WORKING PAPER

Tough Times, Tough Choices in After-School Funding

Pathways to Protecting Quality

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Abstract

Cities, sometimes with the help of private funders, have made investments to improve the quality of the after-school programs that they fund. However, the prolonged financial crisis faced by cities has greatly reduced city agency budgets, forcing agency leaders to make difficult choices between cutting student slots or reducing the quality of programming through cuts to professional development and technical assistance given to after-school providers. Drawing on interview data with agency leaders in three major cities, this paper explores how leaders make these decisions, the extent to which they protect quality investments, and the factors that influence their decisions. Authors identified a number of factors influencing these agencies' ability to maintain investments in quality, including agency authority over budget decisions, how city leaders weigh quantity and quality, strategic consideration of political and public interests, and the size of the budget shortfall. Lessons from interviews suggest that 1) private funds and associated public-private partnerships can shift the preference of city agencies 2) agency heads can make strategic budgetary decisions to help protect quality investments and 3) improving public understanding about the supports needed to achieve quality can help protect investments in quality.

Introduction

After-school programs have been proliferating and improving over the past twenty years. Across the nation, an estimated 6.5 million children—many of whom are low-income or at-risk—participate in after-school programs provided by community-based organizations, city agencies (such as Parks and Recreation and libraries), and schools. Fueled by research that offers evidence that high-quality programs can boost both academic achievement and social development in these children, cities, sometimes with the help of private funders, have been investing in quality improvements in these programs. They have done so by implementing quality standards, offering professional development to after-school staff, and adopting web-based management information systems that collect information about youth

enrollment, attendance, and demographics, and program characteristics and activities.

These investments are now threatened by the prolonged financial crisis, which has led to budget cuts at the state and local level as well as reductions in foundation support and private donations. Many cities that are committed to providing after-school opportunities for disadvantaged children have been grappling with how to keep these programs going with fewer resources. Inevitably, they are making trade-offs between cutting student slots or reducing the quality of programming through cuts to professional development and technical assistance given to after-school providers. These are tough choices: the more agency leaders protect the quality of services, the fewer youth will be able to participate; the more they protect enrollment, the more they have to sacrifice quality.

This paper examines how city agencies that fund after-school programming decide where to cut their budgets. Specifically, we examine two broad questions:

1. How do city agencies make tradeoffs between quality and quantity when forced to cut budgets for after-school programs? To what extent do agency leaders protect quality investments?

2. What factors influence those decisions?

Based on this analysis, we point to strategies cities might adopt for protecting their investments in quality programming into the future.

Approach

We base our analysis on qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews with the heads of three city agencies responsible for after-school programming. Our interviews were informed by a theoretical framework developed by Frank and Kamlet (1985) for analyzing choices about public sector resource allocation for goods that have both a quantity and a quality dimension (see Appendix). The framework posits an allocation process in which the public agency places different weights on quantity and quality and then makes tradeoffs, holding expenditures to some

maximum level. The model acknowledges, however, that the agency's stakeholders, particularly those to whom the agency reports (such as the mayor or city council), may weight quantity and quality differently. In the case of after-school programs, for example, the number of slots available for youth is tangible, easily measured and understood dimension of the programs, whereas quality is an intangible dimension that is not well understood. In the model, the final outcome of the allocation process is determined by (a) the relative values the agency and its stakeholders assign to these three dimensions (quantity, quality, and expenditures) and (b) the agency's authority over decision making compared to its stakeholders.

In selecting the cities for this analysis, we looked for a city agency overseeing after-school program funding that had made investments in systems-building activities aimed at improving quality. Also, because we wanted to examine the effect of private foundation funds on these tradeoffs, we looked for cities with and without an influx of foundation funds that could act as a buffer between the agency and its stakeholders. We selected three cities. All were large; all had made investments in systems-building; two had received private foundation funds and one had not.

