERING OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME FOR CITY KIDS: A NEW “SYSTEMS” APPROACH

Many families take for granted that the hours their children spend outside school will be filled with enrichment and learning: photography or homework help, soccer or robotics, dance or debate – just about anything that can build skills and fire imaginations. But for the nation’s poor, including millions of urban children and teens, such opportunities are often out of reach.

Yet cities are home to much of what would be needed to develop more accessible, and high quality after-school, summer and other out-of-school time (OST) programs for these young people. An array of existing “providers” – libraries, Y’s, small arts and sports programs – could be marshaled. Municipal agencies with a stake in how children spend their time, such as housing agencies, could be tapped. So could schools with space to house programs and buses to transport children safely. Technology could be pressed into service, too: websites to tell families about good, affordable programs; and software to collect data to boost program effectiveness and document that OST is a sound investment.

So, what would happen if someone pieced these and other resources together so they worked in sync, establishing, in essence, a citywide OST system?

A RAND Corporation study has evaluated five efforts to do just that. Its conclusion? That cities large and small can launch OST systems, and these systems have the potential to work, that is, give kids a better shot at filling their spare time with enrichment and learning rather than idleness and risk.

The report, *Hours of Opportunity*, takes a look at The Wallace Foundation’s out-of-school time learning effort in five cities. “This initiative provided a proof of principle – that organizations across cities could work together toward increasing access, quality, data-based decision making and sustainability,” the authors write.

OST systems are not easily built, however, in part because interlocking many parts means collaboration

ABOUT THE STUDY

Hours of Opportunity, by Susan J. Bodilly, Jennifer Sloan McCombs et al., is a three-volume RAND report that explores city efforts to build systems to improve the quality and accessibility of after-school, summer and other out-of-school time programs. Volume I, *Lessons From Five Cities*, evaluates the experiences across the cities that undertook major system-building projects with support from The Wallace Foundation, and Volume III, *Profiles of Five Cities*, looks at each venture in detail. Volume II, *The Power of Data*, examines the adoption of management information systems by out-of-school time efforts in eight cities. The report was commissioned by Wallace, and all volumes are downloadable free of charge at www.wallacefoundation.org or www.rand.org.

from many players. In addition, the “final impact” of these young systems remains to be seen, the report cautions. Other questions center on the extent to which system-building can take hold in cities without the type of seed funding Wallace supplied and how OST efforts will fare when facing hard economic times.

FIVE CITIES’ OST EFFORTS: ORGANIZATION AND FOCUS

The report explores the history and progress of the five efforts through spring 2009, when the research concluded.¹ The smallest of the cities, Providence, Rhode Island (population 175,000), joined the Wallace initiative in 2003, followed several months later by the largest, New York City (population 8 million). Boston, Chicago and Washington, D.C., joined in 2005.² Using

grants ranging from \$5 million to \$12 million, the projects all worked toward four common goals: improving OST program quality, widening access to programs, using data to inform decisions and sustaining what had been established. Each took a distinct approach to the endeavor, however:

- Providence’s work centered on expanding and upgrading OST programming for public middle school children by setting up a structure of neighborhood OST programs based in schools and providing transportation to and from community programs. Coordination was the responsibility of a nonprofit “intermediary” created specifically for that purpose.
- New York City’s effort, run by the city’s Department of Youth and Community Development, focused on expanding and bettering OST in high-needs neighborhoods for children K to 12. Activities included boosting collection of attendance and other data; introducing measures such as staff training to improve program quality; and using contracts to hold programs responsible for meeting attendance goals.
- Boston focused at first on using OST to aid students in selected low-performing elementary schools, and a local not-for-profit “intermediary” led the systems coordination. As the school district became more involved in operations, the focus widened to a larger set of schools K to 12. The school district’s after-school arm provided coaches and other support to OST managers based in schools.
- Chicago brought together a major organizer of teen programs with four municipal agencies heavily involved in OST programming – parks; libraries; schools; and youth and families – housing the initiative in the last of these. For its first major project, the effort concentrated on developing management information systems that each partner could use to gather and ultimately share data on OST enrollment, attendance and other important program characteristics.
- Washington, D.C., set up new programs in middle schools and initially housed the coordination work in a veteran public-private partnership dealing with children and families. Eventually, the effort was extended to all public schools, and much of the coordination was assumed by the school system.

SYSTEM-BUILDING CONSIDERATIONS

- Organizations *can* work together to build an effective system with the potential to improve the quality and availability of city OST programs.
- There’s no single best approach; system structure and focus vary by city needs and circumstances.
- A management information system can be a major support, providing the data needed for informed decision-making and advocacy.
- Improving quality is feasible and challenging, and progress may be slow.
- Mayoral backing of OST system-building is crucial, so organizers should start a dialogue with the mayor early on.
- Building support from school leaders is crucial.
- Re-crafting requirements from various funders so they work in harmony can free up valuable time and resources for OST.

These different approaches grew out of the cities’ individual needs and circumstances. Providence’s “intermediary-led” effort would have been unlikely to work in New York City, which had consolidated OST funding from a number of city agencies into one, the report says, citing one example. But the agency-led model would have been a non-starter in Providence, “which lacked city agencies involved in after-school programming.”

RESULTS

More Data-Informed Decision-Making

Prior to the initiative, the cities often lacked information on basics including the numbers of students attending local OST programming. New “management information systems” enabled them to collect and update such data. In Chicago, developing technology to gather information from five different agencies – operating 1,300 program sites for 380,000 students – became a key exercise in building cooperation among partners who had to collaborate with one another if OST system-building were to succeed.

