



The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the third issue brief in our latest series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. This series explores afterschool and: the Common Core State Standards, students with disabilities and other special needs, data utilization to improve programming, and keeping children safe and supported. The briefs examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

The gap in time between the ringing of the last school bell and when parents arrive home from work has long been a concern of families, law enforcement and community members due to the potential dangers and risky behaviors that take place after school. More than 15 million students—including approximately 3.7 million middle schoolers¹—are alone and unsupervised between 3 and 6 p.m., the peak hours for juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and sex.² The hours after school when children are on their own are not just a time of risks, it is also a time of lost opportunities to help students grow and develop the skills and competencies to make positive life decisions that can lead to their future success.

Strong support and guidance are critical to middle schoolers during a life stage that shapes their trajectory into high school, college, career and beyond.³ Afterschool programs are an environment where students can go to feel safe and find staff and mentors who they trust. They also offer a space where students can express their creativity, find their voice, learn how to deal with challenging situations, and better understand how the choices they make will impact their lives and the lives of those around them. Access to afterschool programs can help keep middle schoolers safe, keep them engaged in learning, and help them take advantage of their full potential as they navigate school, peers and their surroundings.

Navigating the Afterschool Hours

A study of working parents found that a significant number of parents are extremely worried about what their children are doing in the hours after school while they are still at work.⁴ Authors of the study named this specific worry, “Parental Concern about After-School Time,” or PCAST, and found that the indicators associated with parents having a higher risk for PCAST include having children who are often unsupervised and being more concerned about their child’s behavioral and/or social issues.

Parents’ concern for their children after school, especially if their children are alone and unsupervised during those hours, is not unwarranted. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reports that the incidence of violent crimes committed by youth peaks in the hours immediately following the end of the school day, with close to 1 in 5 juvenile violent crimes taking place in the hours between 3 and 7 p.m.⁵ Additionally, more than one-fifth of violent crimes involving youth as victims occurs during the same timeframe. OJJDP reports that, “the risk of violent juvenile victimization was 60 percent greater in the four hours after school than in the 8 p.m.-to-midnight period on non-school days.”⁶

Violence and victimization are not the only factors that worry parents when thinking about their unsupervised children. Risky behaviors, such as substance abuse are additional concerns of parents. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS)—a national survey monitoring health-risk behaviors among youth and young adults—tracks the activities of young people that are related to the top causes of illness, death and social problems in the U.S.: use of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs as well as sexual behaviors that can lead to unintended pregnancies.⁷ The YRBSS found that in 2011, of the more than 25 million youth ages 12 to 17, more than 1 in 10 smoked a cigarette, more than 1 in 4 drank alcohol and approximately 1 in 5 used an illicit drug in the past year.⁸ In a recent report, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) analyzed data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) and after combining NSDUH’s 2010 and 2011 data, estimated that in the past year there were approximately 7 million youth ages 12 to 17 who drank alcohol, close to 5 million youth who used an illicit drug and 3 million youth who smoked cigarettes.⁹

Examining when students first begin experimenting with cigarettes, alcohol, drugs and sex, the YRBSS found that approximately 1 in 5 students were younger than 13 years old when they first drank alcohol, 1 in 10 students smoked a whole cigarette for the first time before they were 13, 8 percent of students were younger than 13 years old when they first tried marijuana and 6 percent of students first had sex before they were 13 years old.¹⁰ The behaviors that children in middle school and younger engage in are important because they can be telling of behaviors later on in life. A CDC’s report on middle schoolers states that these behaviors—such as smoking, alcohol consumption and drug use—are, “frequently interrelated and are often established during youth and persist into adulthood.”¹¹

How Can Afterschool Programs Help?

A positive environment where students can build their social and emotional skills alongside adults who they trust—learning to work well with others and communicate effectively, understanding how to deal with challenging situations productively, and making sound and thoughtful decisions themselves—will help students gain the competencies that will serve them well as they move on through life.¹² A national survey of teachers found that close to 7 in 10 teachers believe social and emotional learning (SEL) are an important part of a middle schoolers’ in-school experience. More than 9 in 10 teachers agree that teaching social and emotional skills will probably or definitely improve relationships among students and reduce bullying. An overwhelming majority of teachers also

“... The fight against crime should not start in the courtroom—it should start by providing our young, at-risk children with opportunities to grow, learn and make choices that keep them off the streets. After-school programs give students a secure and fun place to be, while providing academic support and developing social skills that help to nurture productive and involved citizens.

