Science Centers and Afterschool Programs: Working Together for All Kids

By Melissa Ballard, Laura Herszenhorn, Katie Levedahl, Tara Cox, Tolly Foster, Michele Schilten, Brett Nicholas, and Bryan Wunar

Today, 10.2 million U.S. children regularly attend afterschool programs, where they can enjoy healthy food, homework help, physical activity, and time for reading, arts, and academics. Science centers often look to afterschool partnerships as an opportunity to expand their audiences and better engage populations that aren't traditional museumgoers—which afterschool programs often reach. By partnering with afterschool programs, science centers are able to plug into an existing infrastructure and leverage the experiences and community relationships that these programs have established.

Students at a neighborhood club in Chicago design and build wind turbines as part of an afterschool science club supported by the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago. Photo by JB Spector/Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago

At the 2013 Clinton Global Initiative America event, ASTC and the Afterschool Alliance, a national advocacy organization for afterschool and summer learning programs, made a commitment to increase and deepen partnerships between science centers and afterschool providers across the United States. During these past three years, our organizations have worked together in a variety of capacities—offering minigrants for new partnerships and professional development (PD), engaging in local and national advocacy, delivering conference presentations and webinars, and documenting how afterschool science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs impact youth. Across these initiatives, our goal has been to increase access to high-quality STEM learning opportunities for all children.

In this article, we offer a glimpse into how science centers and afterschool programs are working together, along with valuable advice from seasoned institutions that can help you establish your own partnership.

MAKING A BIG IMPACT THROUGH CAPACITY-BUILDING

Afterschool providers are incredibly diverse, including individual schools and districts, national providers such as the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and other community-based, youth-serving organizations. Many such programs want to offer engaging STEM education, but they often are underresourced and don't have the expertise to provide high-quality programming.

If they haven't yet participated in a partnership between a science center and an afterschool program, staff members of both organizations are quick to cite field trips and one-time outreach programs as the go-to format for community partnerships. While these types of connections have a role to play, many science centers have found that building afterschool educators' capacity to lead high-quality STEM learning makes the biggest impact. Here are four examples of this effort in practice:

- The **California Academy of Sciences,** San Francisco: The academy supports nearly 400

Top: An educator leads students in an ecosystem activity in the yard of their afterschool program in Chicago. The program is part of a network of afterschool science clubs supported by the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, which provides 100 partners with training, lessons, and supplies for hands-on learning. Photo by JB Spector/Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago

Bottom: The Indianapolis Zoo's recent Wildlife Science professional development session introduced out-of-school time educators to hands-on activities related to local wildlife, such as owl pellet dissection. Photo courtesy the Indianapolis Zoo

afterschool programs around the country through the Science Action Club network. Using a train-the-trainer model, the academy provides afterschool staff with in-depth training on citizen science activities and STEM teaching strategies, along with hands-on lesson plans and kits. Through games, projects, and outdoor investigations, 11,000 youth explore nature, document their discoveries, and design strategies for sustainability.

- The **Franklin Institute,** Philadelphia: Two of the institute's (U.S.) National Science Foundation–funded afterschool initiatives, STEM 3D: Integrating Science into Afterschool and LEAP into Science, build afterschool educators' confidence in facilitating STEM learning for children in underserved communities. The Franklin Institute staff offers curricula, PD, evaluation help, and ongoing support to these educators as part of an effort to build long-lasting partnerships with community organizations. Last year, STEM 3D reached 20 afterschool facilitators and more than 500 youth in Philadelphia. LEAP into Science has expanded and is currently being implemented by 24 partnering organizations (including museums, libraries, and afterschool programs) in 11 cities nationwide. This program has reached 83,600 youth and families across the nation since 2007.
- The **Indianapolis Zoo:** Until this year, the zoo had primarily interacted with afterschool programs through field trips. With a minigrant from Bright House Networks (now Charter Communications), the zoo has hosted its first PD workshops for afterschool providers, reaching 55 educators. This experience quickly afforded the zoo a new reputation among local afterschool providers and laid the groundwork for continued partnerships. In the future, the zoo will collaborate with afterschool providers to offer more workshops and develop better educational supports for field trips.