Before their budgets were cut back, all three cities had made key investments to improve the quality of their after-school programs. All three cities developed quality standards for after-school programs, provided professional development to after-school staff, and relied on city agency managers to monitor program quality and to flag struggling programs for additional support.   Each city had invested in web-based management information systems that collected real-time information from after-school providers regarding enrollment, attendance, and student and program characteristics. One city invested in external evaluation to drive systems improvement and promote better agency decision making, and another had increased internal capacity by funding positions of data analyst and policy analyst.

Each city faced substantial budget cuts. Over the past two years, one agency had made eight budget reductions to after-school programming. Respondents

across the three cities focused on describing the decision making process from the latest round of cuts. In one city the cuts amounted to approximately 10 percent of the agency's after-school total budget. The second city had made a series of tough budget cuts, and the most recent one amounted to 20 percent of the after-school program. In both cities, most of the recent cuts were restored through the political process, indicating political will around after-school program provision. In the third city, while the agency faced budget cuts, the after-school quality investments were largely shielded by private funds.

Although they had a common commitment to quality, and all were forced to cut budgets, each agency operated within a different context, including internal and external priorities, which affected how agency leaders made allocation decisions. The agencies also differed in the level of budgetary authority over their program areas, with one agency holding somewhat greater authority over their budget than others. This variation allowed us to draw some interesting observations about the factors that influenced their decisions.

We conducted in-depth, hour-long interviews with five city leaders from the three city agencies using a semi-structured protocol in Fall 2010. Budget decisions are often politicized decisions and we wanted our respondents to candidly describe their decision-making process therefore, we promised interviewees individual and city-level confidentiality.

The interviews focused on several topics:

- Pressures faced by the agency.

- Whether the levels of funding for after-school programming differed substantially from the prior year.

- Who made budget decisions regarding cutbacks.

- How budget cutbacks were allocated among different activities and services, particularly systems-building activities.

We coded the interview data to draw out various themes, looked for commonalities

and differences among the three cases, and linked these back to the conceptual framework to determine the extent to which they validated the hypotheses. Because we relied only on three city cases, our findings should be viewed as suggestive. They can be used, however, to develop hypotheses that could be tested in a larger sample of cities.

To clarify the tradeoff between quantity and quality, we begin by describing what the research identifies as the key components of quality in after-school programs and the steps city agencies have undertaken to foster these conditions. We then report on the findings from our interviews and describe their implications for other cities that are trying to maintain quality in times of constrained budgets.

What Does a High-Quality After-School Program Look Like?

There are very few rigorous studies that link characteristics of after-school programs to better student outcomes. However, evidence from multiple, albeit less rigorous, sources identifies some common characteristics among programs that demonstrate improved student outcomes. These include warm interactions between adults and children; safe and supportive environments; youth-centered policies and practices; high expectations for youth and staff; partnerships with families, schools, and the community; and accessibility of services (Grossman, 2002; Harvard Family Research Project, 2008; Yohalem, Pittman, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004). Factors that contribute to consistent program quality are staff and curricular materials, program policies and supports, mission, infrastructure, and external support from the community (Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007; Hollister, 2003).

A study undertaken by The Finance Project and Public/Private Ventures with support from the Wallace Foundation (Hayes, et al., 2009) identified the most important strategies cities have undertaken to improve the quality of after-school programs.

- *Providing technical assistance, training, higher education and professional development* for after-school program staff members. The after-school sector has

high turnover among staff, many staff do not have a background in youth development, and after-school providers typically lack funding to enroll staff in professional development and training. City investments in technical assistance and professional development allow after-school staff to gain much needed skills that support program quality. In their study of investments to improve after-school systems, Hayes and colleagues (2009) estimate that city funding for technical assistance and professional development accounts for the largest proportion of their "systems building" investments intended to improve access to and the quality of after-school programs—approximately 43 percent.

- *Aligning after-school programming with school district curricula* to ensure that after-school programs reinforced and/or supplement what students learn during the school day. Linking after-school programming to the school day can help support academic and nonacademic goals for students.

