

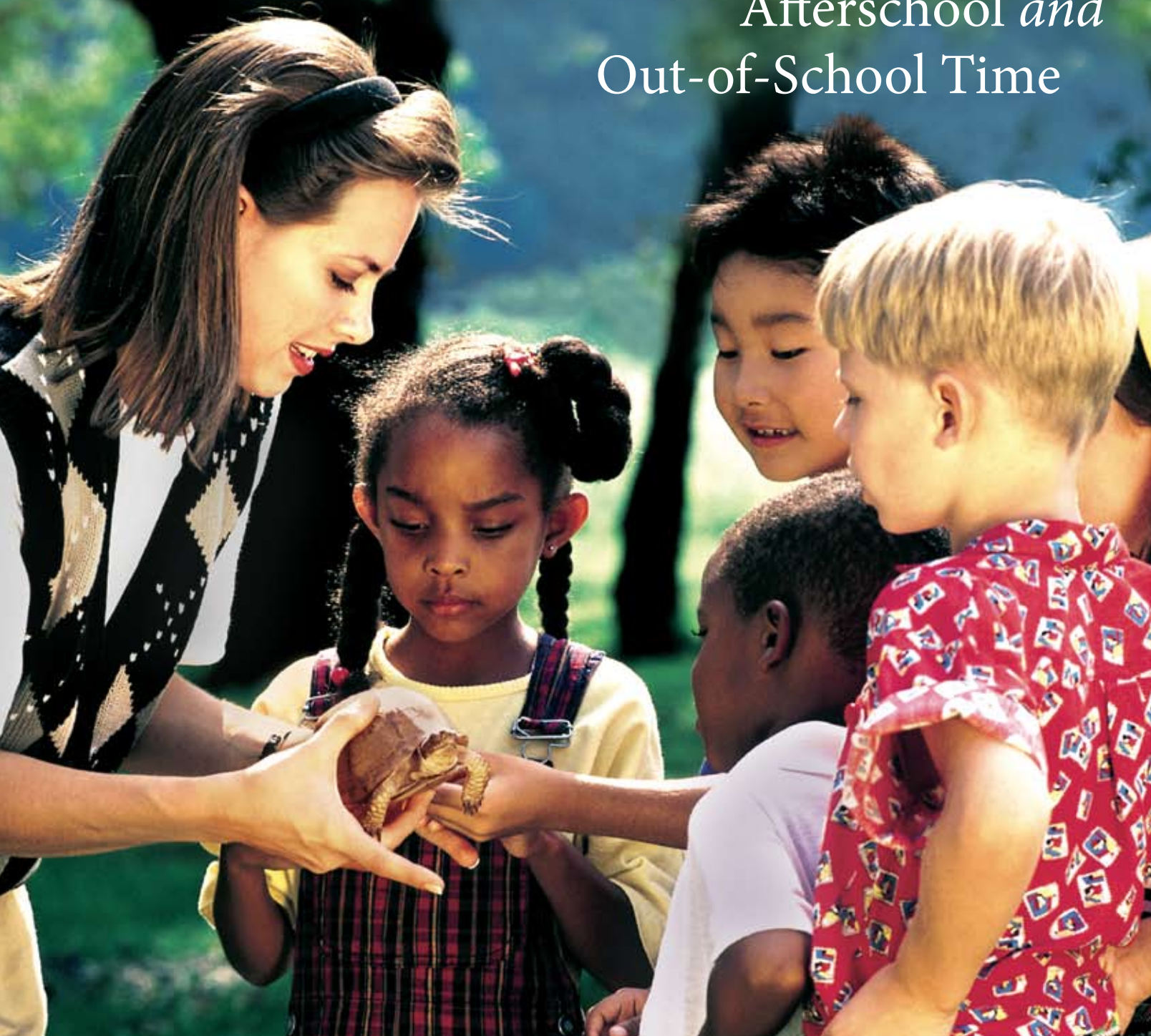
SEDL Letter

SOUTHWEST EDUCATIONAL
SEDL
DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY
Building Knowledge to Support Learning

Volume XVIII ■ Number 1 ■ May 2006

Time for Achievement

*Afterschool and
Out-of-School Time*



CREDITS

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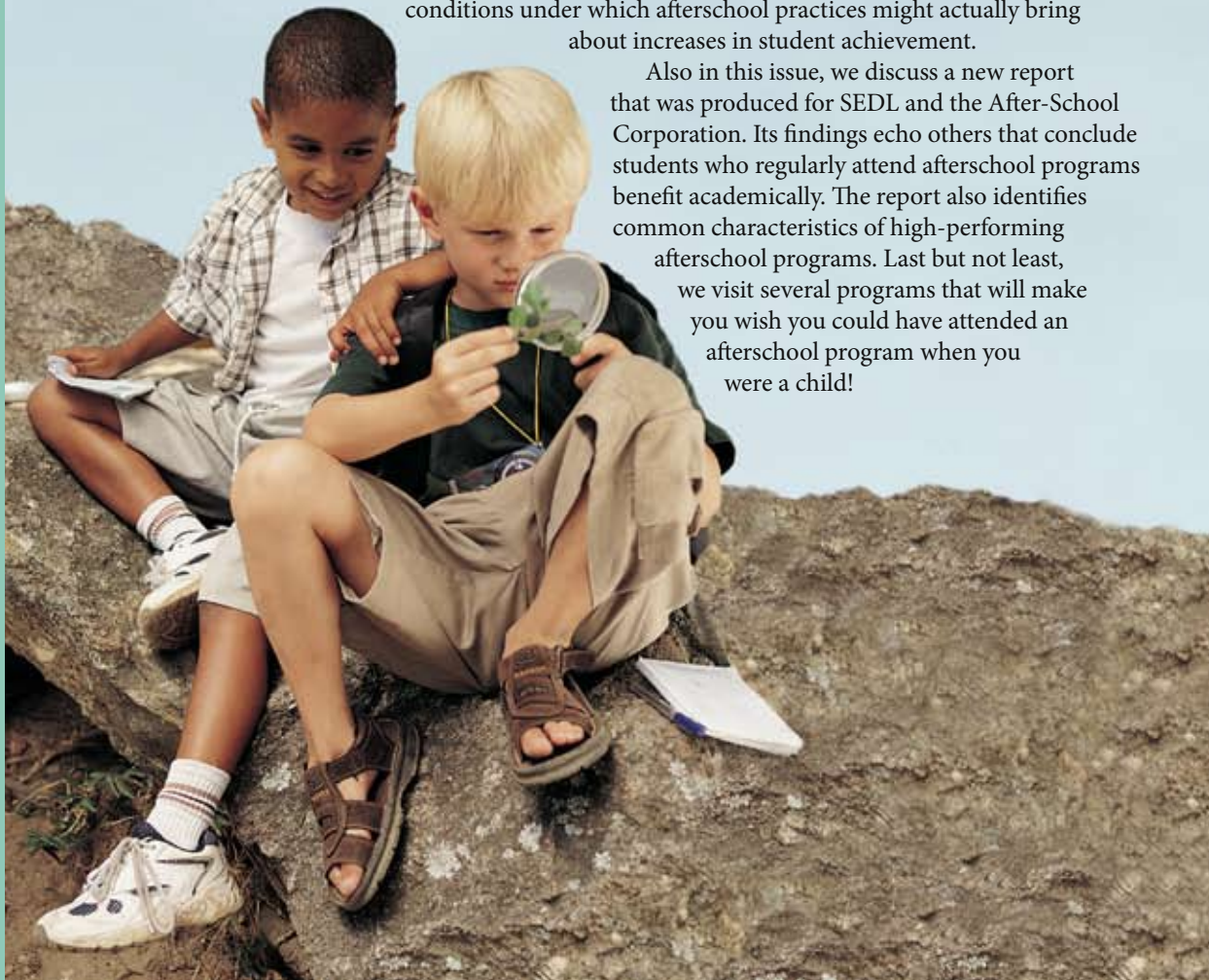
Times Have Changed

After School

Afterschool programs offer families a great alternative to allowing children to entertain themselves after they get out of school, when they often just watch television at home or get into trouble due to a lack of supervision. Recent studies suggest that regular attendance in a good afterschool program can help improve student success and counter obesity. Afterschool programs also often provide tutoring, help strengthen achievement, and offer students enrichment opportunities they might not receive during the regular school day.

In this issue of *SEDL Letter*, you can read stories of afterschool and out-of-school programs across the country that offer children more than just a place to hang out after school is dismissed. We will learn why reading is key in successful afterschool programs. We visit with Robert Stonehill, director of the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Learning Community program, to learn about the department's vision for afterschool learning. We look at the work of the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning and summarize preliminary findings of its study identifying promising practices for afterschool programs. This study suggests that certain practices are related to improved achievement, and it lays the groundwork for more definitive research. Later this year, the Partnership will support a set of randomized controlled trials that will begin to give us evidence about the conditions under which afterschool practices might actually bring about increases in student achievement.

Also in this issue, we discuss a new report that was produced for SEDL and the After-School Corporation. Its findings echo others that conclude students who regularly attend afterschool programs benefit academically. The report also identifies common characteristics of high-performing afterschool programs. Last but not least, we visit several programs that will make you wish you could have attended an afterschool program when you were a child!



National Partnership Promotes Promising Practices

Staff Training for Quality Afterschool Programs

By Leslie Blair

Learning doesn't have to stop as soon as the dismissal bell rings at the end of the school day. Across the country, an estimated 6.5 million students are working on their math and reading skills and participating in enrichment programs after school. The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning works to ensure best practices for afterschool learning are used nationwide. The Partnership has identified afterschool programs with promising practices in literacy, mathematics, science, technology, and the arts. It has developed an array of resources that reflect promising and research-based practices, including the online *Afterschool Training Toolkit*. The National Partnership also offers training to sites that need additional help.

