

At the Crossroads: What We Know and Don't Know About After-School Care Programs

Over the past two decades, various stakeholders have argued that after-school care programs can be part of a solution to problems besetting today's youth—that beyond providing after-school care, such programs can improve academics, reduce crime, and prevent unsafe behaviors. Spurred by such arguments, public funding for after-school care programs has grown phenomenally. For example, the federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLCs) went from zero dollars of funding in 1994 to one billion dollars by 2002.

But the less-than-stellar results of a recent evaluation of the CCLCs have had a sobering effect. That large-scale, rigorous evaluation found that, overall, there are limited academic gains or other benefits for children in after-school programs. In a sense, the field as a whole currently stands at a crossroads, unsure of what direction

to go. Now is a good time to step back and take stock of what is known and not known about after-school care. Recent studies by a number of RAND Corporation researchers contribute to the dialogue.

► **Read the Research Brief:**
[Making Out-of-School-Time Matter](#)

► **Read the Research Brief:**
[Evaluating After-School Care](#)

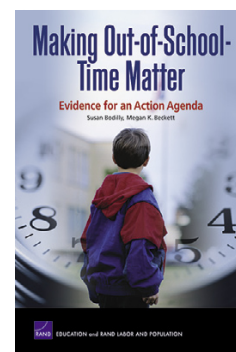
See next page for related links.

Putting It All in Perspective

What do we find when we take a broader look across the field? A new RAND report does just that, systematically examining what we know, and it finds some surprising answers.

There is a current push to ensure that there are enough slots in after-school care

programs for those who want them, but only a small number of studies document this issue, and they all have flaws. And when we look at studies of existing



programs, we find significant numbers of open slots and dropouts, implying that demand for existing programs is not insistent or pent up, as many claim.

As part of this push, there are many efforts to build the capacity of communities and

programs to provide more and higher-quality slots. However, such capacity-building efforts themselves are unproven and perhaps unwarranted until we know what types of programs are effective for what outcomes and populations.

And what outcomes have programs achieved? Very few programs have been evaluated, and when we look at those with the most rigorous evaluation designs, we find that, at best, these programs have had some modest, positive impacts on academic achievement, academic attainment, and social behaviors such as reduced drug use or pregnancy. But we do not currently know how to design the average program so that it routinely has positive outcomes.

Programs most likely to improve student

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INTERVIEW

Making Accountability More Than a Buzzword



As a RAND demographer, Dr. Megan Beckett was lead author on a book that provided the first systematic synthesis of the literature on after-school care practices to identify and devise measures for adherence to good after-school care practices. The book provided a benchmark for how after-school care programs can be evaluated given the current knowledge base about after-school care practices. She has written op-eds, conducted interviews, and spoken widely on issues related to after-school care. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan.

What does the after-school care field look like now?

The field is being driven by funding streams. And those funding streams are driven, in turn, by the claims that many in the field have made about what after-school programs can accomplish. Unfortunately, my read of the evaluations of after-school care programs is that these programs are not living up to expectations. For example, the CCLC evaluation suggests that after-school care programs staffed by regular teachers do not improve the percentage of children who satisfactorily complete their homework. Despite such results, many foundations and funding streams continue to hold programs accountable for achieving certain outcomes, like raising test scores.

How realistic is it to hold programs accountable for achieving outcomes?

Not very. At the very least, they can be held accountable for "doing no harm" (i.e., making sure kids are safe and perhaps getting

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CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFINGS

Join us for a Congressional Luncheon Briefing on Monday, March 14, 2005, at 12:00 P.M. Location: 2105 RHOB.

Dr. Susan J. Bodilly presents *Making Out-of-School-Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda*.

For more information and to RSVP, please contact Wendy Moltrup Pape at wendy.pape@rand.org or 703-413-1100, ext. 5938.

Making Accountability More Than a Buzzword *continued*

healthy snacks they might be eligible for through nutrition programs). Beyond that, no one currently knows how to design a group-based, after-school program that can reliably impact test scores or other ambitious outcomes. Program evaluation makes sense for large programs and where large amounts of public money are at stake and outside evaluators can be used. But requiring the smaller, single programs to demonstrate that they are achieving outcomes that not even model after-school programs can achieve reliably is a waste of resources.

What's the best way to deal with this problem?

I think that using the model of what has been done in the drug prevention field would make sense here. Two decades ago, vast quantities of money were being funneled into subsequently disproved program strategies or into programs that had not been carefully developed or evaluated. Later evaluations showed that these programs were largely ineffective and that the costs were not justified. As a result, the federal government has pushed for adopting better-designed programs that have rigorous evaluations and yield credible and positive results.

I think funders and the government should push the after-school field in the same direction. Researchers and practitioners—who are in a position to carefully develop and evaluate programs—could work together to develop a menu of proven “modules” in a controlled setting. Only modules shown to significantly improve desired outcomes would be added to the menu. The outcomes might be simple ones, such as raising rates of satisfactory homework completion or increasing minutes involved in vigorous physical activity.

Using such modules, how would programs be accountable?

After-school programs have limited resources, and their staffs have variable training and backgrounds. So, modules would need to be designed as flexibly as possible. Then programs could be held accountable for choosing and implementing proven modules that have specified outcomes, such as achieving a minimum level of attendance, but the responsibility for designing and achieving positive and ambitious outcomes would fall on the module developers. Funders might also specify that the programming must include modules designed to achieve outcomes related to their objectives. ■

► **Read the commentary from the RAND Review:**
[Don't Make After-School Care the Next Big Myth](#)

► **Read the commentary from the San Diego Union-Tribune:**
[Monitor After-School Programs Carefully](#)



Promising Practices Network

on Children, Families and Communities

The Promising Practices Network (PPN) is a user-friendly website that provides evidence-based information on child, youth, and family policy. RAND operates the site, and child and family-serving organizations provide oversight for the project. Site content is organized around three major areas: Proven and Promising Programs, Research in Brief, and Strengthening Service Delivery.

► **Visit the Promising Practices Network:**
<http://www.promisingpractices.net/>

For monthly email updates on all new RAND child policy publications and research projects, sign up for the **Child Policy** mailing list at <http://www.rand.org/child/about.html>.

At the Crossroads *continued*

outcomes have a better chance of doing so if the programs themselves follow “best practices” in the field. Both the new RAND report and an earlier one focus on identifying those practices. Evidence suggests that a number of factors might be associated with improved youth outcomes—for example, programs having clear missions and stable and trained personnel—however, these factors have not been tested for effectiveness in rigorous experimental studies.

Moving Forward

While after-school care programs are not a panacea for the problems besetting youth, that does not mean we should toss the baby out with the bathwater. Doing so ignores the fact that there are real societal issues that after-school care programs can potentially address.

For example, one RAND study looked at the amount of time children spend unsupervised by adults and whether it influences the frequency of sex and substance abuse. The study found that more than half of sexually active youths reported they had sex at home after school, and that, particularly for boys, sexual- and drug-related risks increased as the amount of unsupervised time increased.

Yet another RAND study looked at the relationship between adolescent obesity and participation in after-school sports and found that participation in an increasing number of athletic activities was associated with a lower body mass index among adolescents, suggesting that after-school sports are a potential opportunity for preventing obesity.

Such findings argue for taking a longer-term view of the after-school care field as a work in progress. As such, it is important to build on what we know and to continue to research what we do not know. ■

► **Read the journal article in Pediatrics:**
[When and Where Do Youths Have Sex? The Potential Role of Adult Supervision](#)

► **Read the abstract:**
[After-School Activities and Obesity](#)