- *Adopting and publishing quality standards and methods to evaluate program quality*. Cities use these standards to help after-school programs identify areas of strength and weakness. While adopting and publishing standards is a non-recurring cost for cities, evaluating program quality against those standards is an ongoing effort. In addition, cities that evaluate program quality often link these evaluations to professional development so that after-school program staffs receive training targeted to program weaknesses (Bodilly et al., 2010).

- *Implementing data-management systems* to compile and organize information on after-school programs and their operation. These systems are typically web-based and gather, at a minimum, demographic, enrollment, and attendance data for youth as well as basic program information. Cities use data from these systems for a number of purposes, including identifying struggling programs that might need assistance, making funding decisions, and supporting evaluations (McCombs et al., 2010).

Private foundations have invested in such strategies in an effort to promote quality programming. As an example, The Wallace Foundation invested in developing a

systems-building infrastructure that would support local agencies' focus on quality. In fact, The Foundation stipulated that funding could not be used to increase enrollment but had to be invested in infrastructure improvements that would increase quality, access, and participation. The idea was not simply to improve quality over the funding period but to transform quality into a core value that was protected by city agencies even in tough economic times.

Findings

From our interviews, we're able to identify four key factors that influenced agency decisions about how to implement budget cuts in their after-school program portfolios. Many of these observations conform to our conceptual model, while the model did not predict others.

Assessments of relative weights of quantity and quality and agency authority over budget decisions

The relative weights agencies placed on quantity and quality influenced their decisions on how to allocate budget cuts. One city, for example, considered their quality investments as "core" activities and protected them from cuts. The agency head explained,

> We have kept systems investments. We resisted the natural knee jerk response of eliminating the resources of those that are not direct service. Those tend to be the things to go in tough times. We have stayed true to what got us to a significant period of growth – that three-pronged approach of quality, direct services; capacity building; and evaluation. At this point what you want to do is maintain an infrastructure that can withstand the tough times and survive long enough so that you have integrity in services that remain.

Realizing that staff to manage and provide assistance to the CBOs also contributes to the quality of programs, the agency had not released any staff although it had to leave a vacancy unfilled.

Some agencies were not able to prevail in their decisions. Cities with limited authority over budgetary decision-making were over-ruled in their allocation of cuts. In one city that considered after-school quality investments as a core activity, agency leaders were unable to make decisions based on their own preferences. As the agency leader explained, "There is a lot of political pressure to prioritize direct service. Evaluation, training, or internal staff – those are always where we are asked to make cuts." Indeed, the agency head described the lay off of staff in several key areas, including training, program management, and community outreach. In addition, two vacant positions were left unfilled and grants for professional development and technical assistance were cut by two-thirds.. Given these cuts, leaders tried to maximize quality by funding strong programs that could provide quality services with minimal assistance and defunding weaker programs. However, some organizations that were "weeded out" based on quality ended up being funded through political earmarks. One leader noted, "We find ourselves dealing with capacity of programs but not having capacity money to help. This is more difficult than making the original cuts." Agency leaders expressed frustration about the lack of control over the budget process. One said,

> We spend a whole year developing our strategic plan…that guides the
> work we want to do, and we go through the process to implement the
> plan and we make these selection based on criteria in the plan. Then
> the elected officials say that it doesn't matter what your plan is or
> what your quality assessments are, these are the programs that need
> to be funded.

In one case, private funding sheltered investments in quality. In the third city, private funds sheltered much of the investment in quality with the exception of staffing, which is not funded by the private grant. This city chose to make major budget cuts in staffing rather than reduce the number of slots for youth. Staff members across the agency were forced to take furlough days for multiple budget cycles. In 2010, the number of furlough days exceeded one month of work. The

agency also swept vacancies to cut costs.   After-school agency staffing was reduced from 30 to 22. The agency head said that the agency has "lost presence," which affected the agency's visibility and ability to support programs:

> The City used to be present at a lot more things than we could be now. That is a big deal. It's much better with more people to go around. We were more available to help. It was easier to push programs to become better on behalf of kids – had more trained youth development people than we do now. People have to do a lot more work in a shorter period of time.

