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Making Out-of-School- Time Matter

Evidence for an Action Agenda

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Prepared for The Wallace Foundation



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Summary

Programs that offer out-of-school (OST) and out-of-home services to children and youth can be found in every state and locale and run the gamut from school-age care services supporting working parents, to programs specifically structured to prevent problematic behaviors such as drug use or teen pregnancy, to academically oriented programs designed to improve test scores, to those directed at supporting specific hobbies and interests.

A loosely connected set of providers, clients, sponsors, and intermediaries make up the local markets referred to as the OST field. This field and the actors in it have been evolving in response to shifts in the economy, the growing demand for services associated with increased numbers of working mothers in the labor force, concerns over youth development or the lack thereof, and increased academic expectations for youth.

While public interest in OST programs has waxed and waned in the United States for more than a century, the past 20 years have been unprecedented in the growth of provision and the amount of public financing for these programs. In the past 20 years, interest groups such as school-age child-care practitioners, youth-development experts, educators, criminal and juvenile justice experts, and poverty experts have argued that OST programs are part of a solution to problems they see besetting children and youth. These groups have successfully drawn attention to OST issues and worked to increase public funding, but they do not all agree on how to move forward.

Some voices in recent debates over the future of the field say it is enough for the marketplace to offer school-age care services during

times when parents or relations are not available to supervise children. Others call for making subsidized programming more widely available. Still others insist on more ambitious programming to meet a range of goals, such as improved test scores or reduced crime. Some want OST providers to be entrusted more than ever before with the academic skill building of our children, holding specific programs responsible for improving test scores. Others favor these programs as havens from the academic pressures of schools, where children can learn social skills and develop mentors and role models to help them in their difficult circumstances. Finally, the role of government has grown to support service provision, and with it has come increasing regulation, accountability, oversight, and concern over meeting more ambitious goals, including improved academic test scores or reduced crime rates.

The Research Purpose

The Wallace Foundation, an active supporter of programs in this field, asked RAND to provide an objective and systematic examination of the OST literature to clarify and inform the key issues in the ongoing debates related to whether and how to improve OST programming. RAND undertook a broad literature review to capture what is known with some certainty and what is more speculative about claims being made. This report, the outcome of that review, investigates five major issues:

- the level of unmet demand
- the state of knowledge about the types of outcomes that participation in OST programs are expected to impact and the nature of the impacts observed
- determinants of quality in program offerings
- determinants of participation and selection
- practices effective in ensuring that quality programming is available to meet local demand.

The audience for this report is those active in improving OST services. This includes service providers, intermediaries, philanthro-

pists, and policymakers. It can be used as a reference for them on the above issues, the current state of knowledge about those issues, and the strength of the evidence base for that knowledge.

We use *youth* to refer to the period extending from entry into school through adolescence (approximately ages 6–18). We define the subject of this examination as the available literature on public, group-based programs for school-age children that minimally provide care during non-school hours, but might also attempt to improve their behavioral, social, and academic development outcomes. Many of these types of programs are offered by community organizations outside the home, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs, parks and recreation departments, after-school programs, libraries, and museums.

Findings from the Literature

The review generated the following findings.

Demand for OST Services

A significant debate over the provision of services concerns whether or not there is pent-up demand for programming. Some advocates claim significant pent-up demand for OST provision and call on policymakers to pass legislation providing public funding to ensure universal coverage. The current trend is to push for capacity expansion, seeking to offer more slots to meet unmet demand.

More children than ever before are in formal program settings before and after school, oftentimes providing only child-care services. Our review, however, found that the limited number of studies documenting unmet demand for services (1) were based on unfounded assumptions that cannot be verified; (2) often estimated the total possible needs for child-care services, rather than what was demanded from providers outside the home; and (3) were based on surveys that do not force the respondent to consider trade-offs in the use of funds, thereby probably overestimating true demand.

In contrast, studies of existing programs indicate significant numbers of open slots and dropouts, implying unmet demand for existing

programs is not insistent or pent-up. We did not find systematic evidence of what it is parents and youth are demanding; a safe environment, improved or better social behaviors, improved academic outcomes, or all of these. We conclude that demand for OST programs, other than very general current-usage statistics, remains very unclear.

Potential Effects of Programs

We examined evaluations of OST programs to determine what outcomes they have been able to accomplish. Compared to the total number of programs operating, very few have been evaluated. The safety of children in OST provision has not been the focus of many program evaluations; rather, evaluations have focused on effects on academic achievement, academic attainment, and social behaviors. Children who choose to attend OST programs might differ systematically from those who choose not to attend in terms of motivation, aspiration, and other factors. A strong research design would control for this self-selection bias into the program to isolate its effects from the effect of the program. Most of the studies reviewed did not control for self-selection bias, making it difficult to conclude that differences between participants and nonparticipants are wholly attributable to program effects.

Analysis of the research with the most rigorous designs suggests that the few programs that have been evaluated have, at best, had modest positive impacts on academic achievement, academic attainment, and social behaviors such as reduced drug use or pregnancy. Documented academic and behavioral program effects sometimes varied by grade level, background of children, level of participation, program content by site, and whether the program developed was well targeted toward the desired outcome. These evaluations provide few insights into whether existing programs on average offer a safe and healthy playtime environment that might satisfy the demands of parents. There is no way of knowing if the average program offered would have similar academic or behavioral effects to those in the programs studied. The cost-effectiveness of these programs, compared to other interventions, including expansion of the school day, is not well understood.

Program Factors Associated with Positive Outcomes

Studies of what features of programs are associated with better outcomes are often not rigorous and depend on expert opinion. We drew on recent compendiums or studies of quality indicators in OST or related settings such as school-age-care literature, youth-development literature, effective-school literature, analyses of class-size-reduction programs, and recent studies on teacher-training effects.