...Investing in our children now is the best means of reducing future costs associated with prosecution and incarceration. Help us fight crime by fighting for our children.”

- Monroe County District Attorney Sandra Doorley

believe that a larger focus on SEL will have positive effects on students' school attendance and graduation, college preparation, workforce readiness and overall life success.¹³ However, 3 in 10 teachers say that their school places too little emphasis on developing students' social and emotional skills. Overall, more than 80 percent of teachers surveyed report that time is the biggest challenge to providing SEL.

Out-of-school-time programs are not only a safe environment for students before school, after school, on weekends and during the summer months, they provide activities that can build off the lessons students learn during the school day, help children further explore their interests and have an outlet to express themselves, employ staff who fulfill the role of mentors, and offer an ecosystem of support that raises student confidence in their abilities and their future possibilities.

A wealth of research confirms that afterschool programs' impact and influence has progressed beyond acting solely as a safe haven for youth in the community. Afterschool programs are helping students tackle challenging circumstances and avoid risky behaviors, teaching kids how to communicate effectively with their peers and interact positively with others, and encouraging them to believe in themselves—helping them develop fortitude and

persevere through difficult situations they may face. Studies have found that benefits associated with students participating in afterschool programs include:

- **Decrease in criminal activity and risky behaviors:** Studies have found that students participating in quality afterschool programs are less likely to take part in criminal activities and risky behaviors than students not in the programs. A 2007 evaluation report found that children attending LA's BEST are 30 percent less likely to participate in criminal activities than their peers who do not attend the program.¹⁴ Researchers estimate that for every dollar invested in the program, the city saves \$2.50 in crime-related costs. A separate study looking at participants in Chicago's After School Matters program found that students in the program participated in risky behaviors such as selling drugs, using drugs and taking part in gang activity at a much lower rate than matched non-participants.¹⁵
- **Awareness of the dangers of risky behaviors:** An evaluation of New York City's Beacon Community Centers found that 77 percent of students agreed that the program taught them about the dangers of alcohol, drugs and other risky activities.¹⁶

Taking a Look at Middle School Students' School Day Experience

Unfortunately, the out-of-school hours are not the only time that middle school students are susceptible to victimization or taking part in risky behaviors. In 2011, close to 3 in 10 students from 12 to 18 years of age reported being bullied at school; 6th grade students had the highest percentage of reported bullying incidents (37 percent). Based on the Department of Education's "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2012," victimization rates at school for students ages 12-14 was 55 per 1,000 students, higher than the victimization rates at school for 15 to 18 year olds (44 per 1,000 students). Middle school students also reported being "afraid of attack or harm at school" at higher levels than 11th and 12th graders. Robers, S., Kemp, J. and Truman, J. (2013). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2012*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013036.pdf>.

- **Decrease in aggression and other problematic behaviors:** Afterschool programs have the ability to help students improve their behavior and avoid situations that negatively impact their academics and future aspirations. For instance, a study of California’s After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) found that students regularly participating in the program were less likely to be suspended than their peers who did not participate in the program.¹⁷ An evaluation of After-School All-Stars in Chicago, Illinois, reported that participation in the program led to close to a 20 percent reduction in school suspensions.¹⁸
- **Improved social skills:** A number of evaluations have found that students participating in afterschool programs see improvements in their ability to interact with others. A study of New Hampshire’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) found that 97 percent of principals agreed that the afterschool program

enhanced students’ social skills and a study of Wisconsin’s 21st CCLC programs found that more than half of regularly attending students improved their classroom behavior.¹⁹

- **Improved self-confidence:** A meta-analysis found that students participating in quality afterschool programs saw significant increases in their self-perception, self-confidence and self-esteem.²⁰
- **Feeling safe:** Students in afterschool programs report feeling safe. For example, an evaluation of 21st CCLCs in Tennessee found that close to 9 in 10 students said that they felt at least somewhat safer as a result of attending their afterschool program.²¹

Quality afterschool programs have the ability to help students make positive, healthy life decisions. When students learn to think critically about choices they make in their lives, have a space where they feel safe and comfortable being themselves, and know they have adults in their life who they can turn to and trust, they have the supports and tools they need to learn, grow and do well in school, work and beyond.

