

HUMPHREY SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

# Impact of After School Programs on Student Achievement

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Evaluating After School Program Effectiveness

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## Abstract

The purpose of this professional paper is to understand the impact of after school programs (ASPs) on student achievement. More specifically, my research addresses what enables ASPs to produce positive outcomes for ASP participants. After reviewing several ASP studies and evaluations, I focus on the program outcomes and results of four particular studies and evaluations, and look in great detail at how the participants in these ASPs are affected or influenced by program participation. In looking at program effects and influences on student achievement, I identify common characteristics that contribute to successful program implementation. I also specify limitations in ASPs that can impede the success of the youth who participate in these programs. This guides my recommendations of certain techniques or practices that can help programs improve upon their effectiveness, and provide positive impacts on student achievement.

## Introduction

Why is it important to research after school programs' impact on student achievement? According to recent studies on the impact of after school programs (ASPs) on student achievement, ASPs play an important role in impacting a child's development. Research on ASPs shows that regular attendance in a 'good' ASP can help improve student success, strengthen achievement, and offer students enriching opportunities that they might not be able to receive during the regular school day.<sup>1</sup> Further, unsupervised after school hours can contribute to poor academic outcomes, and result in behavioral problems, drug use, and other types of risky behavior. ASPs offer youth a safe and supportive, adult-supervised environment, where they can strongly develop skill building through activities and experiences that promote academic, personal, social, and recreational components. The opportunities afforded in after school programs also may allow students to contribute and take initiative in challenging and engaging tasks that can help them develop and apply new talents. Additionally,

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<sup>1</sup> Hoover, W.A., and Pollard, J.S. *Times Have Changed After School*. SEDL. May 2006.

youth can benefit from spending time engaged in structural activities that offer them positive interactions with adults and their peers.<sup>2</sup>

Today's ASPs offer a blend of academic components and enrichment activities due to the ever increasing need for students to combat "a harsher educational landscape that features fewer extras" in the wake of an emphasis on standard-based assessments and performance. Recently with passage of laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act, educators have had to focus on improving student performance in math, reading, and other basic skills. Turning to ASPs to improve student performance, and strengthen student learning in other areas, i.e. science, technology, etc, the importance of ASPs has grown considerably, creating a strong incentive to provide monetary support.<sup>3</sup> In 2002, the federal government invested \$3.6 billion to fund ASPs. Though this is a considerable amount, the number of ASPs has continued to grow at a rate that quickly out paces federal funding (the demand far exceeds the supply), which has kept steady since 2002, leaving state, local governments and nonprofits to shoulder the remaining costs. During the 2003-2004 school year alone, about one-third of public schools offered programs before and after school, and as of 2007 more than 8,700 communities and schools offered ASPs.<sup>4</sup> As this number continues to grow, it's apparent that the amount of funding set aside for ASPs will also have to increase in order to ensure that these programs remain in the capacity to fully function and operate. However, in order to strengthen the argument for more federal funding, the emphasis on providing not just any programs, but "high-quality programs" needs to be addressed, along with the need for statistical evidence that proves these programs work.

Research and studies on ASPs exist vastly in education reform literature. However, research and studies on what makes ASPs work and produce positive outcomes for youth participants are highly inconclusive and often contradictory. One of the most compelling arguments about ASPs is that they

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<sup>2</sup> Durlak, J.A., and Weissberg, R.P. *The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Hoover, W.A., and Pollard, J.S. *Times Have Changed After School*. SEDL. May 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Frerking, Beth. *A New Learning Day: After School Is No Afterthought*. Edutopia. 2007.

serve as catalysts, by which to boost academic test scores and grades. However, very few studies have focused on the ability of ASPs to improve academic test scores and grades, and those that do mention how ASPs improve test scores and grades are inconclusiveness at best. Furthermore, the benefits of ASPs and how to measure their impact on student achievement have been mixed. One review of 35 studies reported the test scores of low-income, at-risk youth improved significantly in reading and mathematics after participating in ASPs. Other reports, however, have shown inconsistent or inconclusive results about student improvement in tests scores or grades, depending on their participation in ASPs.<sup>5</sup> Overall, though studies on ASPs that positively affect student achievement are inconclusive, there remains a wealth of research and evaluation on ASPs that suggests they do improve academic development. With that wealth of research, perhaps the focus should be less on program outcomes, and more on program quality. In particular, researchers need to ask these questions- What works well in this program, why does it work, who does it work for, and how can we improve these programs to work better? Furthermore, in order to have more conclusive evidence, there needs to be more careful evaluations on the effectiveness of different programs, and evidence-based studies that point out specific factors of those programs that are associated with positive outcomes.