Headquartered at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas, the National Partnership draws on the expertise of its seven partner organizations and 13 steering committee members, who work for an array of academic and nonprofit organizations. The National Partnership comprises the following partner organizations:

- Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), primary contractor
- National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) at UCLA
- Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)
- Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)
- SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro
- WGBH Educational Foundation
- U.S. Department of Education (USDE), Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

The National Partnership is now in its third year. SEDL program manager Catherine Jordan, director of the National Partnership, is proud of the National Partnership's accomplishments.

"We have forged a working partnership with a disparate group of organizations and conducted research that is yielding important indicators for high-quality academic afterschool programs in six content areas. We have developed an online toolkit that is enabling afterschool programs to access substantive help in building their capacity to develop high-quality academic programs," Jordan says. "We've also cosponsored eight regional annual conferences, each with attendance ranging from 200 to 500, and have cosponsored the Summer Institute with the USDE, with an attendance of about 2,000 each summer. And we've done it all on budget and in the original time frame we proposed."

Promising Practices Sites

The National Partnership's initial goal was to identify sites that used promising practices in each of these areas: mathematics, literacy, science, the arts, homework and tutoring, and technology. Jordan says, "Our whole purpose was to identify what practices successful sites were using that might underlie increases in academic achievement and then develop tools and training to help others become just as successful."

The process to identify sites has been rigorous (see "Preliminary Findings," page 9). To begin, CRESST examined all of the annual performance data from the more than 1,600 21st Century Community Learning Program afterschool sites to answer two questions: 1) Which programs see student achievement gains? and 2) Which of these have been in existence for 3 or more years?

After identifying programs that met these criteria, CRESST researchers then asked the question: Which programs have actually achieved their program goals and have some evidence (i.e., data) to show they



Afterschool Toolkit Features Promising Practices, Student Engagement

<http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/>

As soon as you hear squeals of delight from students after their teacher calls out a math problem, you know this isn't an ordinary math class. The students are playing a competitive game called "Bacon and Egg" in their afterschool program at an elementary school in Houston, Texas. For these students, learning doesn't end as soon as class is dismissed—and that is part of the philosophy behind the Afterschool Training Toolkit created by the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning.

The *Afterschool Training Toolkit* (<http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/>) currently features components in mathematics and literacy. Additional content in the arts, science, technology, and homework help are also being developed. The mathematics content was created by staff at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), and the WGBH Educational Foundation—three of the partners in the National Partnership. The literacy content was developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) and WGBH.

Centered around promising practices in afterschool instruction, this online staff development resource shows practitioners how to create engaging activities—like the "Bacon and Egg" game—that target specific academic standards. Most practices feature one or more videos shot at afterschool program sites identified as having had a positive impact on student achievement. Each also includes technology tips, sample lesson plans, and links to related resources.

An example of the many resources found within the toolkit is a 54-page literature review, which was prepared by NWREL. Eve McDermott, a senior program director at NWREL and one of the developers of the literacy content, explains that the literature review gives staff a deeper understanding of the principles that guided the selection of literacy practices in the toolkit. "I think it helps staff see how they can make subtle changes in their practice to have greater impact on the academic success of their children," she says. "Most importantly, it provides staff with a common language to be able to talk to the school day staff about the progress and needs of the students they share."



In fact, that is the goal of the entire toolkit, according to National Partnership director Catherine Jordan. She explains that because of No Child Left Behind, afterschool programs are being asked to improve student achievement. "The toolkit provides tools and training for many afterschool staff who are not well trained to provide enriched academic content. We want to provide them with the tools and training to use the promising practices that were successfully used in other sites and help them improve student success."

have met their goals? CRESST staff then conducted phone interviews with project directors from those sites that showed evidence. From the phone conversation, the researchers further narrowed down the sites that were potential promising practices sites for mathematics, literacy, the arts, homework and tutoring, or technology, and site visits began.

SEDL program associate and National Partnership product development coordinator Deborah Donnelly says, "We wanted to identify schools that not only looked good on paper but were talking the talk and walking the walk."

Jordan reports that based on the data collected, the observations, the CRESST data analysis, and the research literature reviews, she feels confident about the promising practices. "All of the promising practices we've identified so far in each subject area have been used in more than one site," she says.

Developing Program Resources and Training

Jordan notes that one of the primary aims of the National Partnership is to develop resources and training that will help afterschool sites increase student achievement, just as the promising practices sites have. "The whole purpose is to identify practices that successful programs have been using, then develop tools and training to help others," she says. The resources and training go hand in hand. Not only does the *Afterschool Training Toolkit* serve as the cornerstone of the National Partnership resources, but it is one piece of the organization's training. The promising practices are being used to create content for the online toolkit in each of the subject areas (see sidebar). Searchable curriculum databases are also being developed and will include reviews of high-quality curriculum in literacy, mathematics, and science.

Under its contract, the National Partnership coordinates the annual Summer Institute with the USDE and the Mott Foundation. The National Partnership is also responsible for conducting or cosponsoring eight regional conferences. "By reinforcing consistent messages and providing similar training across the country, we are trying to increase the quality and consistency of afterschool programs nationwide," says Jordan. "We not only want to spread the word about research-based practices, but we're also trying to take that knowledge into the hands of afterschool staff in order to increase student achievement. The training component of our work is so important because many afterschool staff members are not trained teachers. We want to build the capacity of



afterschool staff so they can make a difference in student achievement.”

Program associate Jerry Elder, who plans most of the National Partnership’s large training sessions, says, “In the past, we spent a lot of time discussing program sustainability. More and more the focus is on program quality. We’re on the forefront because we are creating resources for academic enrichment, which is a major part of any quality afterschool program.”

Donnelly notes that the National Partnership has been helping program directors think about capacity building as a job-embedded staff development process. “All of them are having informal staff meetings,” she reports. “We’re encouraging them to capitalize on these informal meetings and incorporate some staff development.” Elder adds, “Most of our professional development these days involves how to use the toolkit as a professional development tool.”

The National Partnership staff has been promoting the toolkit as a resource to be used whenever there is a bit of free time at meetings. They have identified training that can take place in small blocks of time. They also have encouraged afterschool staff to use example activities in the toolkit to evaluate what they are currently doing. As an example, Donnelly uses the “Read Aloud” section of the toolkit’s literacy component. The program director could ask afterschool staff what they think constitutes a “Read Aloud” activity; then the staff views the video. Afterward the director can pose questions such as, “How is it different from what you are doing?” and “What do you need to change

what you are doing?” Then at the next meeting, staff members can share what they have learned or thought about.

Staff members’ sharing is an important part of capacity building, says Donnelly. “They are all sharing expertise—essentially becoming consultants to each other,” she explains.

Research: Key to Improving Afterschool Programs

Another element of the National Partnership contract includes conducting research, especially “gold-standard” research, that will add to the growing base of research related to afterschool programming. To this end, SEDL and the National Partnership are initiating a randomized control study to determine the effectiveness of select afterschool programs on student outcomes. Results of the identification of promising practices sites and SEDL’s participation in a recently released study of characteristics of high-performing afterschool programs (see article on page 24) are other research-related contributions of the National Partnership.

“All of this research will play a role in future afterschool programming,” says Jordan. “We want to identify for certain what types of programs and practices can make the biggest difference in our children’s academic success and develop future resources, training, and programs around those strategies.”

SEDL’s National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning staff get together.
Front row: Maria Rodriguez, Zena Rudo, Laura Shankland, Lacy Wood, and Deborah Donnelly. Back row: Marilyn Heath, Artie Stockton, Darlene Murray, Catherine Jordan, Joe Parker, and Jerry Elder.

Leslie Blair is a SEDL communications associate and the editor of SEDL Letter. You may reach Leslie at lblair@sedl.org.

Afterschool Achievement

Strengthening Literacy & Other Skills

By Geoffrey Alan

Question: Where did middle school students recently work with a professional journalist to write articles, lay out a newsletter, and distribute the publication to local community members? Answer: In the exemplary afterschool program operated by a private company called Citizen Schools. As schools increasingly are called on to sharpen students' literacy skills, researchers and practitioners are discovering ways to provide much more than daycare after school is dismissed.

"Students are writing about topics that interest them," says Ned Rimer, cofounder and managing director of Citizen Schools, explaining the program's effective approach. "They are practicing their writing skills. With practice, people develop their skills."

A national network that links thousands of young "apprentices" with volunteers in hands-on learning activities, Citizen Schools is just one of the

afterschool programs leading the literacy charge today. Over the course of weeks, participating children create performances and products that contribute to the community. The demand for such programs has only intensified in recent years.

The No Child Left Behind Act requires schools not only to show student proficiency in reading, but also to provide supplementary services, such as afterschool programs, for those who fail to meet expectations. Although research on such activities is limited, the encouraging news is that out-of-school-time (OST) programs can raise reading achievement among struggling students, according to a recent research synthesis of 56 rigorous studies conducted over the past 20 years. OST programs are especially effective for readers in kindergarten through second grade and when they incorporate one-on-one tutoring, say Mid-continent Research for Education



and Learning researchers in *The Effectiveness of Out-of-School Time Strategies in Assisting Low-Achieving Students in Reading and Mathematics*.

Because of such findings, a new generation of afterschool programs is helping children master the reading, writing, and communication skills they need to succeed. Literacy skills are necessary for young people, at first, to decode sounds and words and, later, to read and learn across the curriculum, the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning notes in its *Afterschool Training Toolkit* (see page 4 for more information about the National Partnership and the toolkit).

Why After School?

The toolkit, featuring research-based resources to facilitate achievement as well as fun, emphasizes that after school is an excellent time to foster fluency and a love of reading. When school lets out, learning is still fresh. Moreover, students are ready to apply and extend their learning in exciting activities. Studies show that engaging activities increase children's chances of success, and success enhances their motivation in literacy learning.

Afterschool programs can engage students through such diverse activities as sustained silent reading, playing reading and writing games, discussing favorite stories, researching topics of interest, keeping journals, composing comic strips, writing to pen pals, acting out plays, communicating about sports or the arts, and collaborating on projects. These are activities that the time constraints and curricular pressures of busy school-day classes often do not permit.