It is unclear what further tradeoffs would have been made in the absence of the private partner grants and the extent to which other quality investments might have been cut.

Strategic Consideration of Political and Public Interests

While some agency leaders resisted the preferences of elected officials, others gave careful consideration to the interests of political supporters and public. As one agency leader said, "We have [elected officials] who live and know their community – they make an argument that the program may not be great but the fact that it is on the corner of X and kids can go in there to seek shelter is a good thing – we weight these factors as well."

Another city agency noted, "In terms of the politicians, their first question is always how many kids, how many slots. The more kids they get doing something – they get credit for after-school slots and employment slots. It moves their agenda forward." This agency made a strategic choice based on this recognition of political realities. It decided not to cut professional development and technical assistance for programs. As one respondent from the city explained, "Once you cut something like that it is hard to put back. After the budget shortfalls are over, people will want to see increase in number of kids served. They won't be as concerned about technical assistance."

Indeed, the experience of a third agency offers support for this hypothesis. It had cut some of their funding for professional development and technical assistance. While the city council eventually restored funding for many programs that were cut, the agency's request to restore capacity building was not granted. Instead, "Everything went to direct service."

Citizen advocacy groups in one city were effective at restoring funding. In one city, cuts were made to programs in areas of the city with relatively less need. This decision to keep programming in higher-need communities directly aligned with the agency's vision and priorities established prior to the budget shortfalls. In addition, leaders believed the more affluent communities were more organized and possessed greater access to elected officials, which made them more likely to be able to access additional or alternate sources of funding for their after-school programs. Agency leaders worked with advocates from these communities and provided them with information on the impacts of cuts, what neighborhoods were affected, and the quality of programs that were cut. Citizen advocacy groups used this information when petitioning elected officials to restore programs. Interestingly, through the political process, many of the cuts were restored. As the after-school director put it, "This speaks to a lot of the public will and expectations. The Council fought to preserve programs."

Size of the Budget Shortfall

Agency decisions on what to cut were also influenced by the extent of the budget shortfall and the relative size of investments in quality versus quantity. One after-school director explained that even if the agency had considered cutting technical assistance and evaluation, the cuts would not have come close to meeting the budget shortfall. They simply could not generate enough cost savings without cutting programs. Given that programs needed to be cut, the agency faced criticism when it made targeted cuts instead of across-the-board cuts. "If it had been a 1 or 2 percent cut across the board, we might have considered it." However, the shortfall was so large across-the-board cuts would have compromised the ability of programs

to provide the level of quality and service expected by the city. "We want full robust programs to fund."

In another agency, leaders described their strategy for mid-year cuts and said that the "cutting strategy varied by the size of cut." In a year when the magnitude was not large, the agency was able to eliminate internal initiatives—those projects they planned but had not yet begun. However, in a year when the needed cuts were large, they made percentage cuts to grants across the board based on the grant size (a grant reduction of 0.5-2.5%).

Strategic Approach to Cutting Slots

Our interviews also revealed that once an agency decided to cut quantity, it gave careful consideration to the distribution of their cuts. One agency leader took into account three considerations: (a) what is most critical to the agency; (b) what market share of services the agency possesses: "When I make these choices it is around thinking of where other agencies can pick up slack, where we aren't the only game in town, versus where we are the only game in town;" and (c) needs of particular communities, i.e., maintaining resources in areas with the highest levels of need, as determined by data. This process was described as "sticking with the core principles that we used when we started." These principles led the agency to try to limit the impact on working families, continue full service to high-needs areas, and to maintain "full, robust programs." This respondent noted that since elected leaders "are paid to be provincial," making service cuts to some geographic areas rather than others is difficult. The agency head said that even though the elected officials might not like the outcome, they respected the fact that "it was not arbitrary or based on favorites or favors. It was based on the methodology." However, it was noted that the Mayor's support for this type of decision-making made it possible in the face of potential political pressures.