Afterschool Programs Meeting the Needs of Students During the Out-of-School Hours

Middle school is a time of transition for students. It is a period in their lives when they experience mental, emotional and physical growth as they explore who they are and manage academic and peer pressures. Afterschool programs from New Britain, Connecticut, to Los Angeles, California, are working with middle school students and ascertaining how to best help them thrive in school and out, and teaching them how to navigate this time in their life. Finding ways to help address the specific needs of the middle schoolers in their community, programs are keeping students safe and supported in a variety of ways during the hours after school:

“...I’m a big proponent of us having strong education systems everywhere and a strong proponent of afterschool programs. I think that’s a time when a lot of our children are getting into trouble and are being recruited by gang members and thugs. If we can raise our community in terms of education and poverty issues, housing that’s stable and safe, people having good jobs to support their families, then we can significantly reduce the problems of drugs and crimes in those areas.”

- Judge Glenda Hatchett

Targeting at-risk children in the community and developing a program that directly responds to the issues and challenges they face.

New Britain YWCA STRIVE (Strength, Teamwork, Respect Individuals, Vision, Excellence) Youth Development Program, located in New Britain, Connecticut, focuses on reaching middle school girls identified as at-risk by providing academic enrichment, health and wellness programming, and overall positive youth development. Stemming from research that identified a shortage of afterschool programs for middle schoolers in New Britain, New Britain YWCA STRIVE is currently the only afterschool program in the community specifically for middle school girls. Girls in the program are identified as at-risk based on their academic performance in school, school day absences, living in an area identified as underserved by the local Youth Initiative or living in a situation that would place them at-risk as identified by New Britain Community Service agencies.

New Britain YWCA STRIVE's primary goal is to build a sense of safety and security for girls in the program, of which 9 in 10 qualify for the Federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program. Employing staff who serve as female role models and work to build positive relationships with girls in the program, the free afterschool program aims to empower students, addressing topics such as peer pressure, leadership development, healthy relationships, body

development and image, and overall health. Program surveys found that in 2013, 94 percent of parents surveyed agreed that New Britain YWCA STRIVE helped students develop life skills, confidence and resilience and 8 in 10 students surveyed shared that the program helped them to build self-confidence.

“Growing up in New Britain can be tough (sic.) there are many factors that can distract a young person and guide them through the wrong path. The transition from elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school can be rough on pre-teens and teens...The pressure to fit in for young people is very strong, especially for girls. During my middle school career, I found comfort in a wonderful program offered at the YWCA STRIVE...This program helped me blossom... STRIVE became my safe zone... STRIVE was more than a program. It was a sisterhood.”

- YWCA STRIVE Program Alumnus

Creating a program where students feel empowered and know their voice is respected and heard, encouraging and sustaining long-term engagement in the program.

AS220 Youth Studio, located in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, is an afterschool arts program open to students who attend the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program (UCAP)—an alternative middle school for students at risk of dropping out of school—and have taken an AS220 Youth class offered at the UCAP. AS220 Youth reaches a number of the community's most disconnected youth; many program participants have been involved in the juvenile justice system, grew up in foster homes or group homes and live in poverty. Eighty-five percent of students in the program qualify for the Federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch program.

The program offers free courses in computer design, creative writing, dance, painting and drawing, guitar and piano, and photography Monday through Friday, 51 weeks out of the year. All students in the program create digital portfolios of their work,

which includes an artist statement and resume, that help them realize the pathways to academic and professional opportunities that are created through various program activities. AS220 Youth places a significant emphasis on student voice in the program and takes a “membership model” approach, encouraging students to view themselves as artists and see the courses offered to them as opportunities to develop their skills and invest in their future. Student surveys are used to help determine classes offered and the program works to adapt programming based on student feedback. Through this approach, AS220 Youth cultivates commitment among their middle schoolers, working to sustain their student’s participation through high school and beyond. Program evaluations found that more than 9 in 10 students in the program graduated from high school or received their GED. Almost all of students in the program shared that they feel more self-confident (99 percent).

