



Issue Brief No. 64

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## Afterschool Supporting Students with Disabilities and Other Special Needs

*The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the second 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.*

Based on the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics' most recent report, 13 percent of public school students—approximately 6.4 million students—were identified as having a disability or other special need and served by a federally supported special education program.<sup>i\*</sup> Research shows that, compared to students without disabilities, students with disabilities and other special needs face additional challenges as they move through school and into adulthood. For instance, during the 2010-2011 school year, just 63 percent of students with disabilities graduated from high school, compared to 78 percent of all students.<sup>ii</sup> Additionally, the National Survey of Children with Special Health Care Needs found that while more than one-third of parents reported that their child's special needs never affected their ability to do things other children do, close to 2 out of 3 parents agreed that their child's daily activities were moderately or consistently affected.<sup>iii</sup>

However, research also shows that when students with disabilities graduate from high school, their academic and career opportunities improve, and their means to live independently and satisfaction with their independence also improves. Inclusive learning environments—where students of all abilities can take part in meaningful learning experiences together—support positive growth and development, helping students of all abilities improve academically, socially and emotionally. Inclusive learning environments have the capacity to provide the supports necessary to help students of all abilities to stay engaged in school, do well in school and graduate from school. Although 95 percent of students with disabilities were enrolled in regular schools and approximately 6 in 10 spent the majority of the school day in inclusive classrooms, these students can greatly benefit from additional opportunities outside the school day to take part in academically enriching environments and learn alongside their peers without disabilities.<sup>iv</sup>

Afterschool programs can broaden students' horizons in an informal learning environment, where the focus can be on the experience and the activities, rather than the final result. They can also provide the extra support to help combat school disengagement and the risk factors associated with a student's decision to drop out of school, which can start in the middle school

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\* The Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau define children with special health care needs as, "Those who have or are at increased risk for a chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional condition and who also require health and related services of a type or amount beyond that required by children generally."

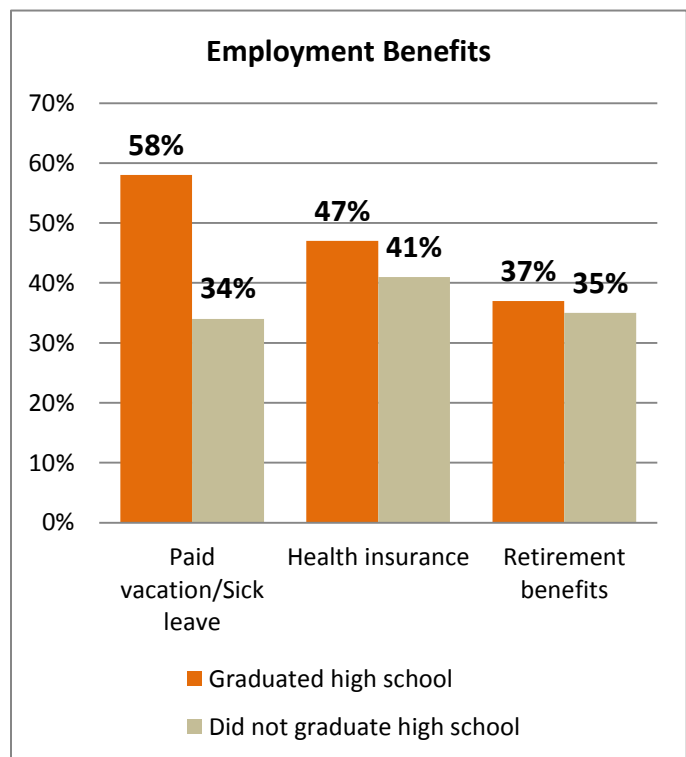
years.<sup>v</sup> These out-of-school opportunities, bringing together students with and without disabilities and other special needs, allow all students to understand and appreciate one another's differences and similarities, helping students gain the acceptance, confidence and strength to succeed in school, graduate from school, and thrive in their career and life.