## Methodology

To understand the impact of ASPs on student outcomes, I did an analysis on several ASP studies and evaluations. The programs within the literature I reviewed ranged from programs open to kindergartners to programs for high school age youth. Rather than focusing on one age group of youth participants, I decided not to limit my range to get a better picture of how after school programs affect youth groups differently. For example, in one particular ASP study, middle school youth participants did not respond as positively to a particular program as younger and older, high school age youth did. Also,

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<sup>5</sup> Durlak, J.A., and Weissberg, R.P. *The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). 2007.

rather than explicitly focusing on academic outcomes in relation to improvements in test scores and grades, several studies focus on the influence of ASPs on the personal and social development of youth participants. Not limiting my inclusion of studies and evaluations to program outcomes that only included improvement in test scores and grade improvements helped to increase my base of studies and evaluations, and provided a clearer picture of how ASPs affect student outcomes more generally.

In my online search of ASP studies and evaluations, I typed into the Google search engine 'after school programs' and 'education impact'. Several scholarly reports and studies appeared through this search. In determining which reports and studies to include in my professional paper, I distinctly focused on studies that referenced how after school programs were evaluated and measured, paid a great deal of attention to program results, i.e. youth outcomes, specifically pinpointed program characteristics that resulted in positive outcomes, and paid close attention to program limitations, i.e. program shortcomings indicated by researchers and evaluators in these ASP studies and evaluations. This still yielded several reports and studies, so to minimize those reports to just a few for the purposes of this paper, to only four studies, I created a criterion chart for review of just four studies to limit my research focus. The four criteria were: (1) Studies or evaluations needed to include ASPs that had some kind of particular focus, i.e. ASPs needed to demonstrate a specific mission or purpose, (2) Studies or evaluations needed to include at least two key ASP findings that related to youth participation outcomes, and (3) Studies or evaluations needed to include at least two program limitations, both implicit and explicit. The criteria for the four studies are summarized in the chart below.

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Study # 1: CASEL evaluation</b>	<b>Study # 2: McREL evaluation</b>	<b>Study # 3: KidzLit evaluation</b>	<b>Study # 4: TASC evaluation</b>
<b>Programs with distinct focus, mission, or purpose</b>	ASPs promote personal and social skills	ASPs promote literacy and reading comprehension	ASP promotes literacy improvement	ASPs promote school improvement among low-income and disadvantaged students
<b>At least two key findings that relate to youth outcomes</b>	Youth improved in three major areas & Evidence-based training approaches were successful in improving youth outcomes	Student gains are greatest when three factors exist & Students improved in reading test scores	Greater reading efficacy & Positive correlation between number of books read and reading enjoyment	Students reported positive experiences & Risky behaviors less prevalent
<b>At least two noted/observed study limitations</b>	No in-depth explanation of three major areas & No description of characteristics of ASPs evaluated	Middle school students don't reap same benefits & Improvements weren't sustained over time	Lack of continuity & Low implementation scores for program facilitators	Student satisfaction decreased over three years & Maintaining enrollment and retention

Lastly, the content of my paper involves an analysis of the four studies of which I developed the criteria to evaluate and examine, including program overviews, program findings, and program limitations. My first analysis, study # 1, evaluates ASPs that focus on promoting personal and social skills. I follow with the second study that evaluates reading-based ASPs, and then turn my focus to the third study that evaluates a specific reading-based program that promotes reading literacy and efficacy. The final and fourth study focuses on several ASPs that target low-income and disadvantaged students to improve school performance. After my analyses of the four studies I chose for this paper, I delve into a discussion regarding what makes a program effective, exploring in detail a key strategy called complementary learning. Lastly, I end with a general conclusion on ASPs, the importance of studying

and evaluating ASPs, and offer final recommendations for improving program limitations and recognizing the importance of producing sound studies and evaluations for ASPs.