"Afterschool programs offer opportunities for children to pick tasks and stay with tasks according to their own needs and interests," says researcher Marilyn Jager Adams, chief scientist at Soliloquy Learning, a private company that uses speech-recognition technology and intervention tools to sharpen children's literacy skills. She contrasts "the regimen of the classroom" with the opportunities for open-ended exploration offered by afterschool programs, where children can become "captivated" by whatever subject intrigues them.

"Afterschool programs provide an opportunity to work with kids in a different way than during the school day," adds Rhonda Lauer, CEO of Foundations, Inc., whose strategies are incorporated into the National Partnership's toolkit. This more relaxed, playful, and nurturing atmosphere allows adults to emphasize the social aspect of literacy.

Perhaps most significantly, afterschool programs give children a rare chance to read. Most children read only a few minutes a day, and they have little

Recommended on the Web

Afterschool Training Toolkit

<http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/literacy/>

Standards for the English Language Arts

<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>

Supporting the Literacy Development of Low-Income Children in Afterschool Programs

http://www.robertbownefoundation.org/pdf_files/occasional_paper_01.pdf

Literacy in Afterschool Programs: Literature Review

http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/literacy/pdf/AST_lit_literature_review.pdf

opportunity to read in the classroom, laments Adams, author of the landmark *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. "Literacy is a product of having read a lot," she observes. "Your ability to do that depends on the time you have to invest."

Academic Boost

One of the most important outcomes of an effective afterschool program, of course, is improved learning. Afterschool activities shown to be the most successful in raising achievement include reading aloud, dramatization, and book discussion, according to the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) 2005 literature review, *Literacy in Afterschool Programs*.

Through such literacy activities, students are "honored" for their accomplishments, says Adams. As a result, afterschool classes become "a time when this is considered a treasured activity," when children gain a sense of personal progress.

Rimer adds that such efforts are most effective when they incorporate hands-on, project-based activities led by an enthusiastic adult expert and directed toward a real-world audience, as in the Citizen Schools community newsletter described above. "Kids want to create a thing of quality, particularly where there's an authentic audience for it," he says.

Afterschool programs also can nurture broader academic skills. For example, Homework Zones provide an afterschool forum within urban middle and high schools where children not only do homework but learn specific language arts and general academic skills, such as how to effectively study, do research, and complete collaborative projects. The drop-in program, established by Foundations, Inc. around Philadelphia and Camden,

New Jersey, normally runs for at least 2 hours after school.

“It’s not just reinforcement or doing homework,” emphasizes Lauer, a member of the National Partnership steering committee. “More important is acquiring other skills that are going to make you successful in school and later in life.” Indeed, important as academics are, the NWREL literature review concludes that the function of an afterschool program “should not be to duplicate what happens during the school day, but to serve a complementary role and provide additional experiences and purposes for engaging in literacy.”

Afterschool classes can be a time when students gain a sense of personal progress.

Targeting Subgroups

More and more, afterschool programs are asked to meet the needs of student subgroups, such as disadvantaged and at-risk children. Many do not have access at home to literacy-building resources such as books, magazines, the Internet, and other technology-based materials, Adams says. In addition, they may lack English-fluent or literate role models, (that is, family members who can add to students’ vocabulary, knowledge of communication nuances, and the sort of “cultural capital” that can enhance literacy).

Researcher Robert Halpern notes that 25% of low- and moderate-income children now regularly attend afterschool programs, a percentage that is growing. Ideally, he says, such children find a setting that celebrates their cultures, respects their interests, validates their voices, affirms social connections, and

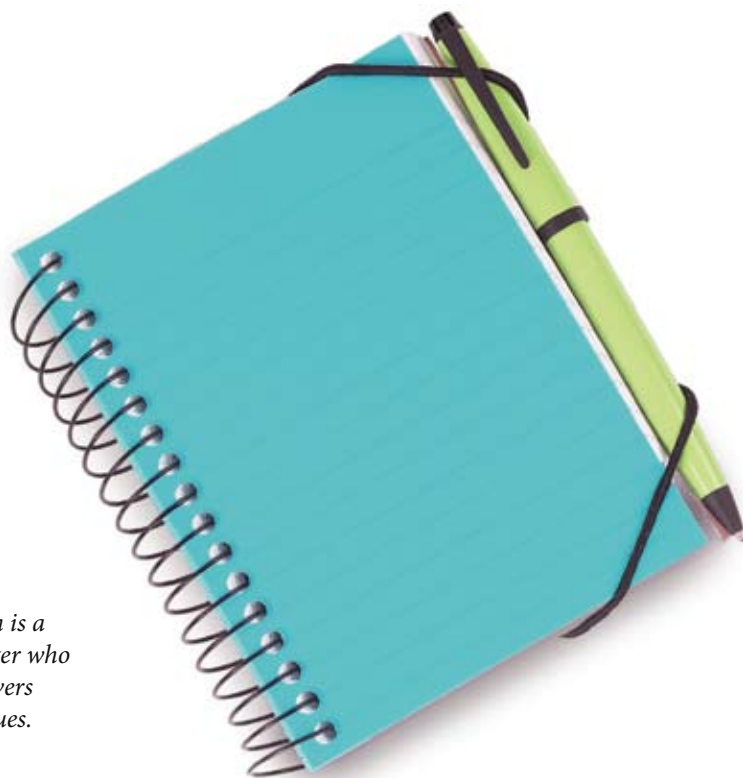
demonstrates the relevance of curricular learning. “Afterschool programs can provide opportunities for children to learn the literacies of their own heritage—the forms, the stories, the particular uses of language—and can make connections between the literacies of home or community and school literacy,” Halpern asserts in the Robert Browne Foundation’s *Supporting the Literacy Development of Low-Income Children in Afterschool Programs*.

In Philadelphia, for instance, many Puerto Rican students routinely travel to and from their native country, often for months at a time. Homework Zones and other Foundations, Inc. afterschool activities encourage these students to write and talk about their unique cultural celebrations and experiences as immigrants, Lauer says.

Step by Step

What are the key ingredients for success? Researchers and experts recommend the following steps for establishing afterschool literacy programs:

- Set goals based on local needs. Consider children’s needs, such as grade-level benchmarks they must meet, to identify specific objectives. Structure activities to build skills and allow students to show their mastery. Generic approaches suggested by research are no guarantee of success, Lauer says.
- Use engaging literature. Read good books to target specific reading strategies based on students’ needs. Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension are integral to early literacy development, according to the National Reading Panel. Combine writing with reading and, when appropriate, allow children to choose their own material. Use resources that appeal to various students’ interests, Adams says.
- Incorporate real-world activities. Read recipes, write to family members, and discuss science and politics to engage children. Connect them with adult experts who convey excitement and passion about topics, says Rimer.
- Assess students’ progress over time. Ask about their favorite stories and topics. Consider their academic and social needs. Check on their development and provide thoughtful, constructive feedback. Mostly, this means knowing what they’re doing in school and what they find interesting. As Lauer says, “Know your audience.”
- Provide ongoing training for staff. Arrange structured time for staff meetings and discussion. Invite a district reading specialist, teacher, or professional development personnel to train afterschool staff. Offer staff the same nurturing guidance that promotes growth among afterschool participants.



Geoffrey Alan is a freelance writer who frequently covers education issues.

Preliminary Findings From Promising Practices Site Identification for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers

By Denise Huang, PhD,
and the CRESST Team

Afterschool programs have long served as venues for providing enrichment, social-development, and arts-related activities as well as childcare at the end of the school day and special help to underserved and at-risk populations. More recently, the No Child Left Behind Act has focused on the potential of afterschool programs to supplement and enhance academic learning. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program (CCLC) plays a key role in this paradigm shift, working to improve the quality of afterschool programs and enhance student success. CCLC programs provide expanded academic enrichment opportunities for children attending low-performing schools. They also provide tutoring and activities to help students meet local and state academic standards in core subjects like reading and math. Additionally, CCLC programs often include youth development activities; drug and violence prevention programs; technology education; art, music, and recreation courses; counseling; and character education.

However, CCLC programs vary in their structure and curriculum and the extent to which they focus on academics. Many are centered on enrichment and social development alone. Many go no further than providing tutoring and homework help, often with unqualified staff. Still others have academic content that is neither rigorous nor research-based. In an effort to identify and incorporate promising practices into existing and future afterschool programs, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) commissioned a large-scale evaluation of the program. After the evaluation, the USDE identified the need for effective approaches to strengthen core content within afterschool programming. Through a competitive solicitation process, the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning—comprising the Southwest Educational Laboratory (SEDL), the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory



Students from Kansas's South Hutchinson Elementary School enjoy music after school as well as academics.

(NWREL), the WGBH Educational Foundation, and the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro—contracted with the USDE to support program quality for the growing number of CCLC programs operating throughout the United States. The 5-year project offers strategies, tools, and technical assistance to address two continuing challenges for afterschool programs: 1) ensuring that programs offer high-quality, research-based academic content using appropriate methods of teaching and learning, and 2) ensuring that programs are able to attract and retain students who participate regularly and thus can benefit fully from the programs and services offered.

To accomplish these two goals, a series of tasks was identified as key to improving the delivery and quality of academic content, teaching, and professional development (see the article on page 3 to find out more about the National Partnership's work). The initial tasks included identifying afterschool sites across the country with promising practices and then validating their afterschool success in reading and math using site visits and data analysis.

CCLC
programs
offer expanded
academic
enrichment
opportunities.

Although it has been recognized for promising practices in the arts, Santo Domingo School's CCLC program devotes time each day to homework help and tutoring.

This article summarizes the preliminary findings based on these initial tasks. Data included interviews, surveys, and direct observation from 18 programs identified as promising. SEDL staff and partners collected the data in the spring and fall of 2004 using instruments provided by CRESST. CRESST then completed all data analysis and a preliminary report.

