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Afterschool: Providing a Successful Route to Credit Attainment and Recovery

Afterschool programs are a rich environment for the development of viable, innovative learning opportunities. If students can show they have learned in a rigorous afterschool setting, then they should absolutely be awarded credit for their efforts.

– **Nicholas C. Donohue, President & CEO, Nellie Mae Education Foundation**

Afterschool provides older youth with critical academic supports including credit attainment and recovery opportunities. Many educators are turning to afterschool programs to reach students who fail one or more courses, become disengaged, or want alternatives to the traditional path to graduation. Credit recovery refers to recovering credits that are lost due to failure or drop out. Credit attainment refers to alternative methods of gaining credits outside of “seat time” in the classroom. In a study of afterschool programs in New Hampshire, researchers found that education leaders see afterschool programs as a way to tie credit attainment and recovery to student interests and learning styles. Most say that credit attainment and recovery through afterschool programs has advantages over the school day, including the ability to better engage students (78 percent) and to personalize learning (60 percent).ⁱ

Today’s Youth Must Meet the Challenges of Tomorrow’s Workplace

The last several decades have seen the industrial and manufacturing based economy shift to a service economy fueled by information, knowledge and innovation. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 1996 and 2006 the United States lost three million manufacturing jobs. In that same time frame, 17 million service sector jobs were created, specifically in the areas of health care, education, environment, security and energy.^{ii,iii} Now more than ever, the nation’s economic well-being depends on the availability of educated, skilled, employable young people to meet the needs of the 21st century labor market.

Older students still need a connection. Afterschool programs can engage students and make these connections for youth to stay in school and be successful.

**--Survey Respondent
from New England After
3 PM: Spotlight on New
Hampshire**

Keeping Youth on Track is Critical to Their Success

Credit attainment and recovery are predictors of future success in secondary school and college. Students who struggle with passing courses or earning credits are at higher risk of dropping out of secondary school and not pursuing a college degree.^{iv} Students who are truant or over-age for their grade level and fall behind in acquiring credits toward graduation are at higher risk for dropping

out than those who regularly attend school and acquire credits along with their peers. Students at particular risk for falling behind include:^v

- Youth with adult responsibilities such as caring for family or paid employment
- Youth involved with the criminal justice system
- Older immigrant youth/English language learners
- Youth with learning disabilities or emotional or behavioral issues
- Youth aging out of the foster care system
- Youth who move regularly from one school to another
- Teen mothers

We want to expand when, where and how students learn in order to make learning more engaging. We need to rethink how children learn. We know the school day is limited in what it can do.

**-- Sarah Cahill,
Executive Director of
the Rhode Island
After School Plus
Alliance**

Once students fall behind, it is difficult for them to get back on track within their regular school. In New York City, for example, only 19 percent of students who are over-age and under credited graduate with a high school or equivalency diploma.^{vi}

There are many programs currently available to help students attain and recover credits and obtain a high school or equivalency diploma. Programs such as summer classes, five-day crunch sessions over school breaks, evening classes and online instruction provide the flexibility many struggling students need, but can fail to address the other barriers to student success. Some educators claim that these types of credit recovery programs are a poor substitute for classroom learning, and say they ultimately devalue the diploma. Some criticize these courses as shortcuts, and worry that students may never acquire the discipline and work habits to succeed beyond high school.^{vii} Other educators view online

learning, in particular, as a cost-effective way to provide engaging content in a flexible setting. The key to the success of all of these types of programs is the involvement of the teacher and engagement of the youth. Teachers working with at-risk students must help students set goals, identify and modify negative behavior early on and help empower students to become self motivated.^{viii}

Afterschool Engages Youth and Addresses Barriers to Attaining and Recovering Credits

Afterschool offers students opportunities to gain knowledge and credits through learning that takes place outside of the traditional classroom, providing the flexibility that is critical to many struggling students. Different models can be employed to engage and inspire youth including independent study, private instruction, participation in the arts, internships, community service, apprenticeships and online instruction. Afterschool programs can offer a holistic approach that can help youth overcome the barriers they face to academic success. Through partnerships with community based organizations, afterschool programs can reach those students who need help staying on the path to a high school diploma. Afterschool has a long history of engaging students and making academic subjects relevant and interesting through hands-on learning and a student-centered approach, boosting graduation rates and encouraging students to prepare for college and work. Among programs that serve older youth, a 2009 Afterschool Alliance

national survey found that 16 percent of those that responded offer students credits toward graduation.^{ix}