*Study # 1: Impact of ASPs That Promote Personal and Social Skills*

Though a more quantified method of evaluating positive outcomes for ASP participation is to measure improvements in test scores and grades, there are other important elements that can be incorporated into measuring program impacts on student achievement. ASPs that focus on personal and social development show that measuring and assessing these factors are just as essential in influencing positive outcomes in student achievement. In an attempt to systematically look at the impact of ASPs, particularly in how they influence youths' personal and social skills, researchers at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) pinpointed the nature and magnitude of programs that focus on enhancing youths' personal and social skills, and describe the features of these programs that make them effective.<sup>6</sup>

The programs were selected based on a "careful and systematic search for published and unpublished studies...that provided information on 73 programs."<sup>7</sup> A meta-analysis was also conducted to evaluate the magnitude of the effects that were obtained from these 73 selected programs. Further, all of the programs presented in CASEL's evaluation explicitly promote personal and social development in their program's mission, and are devoted to developing the personal and social skills of their participants. The personal and social skills that were evaluated in these programs were problem solving, conflict resolution, self-control, leadership, responsible decision-making, self-efficacy and self esteem. ASPs under evaluation in this study were also limited to those that were offered to children ages 5-18, operated at least part of the school year, occurred outside of normal school hours on

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<sup>6</sup> Durlak, J.A., and Weissberg, R.P. *The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Mondays through Fridays, and had a comparable control group. Meta-analysis was also conducted to evaluate the magnitude of the effects from each program.<sup>8</sup>

### *Findings*

The two key findings from the program evaluations were:

1. Youth who participate in ASPs improve significantly in three major areas: feelings and attitudes, behavioral adjustment, and school performance. Meaning, that the programs under evaluation were successful in improving youths' self-confidence and self-esteem, their perspectives of education (attending school), social behaviors, school grades and achievement test scores. A reduction in problem behaviors (i.e. aggression, noncompliance and misconduct) and drug use.<sup>9</sup>
2. Success in these programs was more likely to occur when evidence-based training approaches are used. Meaning, multiple benefits for youth were apparent in programs that used evidence-based training approaches, while those that did not use such approaches were not as successful in several outcome areas.<sup>10</sup>

These evidence-based training approaches used to evaluate ASPs included four core components: approaches must be (1) Sequential, (2) Active, (3) Focused, and (4) Explicit (spelling out the acronym SAFE). To identify programs that used these training approaches to promote personal and social skills, researchers created four criteria: (1) Programs had to display the presence of a *sequenced* set of activities to achieve skill objectives, and (2) Programs needed to show the use of *active* forms of learning, (3) Programs had to demonstrate the presence of at least one program component that *focused* on developing personal or social skills, and (4) Programs needed to illustrate the targeting of *explicit* personal or social skills. Program outcomes were also examined based on three general areas: feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance. More specifically,

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<sup>8</sup> Durlak, J.A., and Weissberg, R.P. *The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



researchers in this particular study wanted to address what types of outcomes can be expected from ASPs that place emphasis on achieving personal and social skills, and identify the program components that were associated with those results.

Programs that used all four approaches to promote youths' personal and social skills were found to be more successful than those that did not. More specifically, when researchers compared the outcomes from the two sets of programs (programs that used evidence-based training approaches versus programs that did not), programs that used evidence-based training approaches yielded positive results in all of the outcomes areas. The latter programs that did not use evidence-based training approaches showed no positive results in any of the outcome areas.