Similarly, another agency made cuts to specialized programs that were offered infrequently because these were not dependable for working families. They

also attempted to cut funding for programs of questionable quality but were overruled by the political process.

Policy Implications

The lessons we learned from the interviews and relevant research have implications for city agencies, funders, and other policymakers.

Private funders and their associated public-private partnerships can shift the preferences of city agencies

Public-private partnerships can change the relative weights of the process in favor of a greater commitment to spending on quality. In one city, quality was described as being a "core element" of the program after the private investment in quality, suggesting both that the city's implicit value for spending more than the minimum required amount on quality had shifted. In another city, adjustments to budget cuts were shaped by the presence of private funding: even if the city had wanted to make across-the-board cuts in spending for quality and quantity, or had wanted to cut quality, the presence of private funding constrained their ability and willingness to do so. In the city without a private partner advocating for more spending on quality, forces advocating for quantity over quality prevailed despite the stated preferences of the agency.

The new governance literature offers a useful description of the role that funders/policymakers could play in this regard and how they can best leverage their role. To persuade agencies to change and move in the desired direction, funders need to become "institutional intermediaries" to champion change and jumpstart the process through the provision of substantial resources, oversight, and the sharing and disseminating of knowledge and best practices (Sturm, 2006). Sturm describes institutional intermediaries as:

> "organizations that leverage their position within preexisting communities of practice to foster change and provide meaningful accountability. . . . [I]nstitutional intermediaries use their ongoing capacity-building role within

a particular occupational sector to build knowledge (through establishing common metrics, information pooling, and networking), introduce incentives (such as competition, institutional improvement, and potential impact on funding), and provide accountability (including grass roots participation and self-, peer- and external evaluation" (p. 251).

The new governance literature has largely focused on explicating the role of public agencies such as the National Science Foundation as an institutional intermediary (Sturm, 2006); while not labeled as intermediaries, private funders often share similar goals and can act in this space as well. One important lesson that comes out of this literature is that the traction for change depends upon strategically placed actors or "organizational catalysts" (Sturm, 2006) with knowledge, influence, and credibility to mobilize institutional change and the capacity to "leverage knowledge, ongoing strategic relationships, and accountability across systems" (p. 287).

Thus, to maximize their impact and to ensure some level of sustainability for their systems-building efforts, intermediaries and funders need to identify and cultivate agency leaders who have the will and capacity to influence the core values of the agency. Given possible changes in leadership, funders might want to ensure a deep bench of staff with similar values and interests by cultivating and investing in agency staff.

Agency heads can make strategic budgetary decisions to help protect quality investments

Agency leaders can take a strategic approach to their decisions and can help protect their investments in quality. We found several types of creative strategies to protect quality investments in their budget decisions. First, cities considered whether public funding in some neighborhoods would be more likely to be replaced by private funding from the community. Second, two cities decided that a cutback in quantity might be preferable to cuts in quality because it was believed that such cuts would elicit greater reaction among the public to reductions in an observable

service (e.g. after-school slots), and/or be more likely to be restored through future public funding. Given that that quality was less likely to be restored, agency leaders decided that cutting quantity of slots was an appropriate short-run strategy. These types of strategic responses are bolstered by strong relationships with city leaders, who can back up the choices made by the agency head, and community stakeholders, who can advocate for the agency and its services.

Improving understanding about the supports needed to achieve quality can help protect investments in quality

Educating politicians and community members about the importance of quality in programming and the efforts the city is making to support quality may help protect quality supports from budget cuts. Such efforts can play an important role in defining the relative weights to quantity and quantity. Politicians in at least two of the cities in our study clearly value after-school programs they restored funding, at least in part, for after-school programming by the end of the policitical process. However, they lack an understanding about what constitutes a quality program, why quality is important and how city agencies support quality programming. Efforts to educate political and community stakeholders about these issues are particularly important in cases where the agency has less discretion over budget decisions.