### **The difference a high school diploma makes for students with disabilities and other special needs**

Supporting the academic success of students with disabilities and other special needs is necessary to help them thrive in their adult lives. Even though students with disabilities hold enormous potential and have the capacity to be productive and independent citizens, overall, students with disabilities were less likely to attend a postsecondary school, earned less and were less likely to live independently than their peers without disabilities. The 10-year National Longitudinal Transition Study of outcomes of young people with disabilities—following them from high school into young adulthood, found that 60 percent of young people with disabilities had enrolled in a two-year or four-year college within eight years of leaving high school compared to 67 percent of young people without disabilities.<sup>vi</sup> Young people with disabilities also earned an average of \$10.40 per hour compared with \$11.40 per hour for young people without disabilities. Additionally, 45 percent of young people with disabilities were living independently, compared to 59 percent of young people without disabilities.<sup>vii</sup>

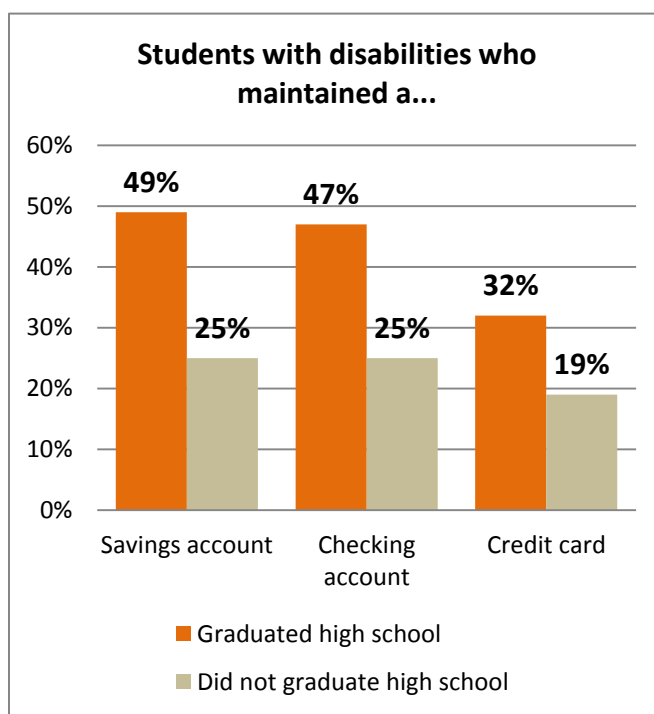
Graduating from high school is an important milestone for every student. It improves a person's ability to move on to higher education, find a job, and become an independent and successful adult.<sup>viii</sup> A full high school education also positively affects aspects of a young person's life outside of college and career. Students that graduate from high school are less likely to get in trouble with the law and more likely to become civically engaged.<sup>ix</sup> Completing high school is just as important an accomplishment for students with disabilities and other special needs as it is for all other students.

The longitudinal study found that students with disabilities who completed high school were more likely to enroll in a two-year or four-year college, have a job, and show financial independence than students with disabilities and other special needs who did not finish high school.<sup>x</sup> The young people who graduated from high school were also less likely to have been engaged in criminal activity and more likely to be involved in their community.



- **Higher education:** The longitudinal study, released in 2011, reported that close to half of students with disabilities who graduated from high school enrolled in a four-year college and 21 percent enrolled in a two-year college. Just 13 percent of students with disabilities who did not graduate from high school enrolled in a two-year college and less than 1 percent enrolled in a four-year college.<sup>xi</sup>
- **Employment and independent living:** Examining employment, the longitudinal study found that more than half of young people with disabilities who had a high school degree were employed at the time of the interview, whereas 38 percent of young people with disabilities who had not finished high school were employed.<sup>xii</sup> Interestingly, those young people who had not finished high school earned slightly more per hour than those that did finish (\$9.80 per hour vs. \$9.50 per hour), however, they were also less likely to have benefits, such as paid vacation or sick leave, health insurance and retirement benefits.