### *Limitations*

The evaluators in this research study emphasized how important well-run ASPs are in impacting student achievement, and producing a variety of positive benefits for youth who participate in these programs. More importantly, researchers concluded that when it comes to implementing a successful or effective ASP, one that enhances the personal and social skills of its participants, and is able to do so effectively used the evidence-based SAFE (sequenced, active, focused, and explicit) approach. Meaning, effective ASPs must devote sufficient time to skill enhancement, be explicit about what they wish to achieve, use activities that are coordinated and sequenced to achieve their goals/missions, and require active involvement on the part of program participants if they want to significantly improve youths' feelings and attitudes, school grades and degree of academic achievement. However, there was little clarity in understanding how these programs came to use the evidence-based training approaches that evaluators determined were used in the 73 programs they evaluated. Furthermore, what particular ASPs utilize evidence-based training approaches was also missing from the evaluators' analysis. A further limitation was the lack of explanation regarding how student improvements in feelings and attitudes were measured. Though evaluators mention that the improvement in feelings and attitudes

meant an improvement in self-confidence and self-esteem, certain factors that contributed to these improvements and influenced how they were measured was absent in these findings. For example, no mention was provided regarding whether these findings were concluded based on self-reports or observations, or some other method of evaluation.

Considering that the evaluators did not conduct their own frontline analysis, but a meta analysis on published and unpublished studies on 73 programs, and neglected to include the specifics of those programs leaves several questions regarding the use of evidence-based training approaches and their effectiveness unanswered.

*Study # 2: Evaluating Effects of Reading-based ASPs:*

What is it that makes a program effective? Several ASP studies focus on what evaluators and researchers have discovered about what makes a program effective. In some studies, it's a program that can boost academic skills, while simultaneously engaging students.<sup>11</sup> The skills that are the most important in boosting academic skills are usually in the content areas of reading and mathematics, but especially reading. In particular, the skills of literacy and reading comprehension are deemed as the most important in terms of student achievement, specifically in the early years of education. The ability to master reading skills early on in the primary years of education is usually a strong predictor of how students will excel throughout the remainder of the middle school and latter years of schooling. However, research shows that reading skills are especially low among students in early education.

Based on results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a large percentage of students are not meeting reading standards. In 2003, only 31 percent of fourth-graders, and 32 percent of eighth-graders performed at or above the proficiency level in reading. Due to the current emphasis on standards-based reform and accountability, all schools and districts are required to establish that every child can read and understand literary and informal texts by the end of the third

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<sup>11</sup> Miller, K., Snow, D., and Lauer, P. Effective Out-of-School Time Reading Programs. Noteworthy Perspectives: Out-of-School Time Programs for At-Risk Students. McREL. 2004.

grade. When children don't master reading skills by the third grade, the effects of their inability to master literacy skills spill over into other content areas, and follow a negative spiral that begins with poor achievement in the early grades.<sup>12</sup> However, this can be reversed. It is an important feat for schools and districts to reverse this spillover effect, and ensure all students possess the literacy skills to do well through their secondary years of schooling. This requires that schools and districts take specific measures to effectively target and remedy the low percentage of students who are reading proficient. Thus, schools and districts have sought additional services through ASPs to help students achieve the reading skills to meet state testing requirements.

### *Findings*

An education research lab, McREL, reviewed seven ASPs that focus on literacy, and identified the components that make those programs effective. McREL research indicates that student gains in reading-based ASPs are greatest when three factors exist: (1) programs offer one-on-one tutoring or mixed student groups, (2) programs range from 44-84 hours per week, and (3) programs focus on early elementary and high school students.<sup>13</sup>

In an ASP for low-income, rural students in Georgia, the Georgia After-School Program, a variety of tutors and methods were incorporated into the program to ensure that students each received a great deal of individual time that they would probably not have experienced in their regular classrooms. In particular, the individualized tutoring was a major positive influence on helping students improve their reading scores. Following their year-long participation in this program, students showed significant gains on standardized reading test scores: students improved on average 31 to 49 percentile points.<sup>14</sup> Program length was also a significant factor for reading improvement. McREL's analysis found that children who participated in ASPs for 44 to 84 hours per week achieved test score gains of 10 full

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<sup>12</sup>Miller, K., Snow, D., and Lauer, P. Effective Out-of-School Time Reading Programs. Noteworthy Perspectives: Out-of-School Time Programs for At-Risk Students. McREL. 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

percentile points. In programs that lasted 85 to 210 hours per week, the test score gains were 7.5 percentile points. The rationale behind these findings is that programs that last fewer than 44 hours might not be long enough to engage students and influence reading improvement, and programs that last longer than 84 hours would have difficulty in sustaining student attention over a longer period of time.<sup>15</sup> So, while the difference in percentile gains for hours per week may not be extremely large, it's significant enough to conclude that programs that are less than 85 hours and more than 43 hours show greater gains in reading improvement and achievement.