Site Selection

A comprehensive process was established to select exceptional CCLC programs that showed evidence of success. Using the *2002 Annual Performance Report*, teacher survey results, participant academic performance data, and recommendations from regional partners, an initial pool of more than 1,600 grantees was culled down to 20 grantees (10 math and 10 reading). The process began with a number of prerequisites for consideration: the potential promising practices site must serve 100 or more students, have operated for at least 3 years, and provide math or reading instruction at least three times per week. The next step involved an in-depth analysis of program objectives, grade levels served, number of students served, student demographics, days per week reading and math content curricula offered, number of staff in the program, and percentage of credentialed staff. It also included analysis of a composite ranking based on academic performance data, which included grade gains, percentile ranking, and percentage meeting project goals. Programs were selected that exceeded one or more of their goals and that scored highly in the previously mentioned areas. After the initial selection process, non-CCLC afterschool programs that were

popularly identified as exemplary were added to the list to ensure more diversity.

The initial selection process from the formal data analysis yielded 15 math and 15 reading sites, in addition to seven non-CCLC programs. Further validation of the selected grantees occurred through a telephone screening process that included a formalized protocol and a request for additional supporting materials. An additional 10 programs (5 math and 5 reading) that did not meet the selection criteria were added to the pool before phone screening took place. None of the randomly selected programs passed the phone-screening process. The validation process presented further credible evidence that the selection process was successful in identifying strong programs, particularly as selected programs scored higher than all the randomly selected programs in both the formal data analysis and the phone screening.

A third form of validation involved aggregating the 10-question teacher survey data from the annual performance report (APR) and comparing the results for the selected grantees to the general population of grantees. This analysis favored the selected grantees, providing a third source of validation. Finally, the National Partnership leadership team and steering committee reviewed and approved the list with the USDE and contacted the programs to ask for their participation. In the end, 11 reading and 7 math programs agreed to participate. In composite, these validation procedures make us comfortable that the 18 grantees studied in this report are outperforming the average CCLC grantee and are, in fact, among the best in the country working in an afterschool setting today.

Data Analysis Methodology

CRESST used a multimethod approach to data collection and analysis, combining quantitative and qualitative data—including staff and parent surveys; in-depth interviews with program directors, site coordinators, principals, and instructors (lasting approximately 1 hour on average); and direct observation of classroom instruction. The staff survey included questions on content-specific curriculum, general instructional practices and activities, and organizational characteristics. The parent survey focused on perceived program satisfaction, opportunities for involvement, and impact on students. The interview was more comprehensive and covered numerous areas, including grantee background, content-area instructional strategies, other student-based activities, organizational structure and operation, internal and external communication, and



interaction, evaluation, professional development, parental involvement, and impact on students. Finally, SEDL staff and partners observed afterschool instructors. Their observations were based on a structured observation protocol that included scales, checklists, and open-ended questions focused primarily on content and quality of instructional practices.

The following three broad themes emerged as central to effective afterschool programming:

- **Goals and evaluation**—Involves using theory- and research-based practices, implementing effective program structure, setting desired outcomes, and conducting continual evaluation to make sure goals are met
- **Curricular quality**—Comprises strong academic collaboration between day school and afterschool staff, availing students with opportunities to practice skills in groups and individually, and fostering motivation and engagement
- **Program environment**—Includes establishing mechanisms for social collaboration and communication, having adequate physical and human resources, using qualified staff, implementing effective professional development, and offering positive attitudes and high expectations for students.

Within the three broader categories, CRESST then designated the following 13 indicators of an effective afterschool program:

- Establishing clear goals for content-area practice
- Assigning research-based activities to achieve goals
- Aligning content materials with state standards
- Developing links between content and school day activities
- Using research-based curriculum and teaching strategies
- Providing a positive program environment
- Employing motivational strategies to engage students in learning
- Promoting student engagement (e.g., encouraging meaningful experiences)
- Providing effective program management, support, and resources (e.g., staff–student ratio, staff educational experience, ongoing evaluation)
- Providing opportunities for student practice
- Assessing program effectiveness periodically
- Reviewing student progress periodically
- Resetting goals according to assessment results



CRESST analyzed the qualitative data using these indicators. This involved a preliminary factor analysis combined with the earlier literature review to establish five constructs as key. These included links to the school day, research-based practices, periodic assessment, parental involvement, and parental satisfaction. These constructs, together with the indicators above, then informed the rest of the data analysis, from the coding of interviews to the quantitative analysis of the survey results and APR.

The quantitative analysis involved using grantee-level performance data to approximate individual student achievement, which was unavailable in this case. The proxies for student achievement came from staff and parent surveys collected during the site visits and teacher surveys from the APR. Rather than using individual student data, we used site grade-level data and normalized to the mean among the programs studied, establishing a baseline from which comparison could take place.

Afterschool classes may provide students access to technology they might not otherwise use.

Program Overview and Characteristics

The 18 programs studied cover a cross-section of the country and include a variety of program styles and foci. Most programs were in operation for fewer than 10 years when the data were collected, with nearly all sites reporting 3–7 years of experience. Most grantees served ethnically diverse populations comprising primarily lower-income students.

The majority of programs offered three or more activities a day, generally combining academic content with homework help, tutoring, and some form of enrichment or social development. Math and reading instruction generally took place 2–4 times a week, lasting from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Most programs also allotted 30 minutes–1 hour for homework help several times a week. And all had some form of recreation that allowed students to release energy and enjoy themselves.

Common Practices in Program Structure and Process

The 18 grantees had similar patterns of program operation. They all had clear goals and aligned the program structure and content to meet those goals. All established some relationship with their corresponding day schools. Most of the grantees used research-based strategies, and all had staff members who related well to the students and were able to build rapport, maintain high expectations, and keep students motivated and engaged.

Most programs made an effort to link the program to state standards. Half of the programs reported building on the regular school curriculum. Many others noted that the curriculum, whether purchased or self-designed, was specifically developed to incorporate standards. Some sites went even further, with staff specifically assigned to develop curriculum and, in some cases, coordinate with day school teachers in creating and modifying it. Homework was also used to connect to the regular day curriculum, and many afterschool staff reported using it as a guide to their own instruction.

In general, the staff members at the 18 grantees appeared to be more highly qualified than the general CCLC staff population. Math program site coordinators had more than 5 years' experience on average and reading program site coordinators slightly more than 4. Instructors in both reading and math had 3.5 years of experience on average.

The grantees provided leadership styles that empowered staff members and helped maintain low turnover rates, with most balancing centralized and decentralized control.

The programs were also systematic in providing professional development and tailoring it to fit both the program and staff needs. Professional development generally centered on classroom management and on reading and mathematics instruction. Some focused on giving staff ideas for enrichment and hands-on activities; knowledge in assessing student progress; and strategies for academic,

enrichment, and recreational activities (including ways to incorporate learning into all three). In some cases, afterschool staff had the chance to attend districtwide professional development with day school staff. The majority of instructors reported all of these opportunities as extremely helpful to their professional growth.

Another striking feature of the programs was the strident efforts to maintain open channels of communication, both between staff within the program and informally with day school teachers. Regular meetings and communication took place between afterschool instructors and site coordinators for sharing successes and problems and collaboratively working to improve overall program quality. Most also had informal mechanisms for communication between afterschool and day school teachers, including phone calls, notes, and meetings as needed, and sharing progress reports and report cards.

All of the grantees had some structures in place for evaluation. Teachers at many programs reported monitoring grades, test scores, and interest among students frequently throughout the year, often informally discussing progress with the day school teachers. Broader internal and external evaluation also took place at many of the programs. About one third of the grantees completed a formal external evaluation at least once a year. These evaluations typically involved pre-post testing and observation, sometimes with comparison groups or longitudinally over a number of years. Internal evaluation was also common, with student assessment data often used to inform instructional focus and content, monitor student progress, and measure program impact. Some programs also used student, staff, and teacher surveys to gain other valuable information.

Lastly, the 18 grantees appeared to be successful in keeping students focused and engaged. Parents and staff noted the reluctance of students to leave the program at the end of the day, and observation and anecdotal evidence supports strong student engagement. One aspect that may facilitate this excitement and engagement in the children was the relatively high expectations staff reported for their students. High expectations are particularly important for underserved and at-risk students, who are often the victims of low expectations that hinder their motivation to succeed. Another factor may be the effort by many programs to give the children a voice in decision making and allow them to actively and democratically participate in their education. Additionally, the programs made strong efforts to balance learning with fun activities, relating the activities to the children's personal lives, and using a variety of learning strategies that kept students engaged.

Children in the afterschool program at the Mirabel Sisters Campus in New York City perform *Little Shop of Horrors*.



Common Practices in Teaching and Learning

There were a number of common instructional practices among the 18 grantees. All supplemented the core academic curriculum with homework help, tutoring, and some form of enrichment activities. All attempted to make learning more engaging by using nontraditional learning strategies, diversifying activities, and connecting the content to students' personal lives. Most allowed children to get out into the surrounding community through service learning projects, field trips, and other educational experiences away from campus.

Mathematics

Following the general theme of engaging learners, the seven programs that showed promising practices in mathematics attempted to make learning more interesting and fun by offering opportunities to explore mathematics in new and innovative ways and capitalize on intentional learning opportunities. These included games, sports, and cross-content activities related to science, art, and reading. Programs also used visual and tactile tools and computer software on a regular basis to supplement learning. All sites attempted to connect content to real-world experiences and provide some inquiry-based activities. Lastly, all employed scaffolding and multiple grouping strategies to take advantage of the variable knowledge and skills of students. Traditional mathematics learning was part of the curriculum at most sites, but instructors attempted to supplement and enrich the regular school day curriculum to foster interest and excitement about math while offering a more relaxed learning environment after a long day at school. This focus may have also resulted from a recognition that afterschool populations are generally the most underserved and at risk, and often lag behind other students under traditional learning regimes.