Providing support that is culturally and linguistically sensitive to students and their families, helping connect them to school and the community.

The **Popular Education and Enrichment for Refugees (PEER) afterschool program** in San Diego, California, is a partnership between the International Rescue Committee and Monroe Clark Middle School. The program provides wraparound services addressing the educational, employment and legal needs of their refugee community in a manner that is sensitive to culture, language and family dynamics. Focused on meeting the needs unique to refugee youth, PEER assesses each student—100 percent of whom qualify for the Federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program and 100 percent of whom are limited English proficient—and develops an individual academic service plan, allowing PEER staff to identify subject areas where students are struggling and provide additional support where necessary. Program staff also works with students to develop goals and

“By offering safe places for children after school, we can help keep our community safer...These programs also help kids succeed in school and provide jobs, as well as child care—all at a very small cost per student. Afterschool programs are a smart investment, especially in these difficult economic times. Because educators have to do more with fewer resources in the classroom, afterschool programs are more important than ever.”

*- State Assemblymember
Das Williams (D-CA)*

action steps to go onto higher education and/or prepare for the workforce. In addition to academic support, the afterschool program immerses students in the community to facilitate a sense of belonging and comfort among students in their new environment, teaching them to navigate the San Diego transit system, taking them on field trips to the library and the San Diego Zoo, and working with them on a community garden.

Parent engagement is another key aspect of the program. PEER understands that helping parents settle into the community in turn supports students with their transition to the U.S. Serving as a resource for parents, the program connects them to social services and legal support, offers translators for school events and parent-teacher conferences, and provides transportation for families to school activities. The program’s assessment for the 2012-2013 school year found that 88 percent of students in the program increased their standardized test scores and 74 percent increased their English language proficiency level.

Providing wraparound services to youth and their families that helps encourage parent engagement and offers support for medical, social and emotional issues children may be facing.

Established through a partnership between the California Hospital Medical Center (CHMC); the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); and residents living in the South Park neighborhood of

“...I will fight for their [afterschool] programs because there are noticeable, positive outcomes when young children of working parents have the opportunity to participate in programs like these with other kids their own age in a structured, safe environment that offers enrichment and a supportive place play, do homework or just be kids. When Luisa and my children were growing up, we depended on afterschool programs because we were a working family, like many others.”

*- State Rep. Mitch Bolinsky
(R-CT)*

downtown Los Angeles, California, the **Hope Street Family Center - Youth Center** is the only afterschool program in the area that provides academic enrichment, recreational activities, and medical and social services for middle school students and their families. The program serves a high needs population, with all students qualifying for the Federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch program. Based on the *Los Angeles Times*' mapping project, South Park's violent crime rate is currently 26th out of Los Angeles' 272 neighborhoods.²² Additionally, a UCLA community assessment survey found that 40 percent of adults in the area have less than a ninth grade education and in 70 percent of households, Spanish is the primary language spoken. The

program offers academic support and enrichment, group activities to help develop students' social and communication skills, sports, dance classes, and art workshops, as well as a focus on the whole family—helping encourage parent engagement and linking families to needed community supports. Staff make home visits to all families when students first enroll in the program and at the beginning of each year, helping families become more comfortable with staff and familiarizing them with the services available, as well as gaining a better sense of the needs of each family. The Youth Center employs social workers and psychologists who provide individual, group and family counseling, and help connect students and their parents to community services such as mental health services, behavioral health practitioners, parenting and couples counselors, and legal support.

Conclusion

It is estimated that children spend as much as 80 percent of their time outside of school.²³ These hours out of school—particularly the hours of the day after school lets out and before parents return home from work—is a time when parents worry about what activities their child is taking part in. It is also a time when parents worry that their child is losing out on opportunities to learn more about themselves, better themselves and their communities, and become more confident in who they are and what they can accomplish. Day after day, afterschool programs are opening their doors and providing a practical solution to families and communities across the country—offering a safe space, caring mentors, youth-centered activities and individualized support to their students and their families. With a wide range of programs, activities, services and areas of focus, afterschool programs are able to meet the specific needs of their community and provide students with the supports they need to help them be happy, healthy, and successful in school, life and career.

Endnotes

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