McREL also evaluated one particular program that targets at-risk kindergarten youth. The Projected Accelerated Literacy (PAL) program analysis focuses on how to effectively implement a reading-based ASP that can improve reading skills for at-risk youth. One of PAL's greatest missions is to implement a well-defined reading curriculum to achieve positive results in reading improvement for its kindergarten participants. PAL includes eight major components of literary instruction: reading aloud to children, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, modeled writing, shared writing, guided writing, and independent writing. The PAL program also includes small classrooms, a variety of learning centers integrating literary tools and tasks, a two-hour block of time for literacy instruction using large group, small group, and individual instruction, teaching practices based on each student's performance on standards, scaffolded teaching that follows a sequence of modeling, guiding, observing, and practicing skills for students, and a thematic curriculum in each activity center.<sup>16</sup>

Following the youth who participated in PAL, researchers found that at-risk kindergarten participants demonstrated a gain of more than 16 percentile points in literacy examinations. This success was contingent on PAL's freedom and flexibility to address issues of motivation, tailor instruction to specific student needs, and their ability to allow participants to make connections

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<sup>15</sup> Miller, K., Snow, D., and Lauer, P. Effective Out-of-School Time Reading Programs. Noteworthy Perspectives: Out-of-School Time Programs for At-Risk Students. McREL. 2004.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

between books, articles, and other materials based on their own experiences. Designing the program and centering strategies on engaging students in learning also positively affected student achievement.<sup>17</sup>

### *Limitations*

Although kindergarteners who participated in PAL programs did report literacy score improvements, those improvements were not shown sustained in the second grade. This suggests that at-risk students may need more than one literacy intervention to retain the gains made early in their education.

McREL's research also shows that younger and older students benefit the most from reading-based ASPs, but the same is not true for middle school students. Students in grades K-2<sup>nd</sup> who participated in reading-based ASPs on average showed gains of 9 percentile points on statewide literacy tests. However, these gains in achievement were not replicable in middle school students. Students in third through fifth grade who participated in reading-based ASPs actually showed declines in reading achievement. In comparison, students in upper grade levels posted average gains of more than 8 percentile points.<sup>18</sup> So, programs that target early elementary and high school students appear to have the greatest benefit, as far as student gains. This is very problematic for middle school students, and suggests that special attention should be paid to middle school students in reading-based ASPs.

Overall, McREL's review found that on average ASP strategies for reading proficiency helped low-achieving and at-risk students improve five percentile points in reading achievement, and that further implementation of reading-based ASPs should be sought after.

### *Study #3: Evaluation of AfterSchool KidzLit*

AfterSchool KidzLit, a national research-based academic enrichment ASP designed for literacy improvement, was evaluated a couple years after its implementation (2001-2002). KidzLit, an ASP that

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<sup>17</sup> Miller, K., Snow, D., and Lauer, P. Effective Out-of-School Time Reading Programs. Noteworthy Perspectives: Out-of-School Time Programs for At-Risk Students. McREL. 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

focuses on developing youth motivation, reading capacity, thinking skills, and social development, began as a national program in 2000 for kindergarten through middle school students. It offers youth the opportunities to read books aloud and hear books read aloud to them by an adult. It also allows them to discuss stories with other students, and connect book themes through art, drama, and journal writing. The materials for KidzLit consists of 120 books with guides, personal journals for each participant, and a “Quick Tips” guide for leaders and facilitators to engage in lively discussions that also includes a suggestion on how to organize activities.<sup>19</sup>