Maintaining a checking account, a savings account and a credit card are forms of financial independence. Young people with disabilities and other special needs who graduated from high school were close to two times as likely to have a savings account and checking account as young people with disabilities and other special needs who did not graduate. They were also more likely to have a credit card.<sup>xiii</sup> Although surveyed young people with disabilities who had completed high school were slightly less likely to have lived on their own than those who had not graduated from high school (50 percent vs. 55 percent), they were much more likely to be satisfied with their independence (73 percent vs. 64 percent).<sup>xiv</sup>



- **Criminal activity and community involvement:** Young people with disabilities who did not graduate from high school were also more likely to have been arrested and have an encounter with the criminal justice system. Close to 60 percent of young people with disabilities and other special needs who did not complete high school had been arrested at least once, compared to 32 percent of students with disabilities and other special needs who had graduated from high school.<sup>xv</sup> More than three-quarters of young people with disabilities who did not graduate from high school had been arrested, spent the night in jail, been on probation or parole, or were stopped by the police for an offense other than a traffic violation, whereas 51 percent of their peers who graduated from high school had been in the same situations.<sup>xvi</sup>

Differences were also seen when looking at community involvement. Close to half of young people with disabilities and other special needs who graduated from high school participated in a community group or lessons or classes outside of school, compared to less than one-third of their peers who did not finish high school. Sixty percent of young people with disabilities who finished high school were also registered to vote, compared to 48 percent of those who did not graduate.<sup>xvii</sup>

## **Bringing together students of all abilities to learn and grow side-by-side**

A guide on inclusive practices emphasizes that inclusion is not merely creating a space where students with and without disabilities are brought together. Rather, inclusion is participation that is meaningful and the environment created promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance.<sup>xviii</sup> Research has found that fully including students with disabilities and other special needs into classrooms and programs positively impacts their engagement, performance, attitude and behavior.<sup>xix</sup> Providing equal access to educational opportunities also helps students with disabilities and other special needs develop friendships and other life skills, such as social and communication skills.<sup>xx</sup> One such study found that in addition to a positive effect on the behavior of students with disabilities, there was no negative effect on the academic performance of students without disabilities.<sup>xxi</sup>

Studies have also found, and researchers agree, that both students with and without disabilities benefit from inclusive settings.<sup>xxii</sup> For instance, one study found that a camp that brought together both students with disabilities and those without allowed students to appreciate one another for their similarities and differences.<sup>xxiii</sup> A separate study found that bringing together students with and without disabilities created an environment to confront, challenge and reject stereotypes.<sup>xxiv</sup>

*“The promise of inclusion is not a one-way offer of help to children with intellectual differences; it is instead a two-way offer to children with and without differences to learn how to live, work, and learn together in ways that elevate the aspirations, knowledge, and creativity of all.”*

*– Timothy P. Shriver  
Chairman of the Board, Special Olympics*

## **Providing an inclusive learning environment: Afterschool programs supporting students of all abilities**

Students with disabilities and other special needs can benefit from additional time spent in inclusive settings that can help them with their homework, develop new knowledge and skills, cultivate social skills, and build relationships. As evidenced above, compared to students without disabilities, students with disabilities face their own set of challenges as they transition out of high school and into their adult lives. But, those students with disabilities who are able to graduate from high school are placed in a much better position to succeed than those who do not.

Along with inclusive settings during the regular school day, afterschool programs can provide the much-needed support middle school students with disabilities and other special needs require and help them to thrive alongside their peers without disabilities. Afterschool programs have the flexibility to provide an inclusive environment that allows students with disabilities and other

special needs to learn and play next to students without disabilities, explore their interests, develop social and leadership skills and grow friendships.<sup>xxv</sup> Focusing on the middle school years, afterschool programs can address the risk factors that lead to students dropping out of school and give them the tools to successfully move through middle and high school. Across the country, afterschool programs are providing an inclusive environment that fosters a sense of belonging and empowers students with disabilities and other special needs in a variety of ways:

*Developing a student-led model that encourages students of all abilities to become leaders, instilling confidence and raising self-esteem.*

**Unified Theater** is an afterschool program located in Hartford, Connecticut, whose mission is to foster inclusion and develop student leaders through the arts. The program was founded in 2004 by Micaela, a middle school student who believed that students of all abilities should be able to take part in and enjoy the benefits music and theater programs have to offer. Micaela's cousin—who was close to her age—was born with disabilities that limited her ability to walk and talk. The two shared a love for music, but Micaela was frustrated that she didn't see more students with disabilities in her music and theater programs. Today, with 30 percent of the program's students with a disability or special needs, Unified Theater continues to place inclusion and leadership development first.