Out-of-school time educators build remote control vehicles during a recent Wildlife Science professional development session at the Indianapolis Zoo. The program used a variety of materials and technologies that educators could replicate in youth programs. Photo courtesy the Indianapolis Zoo

- The **Museum of Science and Industry** (MSI), Chicago: Through its Science Minors Club, an afterschool science club primarily for grades 3 to 5, MSI works with about 180 afterschool partners in community, school, and library settings to reach more than 9,500 youth in the greater Chicago area. (Also see the article beginning on page 38 to learn about MSI's separate Science Minors and Achievers program for teens.) The museum's role is to develop quality curriculum, train afterschool educators on how to lead and teach activities, and regularly check in with partners to support implementation. A key element of its model is holding family events at the museum, which allow students to connect their afterschool experiences to exhibits and include families in their learning.

EIGHT TIPS FOR WORKING WITH AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

By reflecting on these afterschool partnerships, we've identified eight key tips that can help ensure your initiative is successful:

1. **Find the right partner.** This can take some work, but it's important to find a provider that is enthusiastic and ready. Umbrella organizations that host multiple afterschool programs can make great partners, but don't overlook small programs in favor of increased reach. Regardless of size, you'll have the most success in maintaining relationships if you get buy-in from program administrators. That way, even if there is a high rate of staff turnover, the organization will remain committed to the partnership.

2. **Get on the same page.** Identify what is important to the afterschool program and how that aligns with your institution's mission. Together, clarify goals, set target outcomes, define what success looks like, and spell out roles and responsibilities.

3. **Step into each other's shoes.** Afterschool programs tend to take a multifaceted approach to supporting the needs of youth and their families. Juggling multiple tasks and often faced with high rates of staff turnover, supervisors may spend a large chunk of their own time on direct service. This leaves little time for coaching and observation, let alone partnership maintenance. Make time to understand each other's workloads, competing demands, and institutional cultures. Often staff members of afterschool programs don't fully understand what you and your institution do, either!

4. **Start small.** It takes time to build trust and secure the financial resources to support larger initiatives. Low-commitment projects, such as events, are great starting places. Use the event-planning process to learn about each other and evaluate if you're a good fit. For example, many science centers have kicked off partnerships with Lights On Afterschool, a U.S.-wide celebration of afterschool programs held every October. Watch this webinar to hear how six different science centers used this event to start relationships with local afterschool programs: *www.vimeo.com/124345087*.

5. **Seek out your partner's expertise.** The afterschool field is committed to Positive Youth Development, which includes fostering leadership skills, honoring youth voice and choice, providing positive relationships with adults, and supporting socioemotional learning. Afterschool programs have considerable experience in working closely with youth, and they have developed relationships with parents and other community members. Capitalizing on this expertise can improve the program you're partnering on, as well as enhance your institution's educational practices.

6. **Work together and co-create.** Involve your partner early in the planning process. Their input could shape program structure and delivery, helping to ensure that you both have positive experiences. Try writing curriculum or developing staff training modules together. Jointly applying for funding also signals an equal commitment to the partnership.

7. **Establish strong lines of communication.** Make sure you know the key points of contact both in administration and at the local site. You'll also want to establish methods for ongoing communication, as this will reduce confusion or frustration once programs are underway.

8. **Get connected.** Several types of organizations support the afterschool field. Reach out and join their ongoing efforts. Locate your statewide afterschool network *(www.statewideafterschoolnetworks.net)*, and check if there is a citywide out-of-school time organization in your area *(www.afterschoolsystems.org)*. Feel free to reach out to the STEM team at the Afterschool Alliance *(afterschoolalliance.org/STEM)*, and join ASTC's STEM Afterschool Community of Practice *(community.astc.org)*. ■

Melissa Ballard *(mjballard@afterschoolalliance.org) is STEM manager at the Afterschool Alliance, Washington, D.C.* **Laura Herszenhorn** *(lherszenhorn@calacademy.org) is senior manager of the Science Action Club at the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, and* **Katie Levedahl** *(klevedahl@calacademy.org) is associate director of youth engagement and strategic partnerships at the California Academy of Sciences.* **Tara Cox** *(tcox@fi.edu) is project associate at the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia.* **Tolly Foster** *(tfoster@indyzoo.com) is education programs manager, and* **Michele Schilten** *(mschilten@indyzoo.com) is director of education, both at the Indianapolis Zoo.* **Brett Nicholas** *(brett.nicholas@msichicago.org) is manager of community initiatives, and* **Bryan Wunar** *(bryan.wunar@msichicago.org) is director of community initiatives, both at the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago.*

FEATURED RESOURCE

Get more in-depth tips on working with afterschool programs with the **Museum and Community Partnerships Collaboration Guide and Toolkit** from the National Informal STEM Education Network (NISE Net). The toolkit includes resources to help find a partner, sample partnership agreements, and more: *www.nisenet.org/museum-community-partnerships*.