The purpose of evaluating KidzLit was to examine the program’s exposure and youth outcomes, the quality of assignments given to participants, and to follow how staff were trained, how they planned their activities, in what degree they received support from consultants or other coworkers, and program implementation quality and site conditions. Evaluators examined eight KidzLit sites, operated by a Los Angeles, California ASP know as LA’s Best (Los Angeles’ Better Educated Students for Tomorrow). The study followed these eight sites over the course of eight months, between 2001 and 2002, specifically observing reading-related attitudes and behaviors, vocabulary development, and social attitudes and behaviors of second and fourth graders. This data was collected through observations, and pretest and posttest surveys completed by completed by 393 second and fourth graders. Surveys were also completed by staff members and consultants at the end of the school year, and interviews conducted with staff members and site coordinators to evaluate overall program implementation. An overall implementation quality ratings system was also created using observations and interviews.<sup>20</sup>

### *Findings*

In terms of student outcomes, second graders showed greater reading efficacy and an increase in the amount of reading they did. However, they also showed a significant decrease in liking reading and enjoying being read aloud to. Fourth graders also showed a significant increase in reading efficacy

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<sup>19</sup> Casey, J. *A Profile of the Evaluation of AfterSchool KidzLit*. Harvard Family Research Project. 2012.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

and in the amount of reading they did, and also showed a decrease in liking reading. However, there was a positive correlation between the number of books fourth graders read using KidzLit, and the degree to which they reported enjoying reading.<sup>21</sup>

### *Limitations*

Another program shortcoming besides the decrease in reading likeability among second and fourth graders was that programs that utilized KidzLit experienced a lack of continuity. For example, six sites using KidzLit had occasional and random cancellations of KidzLit sessions, and three sites had large breaks in sessions due to staff turnover or conflicts with other programs offered at the ASP sites. Lack of program materials and resources was also a prominent limitation for KidzLit ASPs. In its evaluation, the greatest reported challenge by staff was that they needed more books. Most staff reported that they did not have the whole set of KidzLit books at their site, and some said they had very few books in comparison to the number of students at their site. This became a major problem for these sites as books and materials were frequently mentioned as the main reasons for success among student participants in KidzLit.<sup>22</sup>

Other limitations relating to KidzLit were the implementation of particular segments of the program. Scores for the KidzLit program components were quite low, ranging from 2.0 to 2.6 on a 4 point scale. The highest scores (2.5-2.6) were for connection activities, caring, and group management, while the lowest scores (2.0) were for classroom discussions.<sup>23</sup>

These low scores for program implementation, i.e. classroom discussions, resulted from poor staff techniques and methods. Staff implementation scores tended to be higher for staff members that spent less time planning sessions and used fewer facilitator guides. These staff, on average, tended to have more experience with youth in general, and therefore did not need to spend as much time

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<sup>21</sup> Miller, K., Snow, D., and Lauer, P. Effective Out-of-School Time Reading Programs. Noteworthy Perspectives: Out-of-School Time Programs for At-Risk Students. McREL. 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

planning and using guides. In comparison, staff that had less experience with youth and spent more time planning and using facilitator guides received lower implementation scores. Staff's personal feelings about reading and reading for their own enjoyment were also positively correlated with higher quality implementation. If staff felt positively about reading and reading for their own enjoyment, their implementation quality scores were higher than staff who did not report reading for their own enjoyment.<sup>24</sup>

More reported limitations in the KidzLit program included difficulty in reaching consistent exposure and scheduling for KidzLit, particularly because youth had the choice to participate in "pull-out" activities and engage in other activities in these programs. Staff also reported problems with lack of storage space and frequent changes in location for classroom meeting spaces. Also, though staff reported managing groups of youth as their strongest skills, it was also reported as one of their most common challenges. Additionally problematic for staff was getting students involved and interested in a book or story. Site coordinators reported that their most common challenge was also getting and maintaining youth focus.