Their youth-led model focuses on empowering students to be leaders, letting creativity rule and placing the spotlight on ability. Students learn playwriting, choreography and set design, as well as leadership skills necessary to produce a play, such as strong communication as well as money and project management. The program creates a culture of support, respect and inclusion. It teaches students what a truly inclusive environment looks like, how to place ability first and how to bring inclusion into the community. Students, parents and school administrators have positive feedback for the program. More than half of parents agreed that the program improved their child's home and school behavior. Students unanimously agreed that the program promoted tolerance in their school and/or community, 88 percent of administrators agreed that the program is more inclusive than other programs in their school, and 100 percent of school administrators agreed that the program promoted tolerance in their school. More than 9 in 10 students agreed that the program improved their self-confidence (94 percent).

#### SELECTED QUOTES FROM UNIFIED THEATER

*"Unified Theater made me realize that everybody is equal and should get a chance to shine. People may not realize it, but people of all abilities are all very special, unique, and equal."*

— Student

*"[Unified Theater] gave my daughter her first experience with students of varying abilities and as a direct result she has planned a career in either occupational or speech therapy."*

— Parent

*"The variety of diverse groups is wonderful to see. You can look at Unified Theater and feel the unity of our school."*

— School administrator

*Offering a variety of activities that allows students of all abilities to explore various interests and take part in activities they may not have the chance to otherwise.*

Located in Tiverton, Rhode Island, **Triple A (academics, athletics, arts)**, is an afterschool program at Tiverton Middle School (TMS) that partners with the Special Olympics, the local public library, the TMS Athletic Boosters Club and TMS TEMPO (the music program boosters) to provide TMS students a variety of activities. Serving more than 300 middle schoolers annually—a quarter of whom have a disability or special need—Triple A offers programming that has students of all abilities working side-by-side with one another. Tiverton Middle School, in conjunction with Bradley Hospital, also hosts the region’s autism, behavior support and alternate assessment programs. This brings in students with disabilities and other special needs from communities around Tiverton to participate in Triple A.

*“[Afterschool and summer learning programs] provide more natural environments where children with disabilities can experience joyful learning and develop genuine friendships with same-age peers without disabilities.”*

*– Kara N. Smith and Mary M. Shea,  
Kids Included Together*

Triple A leverages school and community partnerships to offer inclusive programming for students in Tiverton and the surrounding areas. Students in the program are able to take part in sports; arts; digital media; anti-bullying lessons; a science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) club; literacy programs; and community service. For example, in collaboration with the Special Olympics, the program offers “Unified Basketball,” a basketball program in which students with disabilities and other special needs team up with their non-disabled peers to play schools throughout Rhode Island. Another example is through a partnership with the local library: 14 times a year Triple A students, library staff, and parents all read the same book, talk through what the book’s messages are, what each person gained from the book and are able to talk with

the book’s author through a Skype session. Local artists are also brought in to work with students on activities, including “Theater for Social Awareness,” “Creating Characters Through Improvising,” and “Dance Troupe and Vocal Performance.” Triple A staff meet regularly with their partners to review program data to help determine how to improve activities, if new activities need to be added and budget for the upcoming years.

*Valuing parent feedback to tailor programming to best support students.*

**Thriving Minds After-School** is a program of Big Thought, a nonprofit organization in Dallas, Texas, that works with and coordinates more than 100 nonprofits providing afterschool and summer learning programs to students. Thriving Minds After-School also partners with the Dallas Independent School District and close to 100 artists, nonprofit organizations and volunteers. The program’s primary objectives are to help students think critically, increase literacy expression and understanding, and improve students’ social skills. Their Explorer Reading Club at Marsh Middle School has a strong parent engagement component, surveying families every year to determine what activities parents believe will most benefit their children. Serving more than 100 students—85 percent of whom qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program and 40 percent of whom have a disability or special needs—Thriving Minds After-School uses parent and student feedback to tailor programming. For instance, when parents

and students expressed an interest in homework workshops, the program built in time for homework assistance.