Students need to feel that what they are learning is relevant to real life, especially students who struggle in a traditional educational setting. Well-designed afterschool programs allow students to engage in experiences that teach skills they need to succeed personally and professionally.^{x,xi}

Learning to work programs help students envision success after graduation.
--Young Adult Borough Center Program Staff

- **Learn to Earn** in Hayden, Idaho is a cooperative apprenticeship program between Habitat for Humanity of North Idaho and Post Falls High School. Students earn school credits for their volunteer construction work. The students gain hands-on experience on the Habitat job site, and make useful contacts in the construction community. Learn to Earn offers students a way to get the credits necessary for a high school diploma, while teaching them valuable skills in construction from foundation to finish work.
- **Prep Zone** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is an innovative high school afterschool program that offers students the opportunity to earn credit during afterschool time for substantial projects that apply classroom learning to real-world situations. The program includes rigorous coursework, development of an entrepreneurial project and business plan, and culminates in levels of competitions where the students can win grants and computers.

Low educational attainment and lack of job skills are not the only factors that affect the ability of youth to find employment, particularly low-income youth. Lack of transportation, living expenses and self-confidence also play an important role. Effective programs take a comprehensive approach, not only addressing job training and school credits, but also addressing other factors that prevent students from succeeding.^{xii}

I've noticed that almost all [EVOLUTIONS students] talk about colleges they're thinking about applying to, or they think a lot about SAT prep. I gather that these are the serious students that will be successful.
-- EVOLUTIONS student

- **EVOLUTIONS (EVoking Learning & Understanding Through Investigations of the Natural Sciences)**, is a free program at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven, Connecticut that serves underrepresented, inner city older youth. Students earn academic credit at their schools for participating in a program revolving around science career awareness/literacy, college preparation and transferable skills development. Students design and construct their own museum exhibition and produce DVDs that teach state science standards to elementary students. They also go on a 2-3 day college visitation trip and visit another museum in the region, all free of charge.

One component of the program provides students with paid opportunities as trained interpreters of museum resources. The local school district provides free

transportation in the form of free city bus passes, allowing for greater access by the students most in need.

- **Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC)** in New York City, New York are evening academic programs designed to meet the needs of high school students who are behind because they have adult responsibilities that make attending school in the daytime difficult. Students graduate with a diploma from their home school after they have earned all of their credits and passed all of the required exams while attending the YABC. YABCs also have the added support of *Learning to Work*, which offers additional academic and student support, post-secondary and career exploration, work preparation and skills development. Many YABCs also include the *Learning to Work* internship component, in which students can gain valuable work experience and earn money at the same time.

Programs that engage the interests and passions of its students are more likely to attract and keep participants, allowing them to take full advantage of the program and earn the credits they need.^{xiii}

- **Hallways to Learning** in Kewanee, Illinois used the results of a student survey to design their program. Students indicated what their interests and goals were, and they now have the opportunity to participate in a cardio club, a jazz ensemble, a writing club, culture club, film club and book club. Woven throughout the curriculum is a credit retrieval program that helps students graduate with their peers.
- **BlairLEARNS Program** located at Blair High School (grades 7-12) in Pasadena, California combines a unique mix of enrichment, interest-based clubs and sports with no-nonsense academic supports, including credit recovery. While students may be initially attracted to the cutting-edge enrichment programming such as digital media, performing arts and culinary arts, a large percentage of participants take advantage of the afterschool credit-recovery classes. The school has increased its on-time graduation rate by 28 percent since 2004, and in 2007, 62 of the 150 graduating students took at least one credit recovery offering during afterschool in order to walk across the stage on time.

Conclusion

Older youth who are struggling in school, especially those who are disengaged, need both support and challenge to reconnect with learning and stay on a path to higher education and meaningful work. Afterschool incorporates youth development principles that stress building on individual assets and integrating family, school and community and provides a venue for students to attain and recover credits, allowing them to successfully graduate high school and giving them real options for their future.

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- ^v Wyckoff, L., Cooney, S.M., Djakovic, D.K., McClanahan, W.S. (September 2008). *Disconnected Young People in New York City: Crisis and Opportunity*. Public/Private Ventures. Philadelphia, PA.
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- ^{xiii} Youth Development Institute (March 2008). *Promising Practices in Working with Young Adults*. New York, New York.
- ^{xiii} Nellie Mae Education Foundation; PlusTime NH; New Hampshire Department of Education. *Supporting Student Success through Extended Learning Opportunities*. Concord, NH.