#### *Study # 4: Three Year TASC Implementation Study*

A three year study conducted in New York City from 1998 to 2000 followed the implementation of several ASP projects within The After School Corporation (TASC). TASC targets low-income students and operates in schools where the most disadvantaged students are enrolled. What constitutes school participation and acceptance in TASC besides students' disadvantaged economic backgrounds, is low achievement levels and test scores, and a higher proportion of students engaging in risky behaviors.<sup>25</sup> To determine how ASPs could successfully improve student outcomes and achievement, researchers

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<sup>24</sup> Miller, K., Snow, D., and Lauer, P. Effective Out-of-School Time Reading Programs. Noteworthy Perspectives: Out-of-School Time Programs for At-Risk Students. McREL. 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Policy Studies Associates, Inc. *Evaluation of Program Implementation and Student Engagement in the TASC After-School Program's Third Year*. Supporting Quality and Scale in After-School Services to Urban Youth. Mar 2002.



decided to conduct a three year implementation study on ASPs that had received grants from TASC in 1999 or 2000.

### *Findings*

ASP projects were evaluated on their ability to show positive and continual growth throughout the three years of implementation. Over the course of three years, ASP projects operated under TASC showed that they were able to attract and serve a large number of students, employ staff that brought pertinent skills and commitment to their work in these programs. Project leaders and staff also displayed the skill of forming positive relationships with their host schools, and applied various resources to maintaining and improving the quality of their projects. Also, in comparison to previous years, second and third year projects showed an increase in educational support and enrichment in ASPs, as staff gradually began to adopt new strategies that promoted student engagement in learning and other pertinent development experiences.<sup>26</sup>

In the evaluation on student outcomes, over the course of the three year implementation study, evaluators determined that certain risky behaviors were less prevalent among program participants, particularly in the third year of implementation. For example, high school students reported being less likely to engage in alcohol usage and sexual intercourse in their third year of participation in an ASP, in comparison to their first and second year of program participation. Evaluators also documented positive student self-reports. In year three, elementary grade participants reported academic benefits, strong attachment to ASP projects, and positive interactions with peers. Students also reported that these programs had given them new experiences and helped them to develop essential life skills, master specific skills and offer them opportunities to contribute to the project designs and operations, i.e. how the programs were run.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Policy Studies Associates, Inc. *Evaluation of Program Implementation and Student Engagement in the TASC After-School Program's Third Year*. Supporting Quality and Scale in After-School Services to Urban Youth. Mar 2002

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

### *Limitations*

However, students reported some limitations in these TASC programs. Reported satisfaction in after school projects decreased in year three, compared to satisfaction in years one and two. When asked how much they “enjoyed/liked the program overall”, only 47% of students said “great” in comparison to 61% who reported the same satisfaction after the first year of TASC program implementation. There were some additional noted limitations in these ASPs. These limitations included lack of classroom space, other student responsibilities putting a strain on student participation, and low administrative and teaching capacity. School principals also reported that the quality of homework assistance could use improvement. More importantly, the biggest blockage in TASC program implementation was maintaining enrollment numbers and retention of active program participants.<sup>28</sup>

To remedy these limitations and work toward improving enrollment numbers and retention, site coordinators and staff worked to involve students more frequently in projects and group activities. Evaluators observed that more student involvement promoted active learning, positive interactions, and student enjoyment. In terms of academic success, academic and cognitive development was strongly and positively correlated with intensity. This means that students were more engaged in academic and educationally enriching projects when they occurred more frequently, a large number of students participated, and the program lasted longer. Students also appeared more invested in the after school projects if they matched their preferences. Other implementation changes included offering choice and diversity of activities, hiring more qualified site coordinators, and connecting after school projects to the community.<sup>29</sup>

### *What Makes an ASP Effective?*

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<sup>28</sup> Policy Studies Associates, Inc. *Evaluation of Program Implementation and Student Engagement in the TASC After-School Program's Third Year*. Supporting Quality and Scale in After-School Services to Urban Youth. Mar 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Though the evidence on ASPs is diverse, and somewhat contradictory, research shows that a quality ASP can potentially result in positive benefits for program participants. The National Institute on Out-of-School Time believes that high quality after school programs focus on the development of the whole child, integrating academic supports such as literacy skills into programming that also promotes children's social, emotional, and physical development.<sup>30</sup> So, what exactly constitutes a 'quality' program? 'Quality' can be misconstrued as it is an ambiguous term and often poor indicator of measurement, so in lieu of the term 'quality', it's best to say rather which program is effective at achieving positive benefits for program participants. Based on the above studies and further ASP evaluations, an effective ASP includes positive staff-youth relationships, opportunities for program participants to build skills and mastery through program activities, opportunities for youth engagement, voice and decision making, and positive peer relationships. The connections made in an after school program is also a pretty important determinant of program effectiveness. Relationships among staff, schools, families, youth and communities are highly crucial in making those connections.