Reading

Similar themes emerged with reading instruction, where programs offered real-world examples and connected content to children's personal lives. Journal writing was a popular approach, as was relating learning to popular culture. A third approach was addressing multicultural themes. Cross-content learning was also common, with 10 of the 11 grantees connecting reading to math, science, art, or social studies. The vast majority used multimodal learning, including read-alouds, paired reading, and read-alones, and often combined fiction with nonfiction texts such as newspapers and magazines. All included differentiated instruction and multiple grouping strategies to facilitate



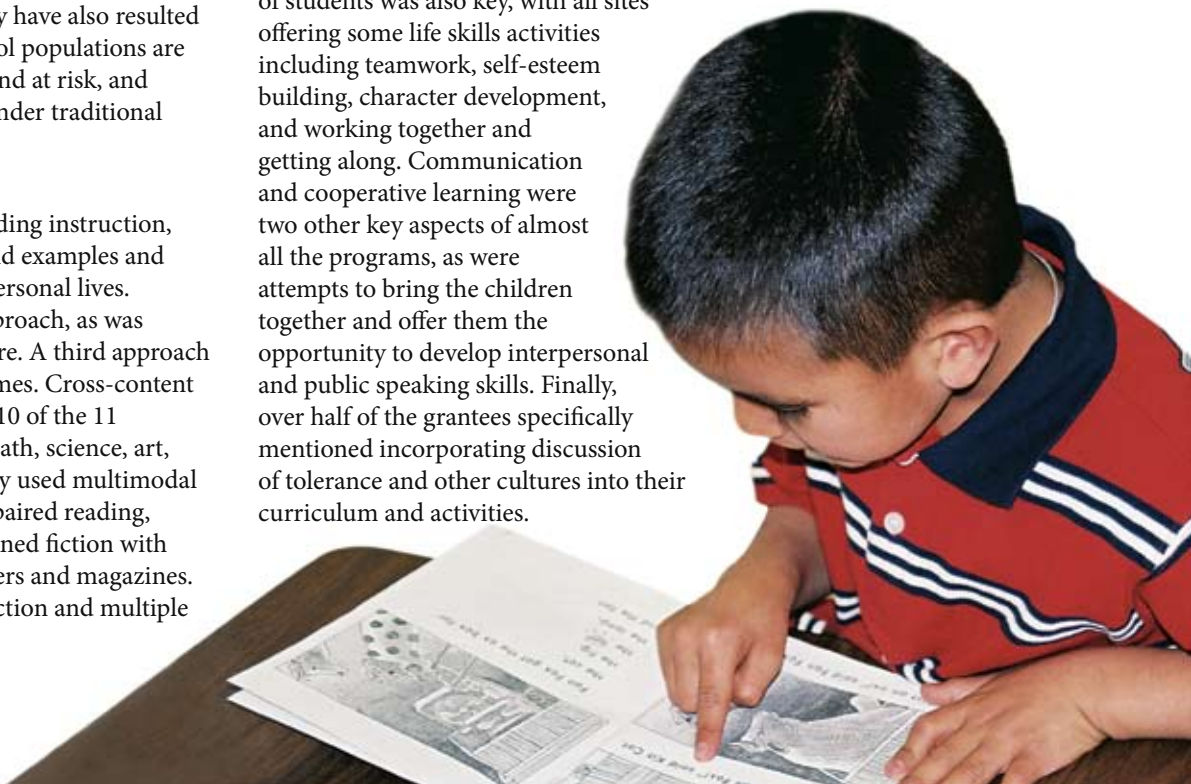
learning across reading and language proficiency levels. Many grantees focused on fluency and comprehension, with some attention to vocabulary building. There was more variability in reading than math instruction, with some programs using computer software and others emphasizing cooperative and dialogical learning. Five grantees focused on phonics, and several used games to supplement learning.

Enrichment

All 18 grantees reported offering some form of enrichment or social development in their program. Most incorporated it as a core component with academics and homework help/tutoring; one program made it the primary focus of instruction. Enrichment included arts activities, sports, drug and violence prevention programs, cooperative learning, and social and life skills development. Arts activities helped foster creativity in children by giving them avenues for self-reflection and coming to voice, helped build self-esteem, and allowed them to work in teams. Social development of students was also key, with all sites offering some life skills activities including teamwork, self-esteem building, character development, and working together and getting along. Communication and cooperative learning were two other key aspects of almost all the programs, as were attempts to bring the children together and offer them the opportunity to develop interpersonal and public speaking skills. Finally, over half of the grantees specifically mentioned incorporating discussion of tolerance and other cultures into their curriculum and activities.

Afterschool programs can nurture a child's natural talents such as in this choral class at the Mirabel Sisters Campus in New York City.

Promising practices sites often connected reading content to children's personal lives.





Afterschool activities such as soccer and basketball keep students fit.

Denise Huang is a researcher at the National Center for Research on Evaluations, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). Her work involves conducting evaluation studies for LA's BEST, an afterschool program established in Los Angeles to combat obstacles to educational achievement by offering an alternative support system to at-risk students. Dr. Huang would like to acknowledge that a number of CRESST staff members have worked on the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning research and made valuable contributions to this summary and to the research project.

Motivational Support

In addition to positive relationships, motivational support is important in supporting students' academic achievement. Such traits can be fostered in afterschool programs through personal interest in a topic; the desire to please a teacher, peers, parents, and other adults; the knowledge that success has long-term rewards; and a desire to increase a sense of their own capabilities. Researchers noted that a variety of motivational strategies were implemented at the 18 grantees in the study sample.

Enhancing Program Retention Through Student Engagement

Most programs reported recruitment and retention as not being of major concerns, exemplified concretely by waiting lists for participation in many programs. No specific strategies were thus offered for recruitment or retention, although some grantees did mention having a day for student or parent sign-up, sending notices or fliers to parents, getting referrals from school day teachers, or, in one case, introducing a fee to try to increase parent buy-in to the program.

Regarding student engagement, observers found students captivated in learning and activities at the sites they visited. Interview data revealed the common features that most staff seemed to care about the students, had high expectations of them, and worked to establish good relationships with them. Instructors attempted to develop curriculum and activities that were captivating and related to students' daily lives, and parent survey responses indicated high satisfaction with the general functioning of the program. Staff also reported that many students did not want to leave the program at the end of the day.

Several key strategies were used to engage students, including the following:

- **Empowering the students:** The programs embraced student-centered learning. One third of the grantees specifically mentioned providing opportunities for student input into the program, and most offered opportunities for students to make choices throughout the day.
- **Meaningful experiences:** Several programs set aside time for open dialogue and for connecting learning to personal experiences and problems. The enrichment aspect of programs generally cultivated the development of the whole student, including social skill growth, preventative intervention, self-esteem building, employment skill training, and fostering creativity and imagination.

- **Active learning:** Inquiry-based approaches and cooperative learning were also common strategies, and instructors at most of the grantees employed problem-solving and scaffolding. We believe these approaches offer great potential as mechanisms to supplement and enrich regular school day activities and improve the educational and future opportunities of participating students.

Program Impact

Although evidence of impact is a key aspect of any study of program effectiveness, a number of barriers existed in accessing individual student achievement. One limitation was the availability of data, which was not accessible in all cases and tended to vary in content and form across programs and, in some cases, even across sites within the same program. Another problem was the difficulty in controlling for all other variables that might affect school day performance. Finally, there was the issue of selection bias, where students who chose to participate in afterschool education might be more motivated to succeed in school in general.

Given these limitations, a number of findings did demonstrate the effectiveness of these programs. As indicated above, the comprehensive selection process and validation of programs make us comfortable that all 18 programs outperformed the average afterschool program. Overall student performance was measured and improvement demonstrated in all programs. All also exceeded at least one of their primary goals. This was further solidified by the annual performance report data, staff and parent surveys, in-depth interviews, and observation data.

The program demonstrated effectiveness in a number of areas. The first was the ability to attract students and maintain consistent program attendance, supported by daily attendance records and the fact that almost all the programs had waiting lists for entry. The second area of effectiveness was student engagement. Almost all the programs reported that students were happy and enthusiastic, and observation tended to support this claim. Additionally, parental satisfaction was high, as was staff satisfaction with the program. A third area is student achievement. Most of the programs reported improvement in students' academic achievement supported by growth in overall test scores and grades. There was also considerable secondary anecdotal evidence from day school teachers who claimed higher grades, more homework completion, and better overall behavior. Internal and external evaluation at most programs tended to validate these claims.

The Future of Federal Afterschool Initiatives

Q&A: Robert Stonehill

To understand the evolution of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program and its probable future, *SEDL Letter* recently questioned Robert Stonehill about the federal government's top afterschool effort. Stonehill has directed the program since its inception in 1997 and also serves as deputy director for academic improvement and teacher quality programs for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

How did the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program first emerge?

The idea of looking at school-based afterschool programs as a federal priority came out of the Clinton administration in 1997. Buried deep within our Elementary and Secondary Education statute was an obscure program, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which basically kept schools open to serve the community. The department believed this was a program that could be recast, using the existing statutory language, as an afterschool program that allowed schools to stay open, primarily to serve kids in the afterschool hours. We asked Congress for \$50 million in the 1998 appropriation—and were quite thrilled to get \$40 million. We were in business.

What role did private philanthropy play?

Even before the funds were appropriated, we sat down with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. They committed \$10 million toward this effort initially and have provided that amount every year to support afterschool programs. They would fund the things that the government's program could not fund. Where we got \$40 million to give out grants, they would fund training, outreach, bidders' conferences, a technical assistance network—and they would get things rolling even before our grants were made.

How has 21st Century evolved to meet demand?

We ran our competition for \$40 million and received almost 2,000 applications in the very first year. Congress instantly saw how much of a demand there was and how much community support there would be for programs like this. The funding just kept skyrocketing. We went from \$40 million to \$200 million to \$453 million to \$850 million, and then, by Year 5, to just under \$1 billion, which is where funding has stayed for the past couple of years.

What have been the major changes in the program?

The program underwent significant changes in 2002, when it was reauthorized as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Under the previous statute, public schools stayed open to serve everyone in the community and were not just limited to serving children or their families. That was one major change.

The second major change was that the program changed eligibility from only public schools to any private or public entity, including faith-based organizations, community-based groups, and other public-sector organizations, such as parks and recreation, museums, and libraries.

Third, 21st Century became not a federally administered program but a state-administered program. Each state would get money by formula and then would run the competitions and fund and oversee the programs. As a result, the \$1 billion, which stayed relatively level-funded for the last 4 or 5 years, went in somewhat smaller chunks to more types of entities.