This recommendation is reinforced by research that shows the importance of dissemination and building knowledge in the larger community. Conferences, websites, webinars, media articles, parent nights, and meetings with elected officials all can help spread the word about the importance of systems building. If quality becomes as visible as quantity, and quality indicators are publicized and understood, then stakeholders can make more informed decisions about the tradeoffs between quantity and quality in allocating budget cuts.

Appendix

The interviews and analyses for the paper are informed by a theoretical framework developed by Frank and Kamlet (F&K) for analyzing choices about public sector resource allocation for goods that have both a quantity and a quality dimension. In the F&K framework, budgets for public services are modeled as being determined by tradeoffs between quantity, quality, and cost that reflect the differing preferences and political clout of various stakeholders. Frank and Kamlet posit what they call "an allocation process" in which government strives to maximize an objective function subject to the constraint that expenditure on the public good (which depends on both quantity and quality) not exceed some maximal level, Z_0. The objective function simply reflects the agency's level of satisfaction with the provision of services, which is dependent on the quantity of services supplied to the constituents, the quality of those services, and the total amount being spent on services. The agency has some minimum acceptable level of quantity and quality that services being provided need to meet. The agency likely places different weights on quantity and quality and this is reflected in its objective function. However, these weights are also likely to be shaped by or even determined by various stakeholders, particularly those to whom the agency reports (e.g., Mayor and/or city council).

For example, various interest groups and political decision makers may value quantity (e.g. number of slots in out-of-school-time programs) and quality (e.g., staff training and capacity building) differently from the agency head. They may value quantity more highly that quality. After all, the number of slots available for youth is a tangible, easily measured and understood dimension of after-school programming whereas quality may be an intangible and not well-understood dimension. The combination of quality and quantity supplied is directly constrained by the pressures and preferences for holding down spending exerted by taxpayers and local budgetary authorities. The final outcome will be determined by (a) the relative values assigned to these three dimensions (quantity, quality, and expenditures) by the agency and its stakeholders and (b) the authority over decision

making that the agency has relative to its stakeholders (politicians, mayor, city council, community).

Figure 1 illustrates the range of possible outcomes. The possible outcomes described above define what Frank and Kamlet call a "zone of contention" that is bounded below by minimum desired levels of quantity and quality, q_0 and h_0, and above by the maximum allowable level of total expenditure on the good or service. The actual level of expenditure and the mix of quantity and quality that emerge from the allocation process depend on the relative strength of the preferences expressed through that process for quantity, quality, and spending restraint. Two broad outcomes are possible. At a point such as B, preferences for spending restraint keep spending below the maximum acceptable level, with a desired ratio of quantity to quality defined by the ray from origin AB. At a point such as C, preferences for greater quality and/or quantity are sufficiently strong so that spending is at the maximum allowable level, with mix of quantity and quality defined by ray from the origin ABC.

In a world of fiscal austerity, in which budgets face pressures to be cut, it is of somewhat less importance whether the interplay of the various advocates for quantity, quality, and spending results in a pre-austerity budget that is on the "frontier" DE in Figure 1, or inside the "zone of contention." In either case, it is plausible to assume that pressures for budget reduction will both move the frontier inward, or if the initial allocation is inside the frontier, cause the desired allocation to move inward from a point such as B. In practice, in our cases discussed below, cuts in spending for after-school programs had already occurred before the most recent round of cuts, so that effectively one can think of the allocation process for after-school programs in each case as starting from an interior point such B in Figure 1.