The Explorer Reading Club began when Marsh Middle School's special education teacher saw that a number of his students attended the Thriving Minds After-School Program. Together, the special education teacher and the Thriving Minds After-School Program's site manager designed a program that focused on creating an interactive and social experience for students with disabilities and special needs that worked to support a student's academic and personal development. Students of all abilities in the program are brought together to discuss books they have read—critiquing story plots, characters and literary elements; sharing stories they have written; and providing feedback to one another in a respectful and supportive manner. An independent evaluation for the 2012-2013 school year found that 42 percent of students improved their school-day attendance, more than half improved their language arts grades and more than 9 in 10 were promoted to the next grade.

*Eliminating barriers to participation, ensuring that students of all abilities are able to benefit from all that afterschool programs have to offer.*

### **Project B.I.N.D. (Boston Inclusion Network for Disabilities)**

is dedicated to serving students with disabilities and other special needs in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and surrounding areas. The afterschool program offers a variety of activities for students, making individualized modifications in programming to ensure that students of all abilities are able to participate. Project B.I.N.D. students are able to take part in a wide range of programming—from academic enrichment to career services to physical activity to arts. Students can learn about song writing, audio production, and filmmaking; engage in job training activities; play on intramural team sports; draw and sculpt; and learn to play an instrument. Helping students to become strong and independent individuals is also central to the program. Students work on developing leadership skills and life skills, such as learning how to purchase a subway fare, ride the train and navigate the city.

With a mission to ensure that all children are able to “access life-enhancing afterschool programs,” Project B.I.N.D. places an emphasis on reaching out to young people with special needs who may not otherwise be able to participate in an afterschool program. In addition to tailoring programs to serve all students interested in attending, Project B.I.N.D. also keeps program fees low—just five dollars per year—to ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation. One hundred percent of the students in the program have special needs or a disability and all students also qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

### **THRIVING MINDS AFTER-SCHOOL BY THE NUMBERS**

- **92 percent** of students were promoted to the next grade
- **53 percent** of students improved their grade in math
- **50 percent** of students improved their grade in language arts
- **42 percent** of students showed improved attendance
- **100 percent** of principals agreed that Thriving Minds After-School program helped students become college and career ready

## Helping more afterschool programs serve students with disabilities and other special needs

Creating a fully inclusive environment does not come without its challenges. Afterschool programs and their staff also need support and resources to effectively serve students of all abilities. A research report by Kids Included Together, an organization specializing in providing support to programs serving students with and without disabilities, concluded that staff members who received training and professional development were more confident and comfortable serving students of all abilities.<sup>xxvi</sup> A survey of afterschool providers in New Jersey found similar results, where programs that had positive experiences including children with disabilities and other special needs had more professional development and experience with children with disabilities and other special needs.<sup>xxvii</sup> Ongoing professional development, partnerships and positive reinforcement are supports necessary to build staff confidence, improve programming, and promote an accommodating and inclusive environment. Statewide afterschool networks are also providing support and guidance to afterschool programs regarding how best to fully include students of all abilities. For example, the New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition’s (NJSACC) NJ Afterschool Action—an online newsletter—featured “Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in After School and Summer Programs,” a document highlighting the legal responsibilities of afterschool programs, best practices and additional resources.<sup>xxviii</sup>

### Conclusion

Providing inclusive learning environments in and out of school gives students with disabilities and other special needs the opportunity to take part in activities that support their development, encourage perseverance and highlight their capabilities. Afterschool programs create a safe space where students of all abilities can learn and grow side-by-side, respecting and appreciating one another’s similarities and differences. The flexible and adaptable nature of afterschool programs make them a valuable source of support for all students—including students with disabilities and other special needs—helping them reach their full potential in school, in work and in life.

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- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.
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