There are now approximately 8,900 21st Century Community Learning Centers around the country. About 3,000 grants go for centers, and those 3,000 grants, in turn, fund the 8,900 centers.

How does the program help meet the goals of NCLB?

No Child Left Behind is all about student achievement—and not only that, but it puts in place accountability systems to make sure that all students are achieving, including students in different subgroups. The 21st Century program is, by statute, targeted at many of the same high-need schools that other federal programs also support with in-school services, particularly Title I programs. It enables kids who need extra help or extra time to use afterschool hours in constructive ways. It allows kids to get afterschool tutoring or work in small groups to make sure that their homework is done correctly, that they understand what they got during the day.

There are approximately 8,900 CCLC programs around the country.

For more information on 21st Century Community Learning Centers and promising practices in afterschool programs, visit the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning's Web site at www.sedl.org/afterschool.

From the beginning, 21st Century was about academic enrichment.

Also, it's not just more school. It lets them do other things and try new things, and it encourages development of leadership skills and responsibility. We want kids to become filmmakers, stay in shape, and participate in sports because these things are being driven out of the regular school day in many places.

Are we seeing less priority placed on family, community, and providing a safe haven for children in favor of greater focus on academics?

Not less priority on families because family educational services are part of 21st Century's authorized activities. We very much want to bring in students' and participants' family members—to make sure that they connect with the school, know how their kids are doing, and are able to support their learning and development.

The program does downplay, if not eliminate, one role that the old 21st Century program played, which was the establishment of the school as a kind of broad hub for the entire community. We used to fund adult learning activities, driver's education courses, citizenship training, English as a second language, and computers for grandparents, but now the 21st Century funds are targeted toward the needs of participating kids.

From the beginning, 21st Century was about academic enrichment. Over the years, we've come to understand more about the balance between providing enhanced academics and providing other things to attract kids, keep them as regular participants, and serve their other needs.

What role does research play in the afterschool efforts you support?

The department got some bad evaluation news in a study that we funded, which was carried out by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. They found that there weren't any big gains or benefits in at least some randomly selected 21st Century programs. Typical 21st Century programs didn't seem to be all that great. So we decided to focus our efforts on supporting quality in afterschool programs.

There have been thousands of studies done, many of which suggest that afterschool programs have benefits. But few, if any of them, meet the department's standards for evaluation—the gold standard, where you actually use a randomized clinical trial and methodology to see whether this intervention is better than no intervention or some other type of intervention. The department's efforts have moved away from evaluating whether a typically funded program is any good to looking instead at programs that have much higher quality to see whether we could document gains in

achievement or positive behaviors in those really high-class programs.

The department's Institute of Education Sciences is funding a study of very good afterschool math and reading programs to look at whether those well-implemented treatments are making a difference with kids. The department is also on the verge of soliciting proposals from afterschool programs around the country that have a good track record and preliminary evidence of effectiveness. We want to select another three, four, five, or so of those to participate in rigorous evaluations. In fact, SEDL has been contracted by the Department of Education to manage the process of finding candidate sites for those evaluations and managing evaluations to make sure they meet our standards of rigor.

What is the current administration's vision for 21st Century?

To get afterschool programs working effectively is our goal now. Our goal in the future will be to use our \$1 billion in funding to support model programs of the highest quality that can serve as beacons for other afterschool programs. The federal dollars are about what they've been, so now it's the turn of the municipalities, the mayors, the city councils, the school districts, and the states. For instance, California, New York, and New Jersey are providing hefty contributions of state money to make sure that kids who aren't now being served have the opportunity to participate in programs. California is virtually going to go to scale through Proposition 49, which will pump about \$500 million more into creating afterschool opportunities for just about every school in the state that wants these programs.

The challenge is to create these models of excellence, establish training systems, share lessons learned and materials, keep staff stable, and recruit and ensure regular participation by kids. We're trying to create a body of knowledge and a delivery system that will allow these thousands of programs to take quick benefit of all the things that have been learned in the last 15 years.

With 21st Century level-funded at about \$981 million for fiscal 2006, is federal support for afterschool adequate to get the job done?

Funding has been leveled out, I believe, at least as long as it's going to take for the 21st Century program to start showing more clearly the benefits to the kids participating. Once our evaluation efforts bear fruit—if they do, if they show that these programs have been effective in improving behaviors and academic performance—then it's up to Congress to reconsider whether to expand these opportunities.

Afterschool Science Classes Nurture an Interest in Nature

By Debbie Ritenour

If a 10-year-old boy could pick his own class schedule, it'd be a safe bet to assume he'd choose a class called "Grossology." It's no surprise, then, that that's one of the more popular classes offered at the afterschool program at South Hutchinson Elementary School in South Hutchinson, Kansas. The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning identified the program as one of the promising practices sites with a science focus.

The afterschool program at South Hutchinson Elementary serves about 200 students a year with an average daily attendance of 75 students. Originally funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, students are now charged \$7 per 6-week class, although students from low-income families are often covered. Certified teachers, volunteers, and paraprofessionals teach the classes, and day teachers conduct the homework help sessions.

"Some of the classes are directly related to science lessons the students are studying during the school day. However, most of the classes are indirectly related to the day curriculum," says Mary Treaster, principal of the school. "In other words, the skills and concepts are the same, but the presentation and information are different. During the afterschool program science classes we try to focus on projects or topics that we are unable to teach during the school day due to time constraints."

"Grossology" is a kitchen chemistry class that is always full and receives many requests. Other popular classes at the preK–6 campus explore topics such as insects, small engines, space exploration, endangered animals, environment education, and sharks. The classes, which last for six weeks, each have between 8 and 15 students.

"All of the classes address the Kansas state science standards, and they are project-based and hands-on," Treaster says. She points out that this emphasis has paid off; in Kansas, elementary school students take the science assessment in the fourth grade, and for the last two years the fourth-grade students at South Hutchinson have earned the Standard of Excellence, a designation the Kansas State Department of Education uses to recognize schools that far exceed normal expectations.

Since the funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant ended, the school was forced to conserve resources. The biggest impact was in training and staff development. The program has been forced to seek other grants to extend the staff development opportunities.

The program develops new classes when teachers discover a topic that interests the students. The insects class, for example, evolved a few years ago when the school's theme was "Going Buggy." The classes are multiaged, which creates a strong sense of community within the school as older students assist the younger students and share their experiences with them. Parents and community members are encouraged to volunteer as aides to strengthen the school's bond with the community.

The classes evolve and expand based on the interests and needs of the students. The students, in return, respond enthusiastically.

"Our students love science, they love to discover new ideas and concepts, and they love to share their information with everyone. It is fun to see that spark in their eyes when they discover something they didn't know before," Treaster says.

"Science is a wonderful way to help students learn to find information for themselves and develop that love of learning."



Debbie Ritenour is a SEDL program specialist and a contributing editor to SEDL Letter. You may reach Debbie by emailing dritenou@sedl.org.

Out-of-School Program Breaks Boundaries, Empowers Students Through the Arts

By Shaila Abdullah

Aziza Hassan's¹ eyes light up when she talks about her art and the workshop that helped her realize her dreams. The young artist, a student at Lee High School in Houston, Texas, is a Somali refugee. She had been living in Houston for only a year when she participated in a summer art program hosted by Voices Breaking Boundaries (VBB), a nonprofit organization devoted to offering a platform for cultural expression through various art forms. The paintings she produced in the program were highly praised, and Hassan sold several of them and received orders for more. The publicity provided her with the confidence she needs to succeed in school. She had never taken an art class in Somalia and cherishes the buzz her work has generated.

In spring of 2003, Michelle Ramirez, also a student at Lee High School, was ready to drop out. Her grades were low, and she had been a low-performing student for too long. Through the VBB workshops and her participation in a performance at the University of Houston Downtown (UHD), Ramirez found new hope in the written word. Writing became a constant in her life as well as a coping mechanism. She is now a student at UHD.

"Although Ramirez was on the verge of leaving Lee because she had turned 20 and was behind in credits, I advised the administration to let her stay," says Anita Wadhwa, an English teacher at the high school. "Since the performance with VBB, I have seen a new determination in her to succeed. Several other students in the class who were also befuddled by the college process are now considering university options because of the mentorship provided by VBB and its volunteers."

VBB's Beginnings

Concerned about the lack of adequate facilities and platforms for creative expression in the immigrant community, Sehba Sarwar, a Pakistani-American poet, writer, and teacher, founded Voices Breaking Boundaries in 2000. It started off as a collective literary reading organized by five diverse women poets and writers at a local bookstore. It soon became a series when Sarwar received a grant from Houston's arts council.

Today, VBB produces more than 10 performances annually at local venues and organizes regular exhibitions and events in its shotgun-style house on the Project Row Houses (PRH) campus—a site for the arts in Houston's Third Ward. VBB also provides a support network for writers to practice, publish, perform, and receive recognition for their work. VBB's mission is to cross borders, sustain dialogue, and incite change through living art. Sarwar and a group of volunteers provide a platform for artists from across the globe and showcase all forms of art, including the written and spoken word, performing arts, visual arts, and multimedia art forms. VBB has sponsored artists from as far away as Mexico, India, Pakistan, Argentina, and Brazil. In the past, VBB has featured such renowned names as Arundhati Roy, Anthony Arnove, Sarah Cortez, Mark Doty, Farnoosh Moshiri, Aradhana Seth, Sonia Shah, Donna Garret, Ruben Martinez, Soldier Blue, Mango Tribe, Tariq Ali, and Laura Flanders.

Among VBB's most notable work is that with Houston high schools. VBB works with teachers and administrators who demonstrate an interest in expressing cultural diversity through various art forms and provides educational residencies and venues for performances. VBB also offers intensive summer creative expression workshops for students. They assist in training students to perform on equal billing as professional artists.

"Once we establish connections with a community, we tend to stay there to nurture the students and provide them creative outlets for expression," says Sarwar. "We help students who are struggling to learn English acquire the language through creative exercises. We present them with role models and college options. We aim to create a path for students to remain in high school and go on to college."