Data on enrollment, attendance, student demographics, types of programs offered and other matters came in handy for a number of purposes – identifying popular programs that might be replicated, for example, or pinpointing low-participation programs that needed help. New York City used the data in part to see if OST providers were meeting attendance targets that helped determine their level of city funding. Data also became powerful ammunition in advocating for support from

the holders of municipal purse strings. Armed with evidence “that poor providers were being weeded out, programs were being located in the highest-need areas, and demand remained,” system organizers could argue persuasively for funding, the report says.

Better Access to OST Programs

Each project that sought to increase access to OST did so. In Providence, middle school student enrollment in OST activities more than tripled, from an estimated 500 before the project to about 1,700, just over one-third of the city’s middle-schoolers, afterward.

Methods differed by city, although introducing online “program locators” for families was one popular approach. New York City undertook a major project to compare the location of existing city-funded programs to neighborhoods with large numbers of children who needed OST; after finding a big mismatch between the two, the city successfully expanded programming in underserved areas. In Providence, planners conducted market research on parents’ views of OST and discovered that concern about safe transportation was keeping children away from programs; the response was the introduction of late afternoon school bus service home from the OST programs. OST organizers in Washington, D.C., offered management training to heads of small providers so that they might develop the organizational wherewithal to expand services.

A Sharper Focus on Program Quality

All five cities sought to improve OST program quality. Steps included developing and using program standards; introducing “assessments” for providers and others to determine program strengths and weaknesses; and training OST staffers. In New York City, managers from the Department of Youth and Community Development scrutinized quality during twice-yearly visits to programs, referring those that came up short for intensive assistance. Chicago organizers started a quality-improvement pilot for OST programs from each of the initiative’s five partners. The school system’s after-school arm in Boston enlisted coaches to help OST coordinators who worked in each of the initiative schools with everything from developing curriculums to engaging with parents.

Still, improving quality proved to be difficult. Although “much was accomplished,” the report says, no city could claim “that the programs being offered were of universally high quality, nor could they demonstrate quantitative improvements in quality.”

FACTORS THAT BOOSTED SYSTEM-BUILDING EFFORTS

- *Strong commitment from the mayor* was key to initiative success and frequently went far beyond the bully pulpit prerogatives of office. In New York City, the mayor did everything from designating a special adviser who could ensure inter-agency cooperation in the coordination effort to including OST as a “baseline item in the city’s five-year financial plan,” the report says. The mayor of Providence, meanwhile, took steps such as working to make sure – during the search for a new schools chief – that superintendent support for the system-building effort would be a selection criterion.
- *Thoughtful, data-based planning* identified local OST resources, funding, groups to be included in the effort, and what needed improving.
- *The early development of shared goals* among the collaborators helped pave the way for participants to work together effectively throughout the venture.

CHALLENGES TO OST SYSTEM-BUILDING

- *Sustainability.* Some efforts successfully found new government or private funding. But how well the five cities could continue to function when Wallace support ended – and the extent to which others could tackle OST system-building without major outside support – were big unknowns, especially in light of the weakened economy.
- *Patchwork funding.* Government and private funds were often designated for a purpose precluding use in one or more aspects of OST. Such patchwork funding was a “major constraint” on building coordination, the study found.
- *Winning over schools.* Schools are central to OST, but garnering the support of superintendents, principals and teachers was far from a given. Getting cooperation involved such things as drawing up formal agreements between school systems and OST organizers, and paying to set up an OST coordinator post within schools.

¹ Each of the five projects has continued to evolve since the research ended.

² Volume II of the report looks at OST management information systems in Denver, Louisville and San Francisco in addition to the five Wallace-supported sites.

RELATED KNOWLEDGE

Like all Wallace publications, *Hours of Opportunity* may be downloaded for free from Wallace's website at www.wallacefoundation.org. You may also want to read:

A Place to Grow and Learn: A Citywide Approach to Building and Sustaining Out-of-School Time Learning Opportunities, The Wallace Foundation, 2008.

Engaging Older Youth: Program and City-Level Strategies to Support Sustained Participation in Out-of-School Time, Harvard Family Research Project, Public/Private Ventures, 2010.

AfterZones: Creating a Citywide System to Support and Sustain High-Quality After-School Programs, Public/Private Ventures, 2010.

The Cost of Quality Out-of-School-Time Programs, Public/Private Ventures, The Finance Project, 2009.

Investments in Building Citywide Out-of-School-Time Systems: A Six-City Study, Public/Private Ventures, The Finance Project, 2009.

Administrative Management Capacity in Out-of-School Time Organizations: An Exploratory Study, Fiscal Management Associates, The Wallace Foundation, 2008.

Making Out-of-School Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda, RAND Corporation, 2005.

All Work and No Play, Public Agenda, 2004.

ABOUT THE WALLACE FOUNDATION

The mission of The Wallace Foundation is to improve learning and enrichment for children. To achieve this, we are focusing on efforts to:

- Improve the quality of schools, primarily through investments in developing and placing effective principals in high-needs schools.
- Improve the quality and accessibility of out-of-school time (OST) programs, primarily through creating coordinated city systems that, among other things, use data and ongoing assessment; and strengthening the financial management skills of the nonprofits that deliver OST programs.
- Integrate in- and out-of-school learning by: supporting efforts to re-imagine and expand learning time during the traditional school day and year as well as during summer; helping develop ways to expand access to arts learning in and out of school; and using technology in new ways as a teaching tool and to promote creativity and imagination.

In all our work, our approach is to select and invest in organizations willing to test promising new approaches, while commissioning and sharing independent research that could benefit the work in those "innovation sites" as well as the broader field.

For more information, please visit www.wallacefoundation.org.