Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, ***Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success.*** This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit **www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds.**

About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at www.expandinglearning.org.

Priscilla Little
Research and Strategy Consultant

Engaging Families in Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs: A Review of the Research

Engaging families in afterschool and summer learning is a critical component of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative. Many other expanded learning opportunities and afterschool programs also place a premium on involving families. Research shows that when families are engaged, student outcomes, such as attendance, behavior, and achievement, improve. This article opens with a definition of family engagement in afterschool and then presents a research-based rationale for why family engagement is an essential component of afterschool and summer learning programs.

What Is Family Engagement in Afterschool?

Family engagement in afterschool includes activities for and with family members that are implemented on-site, where afterschool programs are actually located. It also includes additional and important activities and behaviors that happen outside of afterschool programs that influence children's development and learning within the program, such as encouraging a student's participation, helping students make informed choices about programming, discussing a child's progress with program staff, reinforcing skills from the program at home, and being an advocate for and/or leader in the program.

Families are critical partners in the recruitment and retention efforts of afterschool and summer learning programs.

What Are the Benefits of Family Engagement?

When afterschool programs reach out to and engage families, everyone stands to benefit—students, family members, programs, communities, and even schools. Family engagement can accomplish three specific objectives:

1. **Support improved participation in afterschool programs.** Families are critical partners in the recruitment and retention efforts of afterschool and summer learning programs. They are often a program's best ambassadors, not only in encouraging their children to participate but also in reaching out to other families to help them understand the importance of participation in afterschool programming (Lauver & Little, 2005). Once students are enrolled, family engagement can also be a factor in sustaining participation.

   - *A study of youth participation in over 600 summer and afterschool programs run by New York City's Department of Youth and Community Development showed that programs with a paid or volunteer parent liaison had higher levels of youth attendance and retention, especially for high school and community-based programs. Furthermore, the intensity of communication with families—such as holding meetings, sending materials home, and having phone conversations—was also positively associated with youth attendance rates (Pearson, Russell, & Reisner, 2007; Russell, Mielke, & Reisner, 2008).*

   - *A recent study of afterschool participation among older youth in almost 200 programs across six cities found that programs that retained at least 50% of their middle- and high-school-age participants for at least 12 months appeared to use a greater variety of parent engagement techniques than programs with lower sustained participation rates (Deschenes et al., 2010).*

   - *Evaluations of Texas programs funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative note that students who had at least one adult family member participating with them in center activities were involved in more activities than students with no family members participating. Further, the data show that once they do participate, adult family members return to participate again at a very high rate (Texas Education Agency, 2007).*

2. **Benefit afterschool participants themselves.** When afterschool programs are intentional about their family engagement strategies, then program participants tend to exhibit better outcomes.

   - *A study of 96 school-based afterschool programs supported by the After-School Corporation (TASC) identified connections between program staff and families as one of the shared features of high-performing programs. Efforts to engage families (including hiring a parent coordinator and communicating regularly with families at pick-up time) were some of the most common features among the 10 programs whose participants had the highest academic performance (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2006).*

- *The Massachusetts After-School Research Study examined quality characteristics via observations and surveys in 78 afterschool programs across the state, including some funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative. It found that communication with families during pick-up and drop-off time was associated with more positive youth relations with afterschool program staff and better family and community support for the program (Intercultural Center for Research in Education & National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005).*

- *Afterschool programs that engage families can influence student attendance and engagement in school. For example, a quasi-experimental evaluation of New York City's Chinatown YMCA 21st Century Community Learning Centers family program found that students whose families participated in the program had higher attendance rates in school than those in a comparison group (Bennett, 2004).*

3. **Positively affect family engagement with learning at school and at home.**
Family engagement in afterschool programs can be leveraged to improve family engagement in learning in and out of school. Specifically, studies have found that family engagement in afterschool programs can lead to greater involvement in school events, increased assistance with homework, and more encouragement for reading.

- *A 2-year quasi-experimental evaluation of the Generacion Diez (G-10) program, which provides afterschool support to Latino students and their families, found that by the end of the second year of the program, parents of children with higher attendance rates in the G-10 program reported significant increases in the quality and quantity of parent–teacher contact as well as engagement in their children's school activities (Riggs & Medina, 2005).*

Core Principles of Family Engagement

Family engagement is a *shared responsibility* in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.

Family engagement is *continuous across a child's life* and entails enduring commitment even though parental roles evolve as children mature into young adulthood.

Effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the *multiple settings where children learn*—at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in afterschool and summer programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

For more on defining family engagement, visit the Harvard Family Research Project website: http://hfrp.org/family-involvement.

- *The national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative found that participating parents also helped their children with homework more and asked their children about class more than nonparticipating families (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).*
- *Family engagement in afterschool programs can also support more positive parent–child relationships at home. A review of nonexperimental afterschool and summer program evaluations examining family involvement found that parents who volunteer with programs report feeling closer to their children (Harris & Wimer, 2004).*

The research is clear that afterschool and summer programs, as the bridge between home and school, are well positioned to influence families' engagement in their child's education.

Research shows that meaningful family engagement is associated with improvements in key student outcomes, including attendance, behavior, and achievement. Determining whether there is a causal relationship, however, will require additional research. Is increased family focus on their child's academic performance during the school day a result of specific strategies that afterschool and summer learning programs employ, or are families of children in afterschool simply more inclined to participate in their child's education? Both are important.

Regardless, the research is clear that afterschool and summer programs, as the bridge between home and school, are well positioned to influence families' engagement in their child's education. Therefore, as more and more local, state, and federal efforts to expand learning after school and in summer emerge, it is critical that these efforts include a strong family engagement component. Indeed, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative already includes annual reporting on family involvement, sending a strong signal to programs that family engagement is important. Moving forward, all afterschool and summer programs, whether supported by local, state, or other federal funding streams, should include a robust plan for implementing and monitoring family engagement as a necessary component of effective afterschool programs.

Bridging Schools and Families

The Greenwood Shalom afterschool program is located in a predominantly black and Latino neighborhood in Boston. The program provides homework support, computer instruction, arts and crafts, and literacy lessons. At the end of the day, everyone gathers for sharing and reflection. Parents are commonly seen lingering to talk with staff and report feeling comfortable and welcome. As one parent said, "Even if I have a problem at home, I can go and talk to them." (Kakli, Kreider, & Little, 2006).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Priscilla Little is an independent research and strategy consultant who has been working on issues related to effective afterschool and summer learning programs for over a decade. Her clients include national education research firms, state education agencies, not-for-profit agencies, and private foundations. She is currently working for the Wallace Foundation to support its afterschool system-building work, as well as with the U.S. Department of Education on a research study to investigate good and innovative practices in 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs. The views represented in this article are solely her own and do not represent those of her clients.

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