Sarwar's association with schools dates back to the time when she was writer-in-residence with a Houston-based nonprofit organization, Writers in the Schools (WITS). She learned that she had a natural talent for teaching and thrived on sharing her passion for words with students. A published novelist, Sarwar went on to teach creative writing, journalism, and English in two Houston high schools. She left her



¹ Students' names have been changed to protect their identity.

teaching position in 2002 to work full-time at VBB but continues to work with schools through her connections in the school district.

Marcela Descalzi, a cofounder of VBB who is also a trained scientist and educator, is deeply vested in the program. “I feel that it is very important to provide a secure setting for students to explore their voice,” says Descalzi.

“This means that we try to make it safe for them to seek self-expression through the arts and encourage them to tell their story.”

Descalzi is also the director of the School Writing Project at Rice University. The project directs K–12 teachers in helping students find their voices as writers through weekly seminars and workshops. Descalzi is working on forming an alliance between that project and VBB.

Breaking Barriers in Houston Schools

Lee High School is located in a densely populated area of southwest Houston where the residents are mostly immigrants. VBB targets such communities through their work and encourages students who are struggling to learn the English language. The goal is to help such students finish high school and go on to college.

Garrett Reed, an English as a second language instructor at Lee, has worked closely with VBB and Sarwar and holds the program in high regard. “The staff at VBB work to help students overcome the language barrier by bringing out the artist within each student,” says Reed. “Most program staff do not have the patience or will to do what VBB does. They take the time and interest to interact with this forgotten group and value their art.”

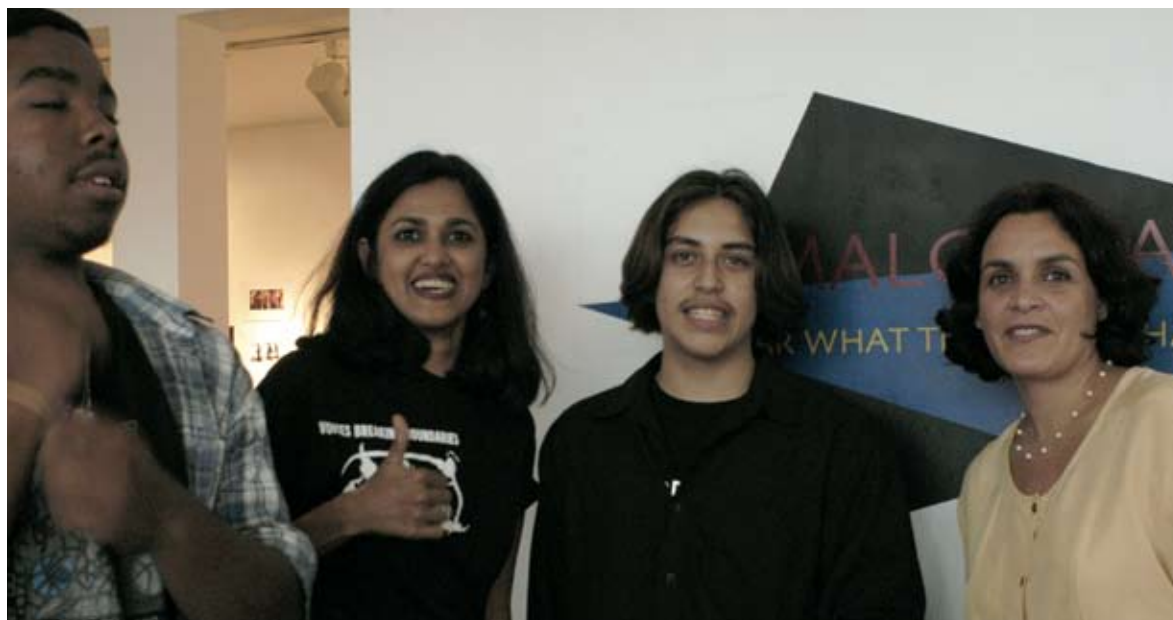
In the past few years, VBB has organized several programs for Lee High School. The summer workshop in 2005 was one such event. Students at the workshop were trained to produce videos and experiment with different art forms. After exploring these art forms, the students chose the medium they wanted to work with and expressed themselves through that medium. The workshop culminated in a final performance at DiverseWorks Artspace where students demonstrated talents in the visual and other arts, including break dancing and playing musical instruments. A poetry reading was also organized at DiverseWorks for students who choose to pursue the written word. In late 2005, Sarwar and other artists conducted an afterschool workshop, which ended in a poignant performance in the school auditorium. The format required improvisational performances between musicians and writers. Parents, administrators, teachers, and other students were invited to witness the collaboration among the participants. It was an inspiring event that was later used as a model for a performance for writers and musicians at Rice University.

VBB also involves teachers in the process of creative exploration. The reason, according to Descalzi, is to form stronger bonds between students and teachers. In a classroom setting, it is difficult to form such connections. VBB provides time for both students and teachers to share their stories and expand on how they view one another. This process breaks down the barriers, and teachers admit that it is a transformative experience for them as well.

“More often than not, teachers help us in the recruitment process,” says Sarwar. “And we’ve found that our work is easier when the school is invested in the work we begin.”



Through VBB, high school students have the opportunity to perform in public, often with professionals.



Sehba Sarwar (2nd from left) and Marcela Descalzi (far right), cofounders of VBB, with two students at a Furr High School performance at Houston’s DiverseWorks.

From Spark to Explosion

By Shannon Garth-Rhodes

My parents flew me from St. Louis, Missouri, to Houston, Texas, for a summer writing program called Writers in the Schools (WITS) when I was in sixth grade. My favorite memory of that summer was a woman of brown complexion, a little lighter than mine, who wrote backwards in her journal. She was from Pakistan and explained to me that that was the way the Urdu language is written. I had the hardest time getting started writing. I would stop and start, crumple up the pages I was writing on, toss them, and then peek at other people's work to see what they had written. That is when she instructed me to write. "Just write," she said. "Don't think, just put your pen to the paper and write." I obeyed, and the words started to flow. That writing instructor from Pakistan was Sehba Sarwar, a woman who ultimately became my mentor and guide.

In 2003, I applied to University of Houston-Main Campus because I wanted to study creative writing. I had been told that their program was one of the best in the country and was accepted. That spring I was asked to attend a reading at DiverseWorks Artspace as part of an extra credit assignment. That is where I met Sarwar again. After that second meeting, I volunteered several times for VBB while at college and established a rapport with Sarwar. When I told her that I needed to fulfill a field experience undergraduate requirement, she asked me if I would accept an internship with the organization. I agreed and spent the first few weeks getting to know the young organization's mission by concentrating on their literary workshops in high school classrooms. I also brainstormed and wrote proposals for grants to fund more programs.

Homing in on my interest, Sarwar invited me to a workshop to tape-record the students at Lee High School while they read their writing aloud to the class. I enjoyed watching Sarwar and Anita Wadhwa, an English teacher, work collaboratively. To this day I have never come across a more innovative or involved group of educators. Sarwar shares a reciprocal relationship with students that allow them to feel unique and talented when they participate in her class exercises.

I continued to work with VBB and Lee High School after graduation and independently led three more workshops within the next year. The performances toward the end always took place at public venues and were attended by a citywide audience. Working with VBB allowed me to see the potential of student engagement. Shortly afterward, I moved to Massachusetts for a teaching fellowship with Citizen Schools, a national AmeriCorps-sponsored organization that provides afterschool programming for middle school students. I was recently accepted in the urban education policy program at Brown University and in an education policy and management program at Harvard Graduate School.



In 2002 and 2003, Sarwar received personal grants to run education workshops at Furr and Sharpstown high schools. The Furr workshop was led by musician Isaias Degollado and by Descalzi. It resulted in *Amalgamation*, a rich presentation that combined different art forms expressed in unique ways. The event showcased hidden talents of Houston teenagers who curated and performed, and expressed themselves through various means.

"By working with VBB for the past 4 months, I've received positive feedback about my art," says 16-year-old cocurator Luis Guerro. "I've been drawing since I was 10 years old, but when I started the creative writing class that led to this performance, I got more into my art and talent."

Empowerment Through Mentoring

VBB has an established mentoring program. Students who benefit from the programs go on to become arts facilitators and serve as role models for students. These students often give something back to VBB for its impact on their lives and remain involved with the work. Two students who have done so are Eric Hester and Shannon Garth-Rhodes.

Hester was in high school in 1999 when he enrolled in a creative writing class led by Sarwar at Jones High School. After VBB received nonprofit status, he became the first teenager to be on the board of VBB and remained there for 3 years. Presently, he is a sophomore at Rice University and changed his major from engineering to visual art after VBB conducted a successful exhibition of his photography at one of their events. Hester also co-facilitated the Sharpstown and Furr workshops and played a vital role in the success of *Amalgamation*.

Garth-Rhodes was in middle school when she first met Sarwar. (see "From Spark to Explosion" at left). She continued working with VBB throughout college and soon will attend graduate school on the East Coast.

"Especially for groups of students and even teachers who feel disenfranchised by society, it seems of utmost importance to hear their voice, to hear what they have to say," says Descalzi. "We hope to continue to work with teachers and students to provide the time and space for the kind of artistic initiatives that encourage dialogue and expression."

Shaila Abdullah is a SEDL media design associate. She is the author of Beyond the Cayenne Wall, a collection of short stories that received the Jury Prize for Outstanding Fiction in the 2005 Norumbega Fiction Awards. You may reach Shaila by e-mailing sabdulla@sedl.org.

Knowledge, Excellence, Wisdom, and Action

Through the Arts After School

The artist from Santo Domingo Pueblo, New Mexico, is working intently. He is carefully stringing together beads of different colors and shapes to make a treasure necklace. He is quiet and focused. He is 7 years old.

Incredibly, there are six more first graders in the group, all just as intent on making a beautiful treasure necklace, much like their grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles have made. In another room, third-grade students are busily and precisely sanding and painting pottery pieces adorned with native designs. Fifth graders are participating in the Youth Leadership group. Other students are playing soccer, and still others are receiving reading instruction or computer instruction. Later in the afternoon, students will attend Homework Club. It is a typical day in the Santo Domingo School's afterschool program, the KEWA 21st Century Community Learning Center Program.