There appears to be a convergence of these multiple, but less rigorous, sources on several program factors that might be associated with improved youth outcomes:

- a clear mission
- high expectations and positive social norms
- a safe and healthy environment
- a supportive emotional climate
- a small total enrollment
- stable, trained personnel
- appropriate content and pedagogy relative to the children's needs and the program's mission, with opportunities to engage
- integrated family and community partners
- frequent assessment.

We note that the field itself has moved toward the development of standards for service providers with the publication of standards consistent with the above characteristics. These factors have not been formally tested in OST programs or tested for effectiveness in rigorous experimental studies, but provide a useful cluster of characteristics upon which to base initial program-improvement efforts. These improvement efforts should be evaluated to determine whether in fact they are effective in meeting program outcomes.

Improving Participation

If quality programming is provided, then it might be appropriate to consider how to improve participation and, especially, how to target those children and youth who could most benefit from the services. We drew on a cross-section of fields to understand how to encour-

age and target participation. In recent years, leading behavior theorists have reached a consensus regarding the most important factors that determine how people choose to behave, which in turn are influenced by a host of individual, family, social, and environment factors. Other fields have made excellent use of these behavioral theories to target or increase participation.

We found empirical evidence that participation varies by participant background, implying that targeting services might increase participation. For example, lower-income families might be more attracted to subsidized programs that are located within their neighborhood and convenient to attend.

Practical ways to increase enrollment and attendance in programs have been developed and tested in the job-training and military-recruiting fields. Proven or promising ways to bolster enrollment rates in these fields include identifying all possible participants, dedicating sufficient and effective resources for outreach and recruitment, locating such efforts in places where targeted youth and their key influencers congregate, and combining advertising resources across like organizations. Monitoring attendance and quality, following up on absentees, and offering incentives to programs for achieving high attendance rates are potential ways to improve attendance. Most importantly, to successfully target a group and provide accessible services requires knowledge of their needs at the local level.

Improving Community-Level Provision

While often written about, we found little rigorous empirical evidence about how to build capacity in the OST field. Studies did provide notions about how to improve and build capacity both of individual programs and across local, regional, and national markets. In general, the review pointed to a few approaches that can be debated, but did not provide the evidence needed to create a well-crafted agenda.

- Strong arguments were uncovered that point to the effectiveness of more-integrated approaches with collaboration, joint planning, and networking as important ways to further the debate, as well as

identifying shared challenges, best practices, and common interest among the groups involved.

- Historic examples reviewed showed the importance of data collection and analysis, data-driven decision making, evaluation, self-assessment, standards, and quality assurance to the development of other relevant fields.
- More-generic discussions pointed to the need for better incentives for improved performance, accountability mechanisms, and perhaps market-based relationships to engage competition as a way to increase performance.

Implications

Policymakers and program implementers should remain skeptical of claims about pent-up demand for programs as well as claims that these programs can meet multiple needs and impact positively on multiple outcomes. Rapid growth should make way for concentrating on how to improve the quality of offerings by existing programs and of systems of provision.

A public discussion of the goals of OST would benefit from a better accounting of real demand, both in qualitative terms (what do children, youth, and parents want in OST programming?) and quantitatively (how many slots are demanded for different goals?). The first steps in that direction are survey-based local-area assessments of demand, and then matching program content and support to those specific needs. Resources would be well spent in assessing local needs and barriers to participation and developing programs to meet those needs and remove those barriers. Furthermore, any push toward rapid expansion of slots should be tempered with an assessment of how that expansion in quantity might affect the quality of the programs offered. The opposite might also be true: improvement in program quality could have the effect of increasing demand.

Policymakers should be cautious about overly optimistic predictions of the effectiveness of OST programming for improving youth outcomes such as test scores and improved social behaviors. Much de-

depends on the specific characteristics of the program and youth who participate. While programs have been developed that have modest positive effects on academics and social behaviors, there is no evidence to support the view that OST programs are a universal panacea for all the problems that OST proponents claim they are. Based on the few programs that have been rigorously evaluated and found effective, it is unrealistic to expect the current generation of OST programs to achieve most or even some of the outcomes articulated, such as those in California's debates on Proposition 49. Designing and implementing effective programs will take careful planning and attention. It would also likely take very significant funding.

We summarize here some basic information requirements that need to be addressed if programming is to be improved and the current debate is to become more productive:

- local assessments, using surveys and other field instruments, to clarify demand for specific services by specific classes of clients and the level and quality of existing providers
- development of forums for public consideration of the results of such analyses
- creation of more-systematic program evaluations with proper controls for self-selection and, where possible, the effect of participation levels; documentation of the impact of varying program elements or contexts; determination of the effects by age group or characteristic of participant; and attention to measuring cost effectiveness
- As there is little value to a strong evaluation of a weak intervention, these quality evaluations should be applied selectively to large, publicly funded programs and, any well-designed and funded programs with potentially wide impact (see Walker, 2004, for ideas on selection)
- dissemination of standardized measures of participation levels and intensity that are regularly reported and aggregated, combined, when possible, with serious attention to participation effects in program evaluations

- development and dissemination of tools to collect and report cost information and compiling of information necessary to undertake cost-effectiveness evaluations, with the ultimate goal of comparing OST programs to other alternative
- development, demonstration, testing, and evaluation of practical and cost-effective means to improve participant recruitment and enrollment practices for targeted services
- development of effective forums and incentives to disseminate existing standards, guidelines, and best practices as they evolve or are uncovered through research
- support for collection and analysis of data for use in decision making about provision of services, stronger monitoring, assessment, and accountability based on those guidelines and practices, including stronger incentives for performance.