The need to cut spending will prompt adjustments in the allocation of scarce budgetary resources to quantity and quality of the service. Possible outcomes include: (1) "across the board" percentage cuts that, in terms of Figure 1, would

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involve moving inward along ray AB which would essentially preserve the existing mix of quantity and quality; (2) holding quantity constant, while placing the burden of adjustment on quality of service (e.g. move downward from point B toward point G); (3) holding quality constant, while placing the burden of adjustment on quantity of service (e.g. move leftward from point B toward point F); or (3) reduce total spending from the amount implied by B, while changing the mix of quantity and quality (e.g. a move to points such as H or I). Which of these responses occurs will depend, as noted above, on a mix of factors including the priorities of the government agency charged with administering the budget, as well as the desires and political influence of clients and other stakeholders and interest groups that may place differing priorities on adjustments in quantity, quality or both.

Figure 1
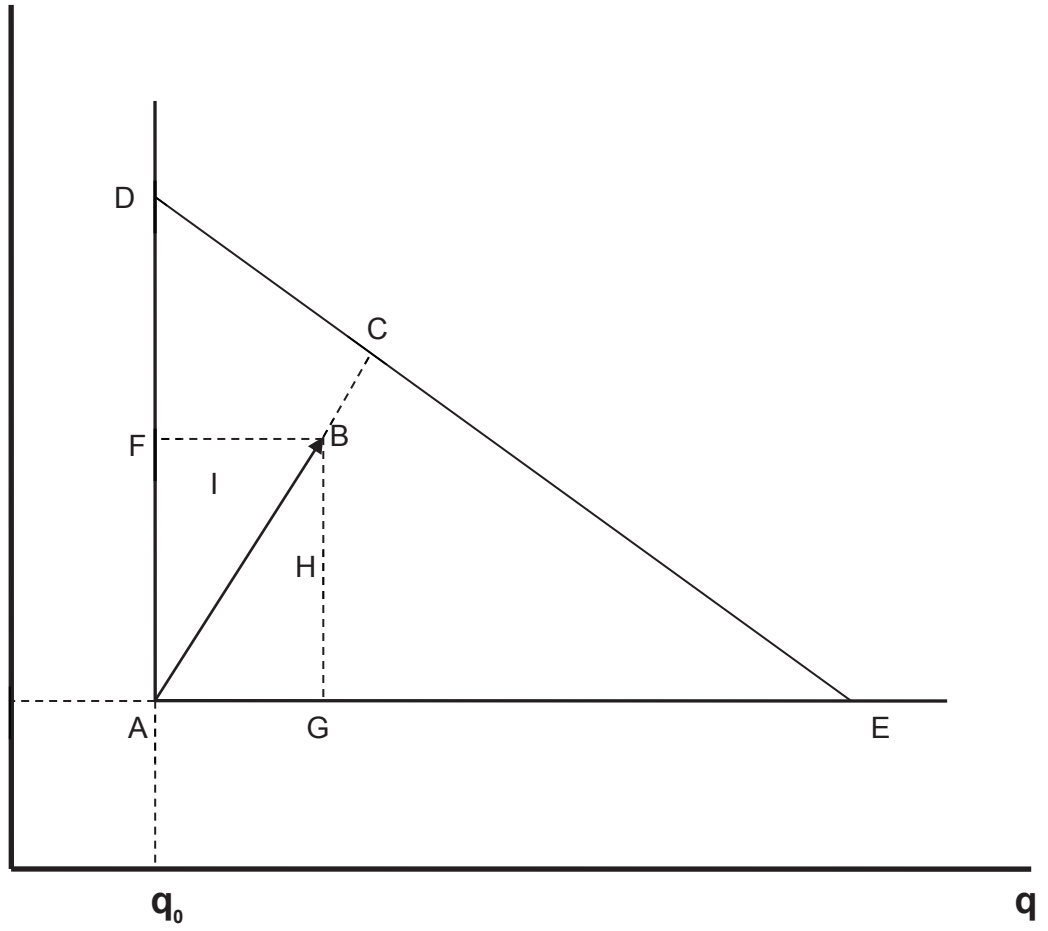
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