Besides these afterschool activities, students also have the opportunity to receive tutoring throughout the school year, play basketball, and participate in an exercise program, a nutrition program, storytelling, and a wide range of arts classes. There is also a math, engineering, and science program for grades 6, 7, and 8.

Of the afterschool program's variety of activities, 21st Century Project Director JoAnn Melchor explains, "We look at different opportunities for students—different opportunities for them to learn and grow."

Collaborative Effort, Cultural Vision

K-5 principal Bryan Garcia reports that the afterschool program is a collaborative effort among the school, the pueblo, and the 21st Century Community Learning Center Program. "It addresses

the needs of the whole child," he says. "The program helps meet academic needs and provides enrichment activities that address the cultural needs of our students."

The opportunities at Santo Domingo are often related to the unique culture of the school and community. Melchor explains, "The afterschool program and our school in general need to address the cultural aspects of our pueblo life because our culture is so critical in the lives of our students, parents, and families. There has to be a balance of what we teach our children in day school and after school. Some of our children come from families that have strong traditions, and these students appreciate knowing that the arts of jewelry- and pottery-making have sustained our people since time immemorial."

Indeed, several of the afterschool staff members mentioned the importance of culture in what they were teaching after school. Cheryl Lucero, who teaches jewelry-making, says she would like her students to carry on the pueblo's tradition of making jewelry. "If they do that, I'll be happy," she says, beaming at her first-grade group.

Much of the culture of Santo Domingo lies in the pueblo's language, Keres. Keres is an oral



Santo Domingo artist Cheryl Lucero teaches students to make traditional necklaces.



Students sand and paint pottery in a class taught by potter Manuelita Lovato.

Why the Arts After School?

“The arts are another language,” says Suzanne Stiegelbauer, an associate professor at Texas State University’s National Center for School Improvement. Stiegelbauer began her career as a high school art teacher. She explains, “The arts offer a language more basic than the spoken word—a language that comes from the senses. You don’t have to have high grades to learn or be involved—you are using the senses to acquire information. Plus, because the arts are more physical, they are more fun than other subjects.”

Stiegelbauer believes once kids get into arts projects—no matter what the medium—they connect with and internalize what they are learning. Often, skills students develop in the arts help boost self-confidence and cultivate self-discipline, which could help them with other academic work. According to Stiegelbauer, “To dance well, to paint well, to play an instrument well, you must be disciplined, and once a student is involved in these activities, it is self-reinforcing. Academic subjects often rely on external reinforcement.” Additionally, she notes that students who become active in the arts often build a support system with other students and adults.



language spoken at seven pueblos in New Mexico. In fact, Santo Domingo was the name given to the pueblo by the Spanish in the 1600s. The pueblo’s preferred, traditional name is Kewa. The school has incorporated Kewa into its vision: “A learning community continuously committed to Knowledge, Excellence, Wisdom, Action—KEWA.”

Garcia explains, “The afterschool program—through strong cultural connections and a focus on increasing academic achievement—creates a learning environment where students strive for increased knowledge and excellence in what they do, wisdom through character development, and the action needed to realize their dreams.” Garcia adds that wisdom through character development includes respect, responsibility, caring, trustworthiness, citizenship, and fairness,

About 70–150 students attend the afterschool program, which is in its third year. Attendance fluctuates with the school schedule. Many of the students don’t come after the New Mexico Standards-Based Assessment (NMSBA) is given; attendance also drops when the weather warms up in the spring.

Principal Bryan Garcia (right) says the afterschool program helps reinforce strong family connections.

Melchor is passionate about the program, the children, and her work. She has spent her career working for and with children in New Mexico through several programs, including Futures for Children, the American Indian Graduate Center, and the New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution. While giving a workshop to Navajo students in Alamo, New Mexico, she realized that she needed to focus on native children and was drawn to the idea of working directly with Santo Domingo Pueblo children through the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant. She attributes much of the success of the program, however, to the support it receives from Garcia, middle school principal Richard Torralba, the leadership at Bernalillo Public Schools, and the Santo Domingo tribal leadership.

Today, the cheerful afterschool project director is juggling many tasks. Melchor has been to nearby Albuquerque to buy snacks that will be distributed to the students in grades 3–8 who are taking the NMSBA tests all week. Two teachers stop by the office to coordinate plans for one project or another. Christian, a third grader, checks in to see what the snacks will be during tomorrow’s testing. In the hallway other students greet Melchor, all happy to see her. The grandparents of two children who participate in the afterschool program stop to chat as well. The atmosphere at Santo Domingo School is warm and welcoming. Everyone is treated with respect.

Garcia says that as a result of the strong cultural connections in the afterschool program, “Our families feel connected to our staff, which creates a comfort level that is conducive to increased family involvement. Families are welcome to visit, volunteer, and participate on a daily basis. In addition, there are many learning opportunities for families through parent nights focused on topics such as literacy, art, math, career development, and parenting.”



Linking Arts and Academics

Santo Domingo School has been identified by the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning as one of the promising practices sites with an arts focus. Suzanne Stiegelbauer, an associate professor at Texas State University and a consultant to the National Partnership, says the arts and academics go hand in hand and that this is apparent at Santo Domingo School. She reports that the afterschool arts program at the school is “powerful in that it keeps kids engaged in traditions and their pueblo’s economic base while drawing on math and literacy skills.” She explains that in the pottery classes, students use mathematical concepts to measure designs for the pots, determine what size their piece should be and what percentage of mixtures are needed to make the glaze, estimate the cost of materials that went into making their pots, and figure out what price they should charge when selling their pottery. In some art classes, the students keep journals, helping to reinforce literacy skills. Manuelita Lovato, a pottery teacher, has the students make notes about the meaning of their designs in their journals.

“When the afterschool program supports the school goals and focus areas,” says Garcia, “the students benefit greatly from the additional learning support.”

At Santo Domingo, this support is facilitated by the high proportion of afterschool staff who are regular teachers or paraprofessionals during the school day. The Santo Domingo faculty look at the achievement levels of each student and their test scores and make recommendations for tutoring. Afterschool staff also work closely with the regular staff to find out what kind of help students need. For example, Corine Lovato, the afterschool computer teacher, checks with the students’ regular teachers to find out what skills they need to work on in computer lab. As a result, on any given day, she has some students working on keyboarding skills, others working on computerized math or reading programs, and others who are free to play computer games or work on homework.

Much time in the afterschool program is spent preparing students for the NMSBA tests. Teachers look at the test scores and achievement levels of each student and make recommendations for tutoring. The afterschool program coordinates with the Day Foundation to provide tutoring to Santo Domingo students, and the afterschool staff also works with the students to prepare them for testing. Karen Adams, an art teacher on the Santo Domingo faculty who works in the afterschool program, says that a great deal of the coaching regarding the NMSBA testing focuses on helping students learn to take the tests and the importance of showing their work and their thought processes on paper.



KEWA CCLC program director JoAnn Melchor enjoys helping students with their homework.

One thing that strikes visitors to the KEWA 21st Century Community Learning Center Program is student behavior. Although students are having fun, they are courteous to each other and to teachers, even while in the gym playing soccer. The afterschool program coordinates its discipline policy with that of the school. “We follow the same rules and regulations as the day school. The consequences and rewards are the same for day and after school,” Melchor says.

Everyone in the school participates in the school’s incentive program. This includes the School Dollars program, in which students earn “dollars” for good behavior, attendance, and excellence in academic work. Twice a month students have the opportunity to redeem the dollars at the school store for school supplies, sports equipment, clothes, jewelry, and other items.

And what about student outcomes related to the afterschool program? Students, families, and teachers are surveyed regularly as part of the program evaluation. Many students who attend the program regularly show improvement in behaviors related to academic work. They turn in homework more regularly than before, they complete their homework to their teachers’ satisfaction, their attendance is improved, and teachers believe their motivation to learn is higher—all factors in academic success.

At 5 p.m., two yellow school buses pull up in front of the school. A flurry of good-byes are hollered up and down the hallway, hugs are dispensed, and suddenly it is quiet. Another day of arts and academics after school has come to an end at Santo Domingo.

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New Study Shows High-Performing Afterschool Programs Share Five Characteristics

Recent research conducted by Policy Studies Associates for The After-School Corporation (TASC) and the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) echoes what several researchers in the afterschool field have found over the past decade—afterschool programs can contribute to increased student achievement. Perhaps surprisingly, the study found that afterschool programs that help lead to higher achievement don't necessarily focus on academics. Successful programs had a variety of arts, recreation, and literacy activities and allowed the students free time as well.

Catherine Jordan, director of the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning at SEDL, said, "Successful afterschool programs do not replicate the school day. Policy Studies Associates found that instead, these afterschool programs are safety zones where students receive homework help and are able to explore new ideas and interests. Students also are able to develop long-term supportive relationships with adults and peers."

The study focused on 10 high-performing TASC-supported afterschool programs in New York City. Researchers first analyzed mathematics and literacy standardized test scores, examining differences in gains between students who actively participated in TASC programs and those who attended the TASC

host school but did not participate in the school's afterschool program. The afterschool programs that were successful, based on participant achievement data increasing over a 2-year period, were identified as high-performing. The research team then conducted interviews and observations at each of the 10 schools to identify commonalities among the successful programs.

The study found the high-performing programs shared the following five characteristics:

- A broad array of enrichment opportunities such as arts, crafts, homework help, and sports and recreation
- Opportunities for participant skill building and mastery
- Intentional relationship building with host schools, participants, and families
- A strong, experienced site coordinator who is supported by a trained and supervised staff
- Full administrative, fiscal, and professional development support from the program's sponsoring organization

The TASC/SEDL study is important in a number of ways, says Jordan. "It can serve as a guide to new or struggling afterschool programs, helping them refine certain areas of their programs. It also helps emphasize a need for future research related to afterschool programming—more systematic information across large, diverse program samples is needed to shed light on practices that will lead to the greatest gains for students."

To download a copy
of the full report,
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