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Literacy in Afterschool: An Essential Building Block for Learning and Development

The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the fourth in a series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. These issue briefs feature: the importance of aligning afterschool with the school day; bullying awareness and prevention; service-learning opportunities for middle schoolers; and literacy education. They examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

Literacy in its traditional sense has always been linked to reading and writing; however, the list of subjects associated with the term literacy has become much more expansive in recent years. No longer does literacy simply refer to the comprehension of the written word. In the 21st century, literacy connotes an intense knowledge of any particular field of interest. Those who are STEM-literate are particularly apt at understanding the worlds of science, technology, engineering and math, while those who maintain financial literacy are able to manage their personal investments and savings. In the same way that literacy's meaning has expanded in recent years, so too has the push to broaden academic experiences beyond simply comprehension and vocabulary. The new global, high-tech marketplace demands intense creativity and thinking that goes beyond basic learning skills and propels students to a fuller understanding of society. However, despite the growing importance of 21st century skills such as critical thinking and global awareness, the ability to comprehend written text is still an essential building block to learning and development. Even as doors are being opened for more well-off students to expand their minds beyond reading, writing and arithmetic, many students continue to struggle to develop a strong command of written text not only in elementary and middle school, but also into their high school and even adult years. At its core, literacy is the use of written information to function in society, attain goals and develop knowledge.ⁱ Without this tool, a student will almost inevitably struggle with other forms of learning. Whether solving a complex word problem or learning about the Revolutionary War, literacy is an absolute necessity to furthering learning and development.

Middle school stands as a particularly important time to intervene and ensure that children are on the right track toward proficient literacy. Although reading and writing abilities are first developed in elementary school, sixth graders who failed math or English/reading have only a 10 to 20 percent chance of graduating high school on time.ⁱⁱ Therefore, intervention during the middle school years is critical, and children who have fallen behind by the end of elementary school need more help to catch up. Afterschool programs across the country are helping to close the reading achievement gap to ensure that all children are prepared to tackle more complex subject matter as they advance to high school and beyond.

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Literacy by the Numbers: A Lot of Work Needed to Catch Up

The achievement gap in the United States is a well-documented issue that pervades every aspect of society, and one of its essential cogs is the disconnect in reading and writing achievement between low-income children and those from more affluent backgrounds. By comparison, children from low-income families start off at an immense disadvantage in terms of literacy development:

- First graders from lower-income families have a vocabulary half the size of children from higher-income families.
- By age 3, children in low-income homes will have heard one-third as many words as children in middle- and high-income homes (10 million versus 30 million words).
- The literacy gap between racial/ethnic groups is wide – while 41 percent of White and 42 percent of Asian-American fourth graders score at or above the “proficient” level, just 13 percent of African-American, 16 percent of Hispanic-American and 18 percent of American Indian fourth graders do.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Seventy-five percent of students with literacy problems in the third grade will still experience literacy difficulties in the ninth grade.^{iv}

Once these students advance on to adulthood, the numbers become even more disconcerting:

- A 2002 study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics found that 21-23 percent of adult Americans were not "able to locate information in text," could not "make low-level inferences using printed materials," and were unable to "integrate easily identifiable pieces of information." Additionally, the study showed that more than 40 percent of U.S. adults in the lowest level on the literacy scale were living in poverty.^v
- Eleven million adults nationwide were deemed non-literate in English in a 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.^{vi}

In light of these statistics, it is apparent that early intervention is necessary to ensure that children start on the right track toward healthy literacy development. However, the statistics also show that once students fall off the path to literacy, it is extremely difficult to get back on, leading to high rates of adult illiteracy that can have damaging effects on the individual and the future of our economy. Studies have shown that between 10 and 15 percent of children with serious reading problems will drop out of high school, and about half of youth with criminal records or with a history of substance abuse have reading problems.^{vii} With this, the adolescent years have taken on new importance of late as a time to reverse the reading losses low-income children suffer in elementary school so that they can succeed as adults.

"When educators partner with the community in afterschool programs, kids flourish both inside and outside the classroom. I have seen first-hand how these programs support and build on the work of our teachers. Afterschool programs... are an important piece of public school reform."

Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers

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There is growing research showing that adolescents may be able to develop stronger literacy if they are able to read more liberally, with materials they select and in the medium they most prefer: the Internet. Research also suggests that the time spent outside of school in enrichment programs and clubs can infuse reading into subjects and hobbies that youth actually enjoy, therefore leading to development in the classroom.^{viii} With this in mind, afterschool programs are an excellent conduit to bridge middle schoolers' interests and passions with literacy development.

Innovative Literacy Learning in Afterschool

In general, studies on afterschool have shown stronger gains in math in comparison to reading and language arts; however some programs have shown significant gains in increasing literacy and related skills, and programs across the country are offering innovative solutions to promoting literacy engagement afterschool.

- In an evaluation of New Jersey After 3 participants, teachers reported that over three-quarters of program participants were at or above grade level in their ability to draw conclusions, spell, identify the main idea of a reading passage and communicate orally.^{ix}
- A Yale University study of afterschool participation found that children who were in the highest category of afterschool program attendance had significantly higher reading achievement than children in all other care arrangements.^x
- A Public/Private Ventures evaluation of the Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL) project, an eight-year, \$58 million afterschool initiative of the James Irvine Foundation, concluded that the five-city program's tightly focused literacy programming three to four days a week produced "pronounced gains in achievement for a range of students." The reading gains were greatest for participating youth who were two or more grade levels behind at the time of the first assessment.^{xi}

As can be seen in the statistics, afterschool programs can have a range of important benefits for children's literacy development, and innovative programs across the country are proving that afterschool and literacy learning can be a powerful combination.

