The Cost of Quality Out-of-School-Time Programs:
Key Findings in Brief

Out-of-school-time (OST) programs are a vital component of children’s academic and social development. Nationwide, 6.5 million school-age children participate in OST programs that seek to ensure children’s safety, develop and nurture their talents, improve their academic behaviors and help them form bonds with adults and youth who are positive role models. These programs incorporate a diverse array of organizational models and programmatic approaches.

Throughout the country, policymakers, parents and community leaders are working to develop and sustain quality OST programs. In order for their efforts to succeed, organizers and supporters need information about the costs of building quality programs and how costs can vary depending on participant populations, program location, staffing structures, hours of operation and ancillary services.

To meet this need, The Wallace Foundation commissioned The Finance Project and Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to conduct a groundbreaking study of the full costs of quality OST programs. The study, The Cost of Quality Out-of-School-Time Programs, is a significant step toward building a valuable knowledge base about the costs of OST programs and services. Policymakers and funders are increasingly interested in knowing the “return” on their OST investments. This study reveals half of the answer by providing leaders with the best information to date on the cost of OST programs. These cost estimates can be used to gauge the adequacy of funding for existing programs or to plan for program expansion.

This report, one of the largest and most rigorous OST cost studies to date, is based on data from 111 programs distributed across six cities (Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, Denver, New York and Seattle) and examines programs that varied dramatically in their focus, content, location, staffing, management and hours of operation. All of the programs included in the study passed a quality screen that was designed to identify established, high-capacity OST programs that have been in operation at least two years, have high participation rates¹, have appropriate staff/youth ratios and have other key research-based structural characteristics associated with quality. The sample of programs included in the study does not represent the universe of OST programs across the country, nor is it intended to represent an average OST program. The goal was to clarify the costs of quality OST programs.

The study provides detailed information on the full cost of quality OST programs, encompassing both out-of-pocket expenditures as well as the value of resources that were contributed in kind (including space), which most other OST studies have not done. Given that in-kind contributions cannot always be counted on when scaling up or building new programs, policymakers, program directors and funders can use the full cost estimates as an upward bound of cost, assuming no donated resources.

¹ No participation threshold was set for teen programs
Key Findings

The study found costs varied substantially. These variations were largely driven by:

1. Program directors’ choices (when and how many days and hours the program operated; what activities it offered; the staff/youth ratio; etc.);
2. Available resources (funding, as well as donated goods and services); and
3. Local conditions (such as the ages, needs and interests of the children and the cost structures in particular cities).

The study also made the following observations:

• For the programs in the sample serving elementary and middle school children, the average hourly cost was approximately $7 per slot during the school year, with costs ranging from $3 to $9 for the middle bulk of programs.

• During the summer, the average hourly cost for elementary and middle school children was $4 per slot, with a much smaller cost range ($2 to $5).

• On a daily basis, this translated to an average slot cost of $24 during the school year (ranging from $14 to $31 a day) and $32 during the summer (ranging from $21 to $36 a day).

• For the teen programs, the average hourly cost for a school-year program was $10 per slot, with costs ranging from $4 to $12 for the middle bulk of the programs.

• During the summer, teen hourly costs averaged $8 per slot, with approximately the same range ($3 to $12). These hourly costs translate into daily slot costs of $33 a day (ranging from $15 to $49) during the school year and $44 a day (ranging from $24 to $63 a day) during the summer.

• Per-enrollee costs of school-year programs were approximately 60 percent of the slot cost for programs serving younger children ($4.60 per enrollee versus $7.40 per slot per hour, or $2,640 versus $4,320 annually) and 40 percent for programs serving teens ($5.10 per enrollee versus $10.30 per slot, or $1,880 versus $4,580 annually).

• Per-enrollee costs of summer programs are approximately 75 percent of the slot cost for programs serving younger children ($2.90 per enrollee versus $4.10 per slot per hour, or $1,000 versus $1,330 annually) and 55 percent for programs serving teens ($5.00 per enrollee versus $8.40 per slot per hour, or $790 versus $1,420 annually).

• Staff costs were the primary cost driver for OST programs. Among sample programs, staff salaries and benefits accounted for about two thirds of total costs.

• Average costs and cost ranges varied by program characteristics, such as focus, provider and setting, size and the age of their participants. However, these differences were less pronounced among summer and teen programs.

• Underlying these and all of the cost differences were explicit choices, mostly about staffing. For example, the school-based school-run programs in the sample operated with lower staff/youth ratios, had fewer certified staff and used fewer resources for management than even their closest substitute, school-based CBO-run programs.

• Costs varied by geographic location not only because the cost of living differed but also because of city or district-level policies.

• Although the vast majority of costs were covered through out-of-pocket expenditures, in-kind contributions were an important source of funding for many programs.