Afterschool programs can create a community of support that encourages reading and writing in school, at home and in social settings, offering children the opportunity to strengthen themselves as readers, writers and communicators.^{xii}

ACES (Athletes Committed to Educating Students) in Minneapolis, MN, is focused on reducing the achievement gap by providing innovative literacy enrichment to its participants. Data prove the program's significant effects on reading gains: During the 2009-2010 school year, ACES students were 30 percent more likely than non-participants to gain one year or more of reading growth. In addition, ACES has served the Minneapolis community for 16 years, creating ongoing access and sustained participation opportunities. ACES program curriculum has strong ties to school-day learning. Students learn in classrooms of ten or fewer, with a 1:4 staff-to-student ratio, providing individualized instruction in partnership with school day teachers and principals to truly coordinate the school day and afterschool. This creates a strong community of

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learning for the students which assists in their literacy development. Throughout their work, ACES connects with families, teachers, administrators and other community groups to create holistic supports for students' literacy development. ACES students have achieved outstanding gains in reading because of dedicated staff and a whole child approach that allows children to change their mentality on literacy and succeed in school.

Some of the best afterschool programs encourage enhanced literacy by helping children to see how and why reading and writing might be useful and relevant to their lives and futures. In this, reading and writing transcend their status as schoolwork and instead become an avenue for self-discovery and community exploration.^{xiii}

America SCORES Chicago delivers high-quality, comprehensive afterschool programming to students and families in Chicago's low-income West Side neighborhoods. The program employs a unique, three-pronged combination of soccer (physical fitness components and nutrition workshops), creative writing (spoken word, hip-hop and poetry training aligned with national literacy standards for educators) and community service to inspire program participants to be engaged students, lead healthy lives and become agents of change in their community. Each school program consists of two teams of 20 sixth through eighth grade students—one boys' team and one girls' team. These teams work together in the classroom, on the field and in the community, guided by a writing coach and a soccer coach. America SCORES' "Writing for the Community" curriculum introduces various modes of expression, from letter writing to creating flyers, all drawing upon previous lessons in poetry and creative writing. Weekly meetings are centered on student-directed service projects addressing neighborhood issues identified and explored by the students themselves. Poet-athletes learn to recognize the assets available to them in the community and learn firsthand their power to impact what they see. Through service projects, students are given the means to convert educational theory to concrete actions, helping cement learned concepts as well as develop critical thinking, real-life problem solving and a sense of social responsibility. The program provides the ideal balance of academics and enrichment that keeps kids engaged in learning and on the path to literacy.

"Literacy skills are fundamental to a good education, a successful career and a highly-skilled, competitive workforce. Yet, more than 60 percent of our nation's high school seniors currently read below the proficient level."

U.S. Representative John Yarmuth (KY)

Connecting writing with other art forms can be a very powerful way to make literacy relevant to all students and connect all forms of expression with language development.^{xiv}

Carteret Arts & Sports Academy (CASA) in Carteret, NJ, places a heavy emphasis on the use of arts education as a catalyst for student academic achievement and individual learning. The goal of the program is to deliver high-quality literacy enrichment for students while also fostering positive character development, overall academic achievement, physical and artistic development and a higher degree of community and parental involvement. CASA's focus on literacy evolved from an intense look at the needs of the surrounding community. Once it was discovered that 40 percent of students in the community were not proficient in English language arts, CASA developed CREATE (Carteret Readers Exploring Art Through Expression). Through this innovative program, guest authors and artists are brought in to work with the

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children to visualize and create various types of works of art based on books that the participants have read. By innovatively addressing community needs and utilizing community partners to connect other art forms to reading, CASA is helping students in Cartaret develop healthy reading habits that will help them succeed in the future.

Afterschool programs can utilize reading and writing as a way for children to reflect on their family and culture and explore the links between their heritage and the customs and cultures of others in their community by providing access to mentors and community partners.^{xv}

Oxford Stars in Oxford, PA, offers afterschool and summer programming that provides academic enrichment and social support for middle school English Language Learners (ELLs) and Long-Term English Learners (LTELs). Primarily Latino immigrants, these students tend to struggle in school, score in the non-proficient ranges on standardized tests, drop out of school, and fail to graduate high school on time. Oxford Stars has been successfully building a bridge between the Oxford School District and the growing Latino population within the Oxford community since its inception. The program seeks to support English language development for immigrant students as they work on acquiring grade-level standards in reading, math and science while also connecting participating immigrant youth and their families to necessary community resources and organizations to help spur healthy youth development. In addition, Oxford Stars offers a chance for students to learn from mentors and guest speakers from the community who have real-life work experiences they can share with students to encourage them to learn and grow. The power of the program lies in its ability to provide individualized reading and ELL instruction that meets the unique needs of Oxford's growing immigrant population.

Conclusion

While literacy's definition continues to expand to encompass more fields, reading and writing still stand as two of the most important pillars in every child's education. Low-income students across the U.S. are falling behind in basic literacy skills due to unequal opportunities to learn both at home and in the classroom. Afterschool programs are uniquely positioned to fill those opportunity gaps and support the acquisition of reading and writing skills among underserved youth to help them build a brighter future. Intervention during the middle school years is vital to overturn losses that occur in elementary school and give children who have fallen behind a second chance to get back on track to successful literacy development. All in all, more time to learn in an afterschool program that provides innovative literacy enrichment opportunities can be a great avenue for middle school students to make academic advances in the classroom and developmental advances in life.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Association of Small Foundations. (2008). *Discussion guide: Ensuring success for young children*. Early Childhood Literacy. Washington, D.C.

^{iv} National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2005). *Creating a culture of literacy: A guide for middle and high school principals*. Executive Summary.

^v National Center for Education Statistics. *Adult literacy in America*. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from

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