In order for students to build skills and mastery through program activities, specific aspects of program activities must be present. One specific aspect is that youth in ASPs seemed to benefit the most from informal, personalized, or small group meetings. For example, the in-depth TASC evaluations for ASPs showed that youth responded positively to smaller and less informal groups that included activities led by an instructor with whom they shared a like passion. Such programs also allowed students to feel less stressed about the school day, and find relief in participating in activities that allowed them to express themselves more freely than they were able to in school. Also, The McREL research study indicated that students make the most gains in reading proficiency when reading-based ASPs offer one-on-one tutoring or mixed student groupings, rather than a formal classroom setting and structure.

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<sup>30</sup>McREL. *Effective OST Reading Programs*. Noteworthy Perspectives: Out-of-School Time Programs for At-Risk Students. 2004.

Another effective method to incorporate in ASPs is focusing on the needs and interests of the participants, which focuses on the component of youth engagement. In the ASP study of the 15 programs in New York, three specific strategies proved promising in facilitating positive youth experiences. The first two strategies specifically focused on the needs and interests of the participants. They referred to enacting activities that offer youth active learning opportunities to build skills in areas that interest them, and incorporating activities that meet participants' developmental needs. Furthermore, staff at these program sites felt that more than focusing solely on academic improvements, workers at ASPs should also focus their attention on the social aspects and well-being of the student. Specifically, they mentioned the importance of motivating students to do their best work. As one staff worker said, "When you give the child self-esteem, they can learn multiplication." Overall, this in-depth evaluation found that successful, i.e. effective programs, help youth build skills by offering them engaging activities that motivate and interest them.<sup>31</sup>

Programs that also stood out as exceptionally successful offered programming that encouraged youth leadership and input into the activity design of the ASP. For example, an elementary-grade focused program in the New York ASP study sample offered opportunities for youth to make choices, solve problems, and participate in leadership development activities. This program included daily assemblies that offered structured and frequent opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles, through public speaking, that according to staff, encouraged students to "feel good about the talent or skills that they have." This program also consistently achieved high levels of enrollment and participation, and youth reported high levels of satisfaction in this particular ASP. Equally as important as the youth leadership and input component, the program was also successful because it had a goal and focus, which was most heartily emphasized by the staff: "to teach kids about friendship, respect, and responsibility." In contrast, at a middle school ASP, youth participation rates were lower, as

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<sup>31</sup> Policy Studies Associates, Inc. *Evaluation of Program Implementation and Student Engagement in the TASC After-School Program's Third Year*. Supporting Quality and Scale in After-School Services to Urban Youth. Mar 2002.

participants reported having fewer opportunities to engage in structured and well-organized activities that appealed to their interests. Based on one participant's account: "Our parents make us come. I wouldn't otherwise come...It's boring, the same thing over and over." Evaluator observations also revealed that much of the participants' activity was spent in recreational activities in which little instruction or structure was provided.<sup>32</sup>

Another effective technique to incorporate into ASPs is collaboration. Complementary learning is one way in which collaboration can be achieved. Complementary learning emphasizes the importance of school and nonschool programs working comprehensively. ASPs can complement school-day learning and lead to more effective and sustainable education efforts. For example, effective programs have the potential to support and promote youth development because they place youth in safe environments, prevent youth from engaging in delinquent activities, teach youth general and specific skills, beliefs and behaviors, and provide opportunities for youth to develop relationships with peers and mentors. Evidence also shows that youth that participate in effective programs are positively impacted in both current and future outcomes. Complementary learning is also defined as learning that occurs when two or more institutions intentionally link each other to improve learning and developmental outcomes for children and youth. These institutions include families, early childhood programs, schools, OST programs and activities, higher education, health and social service agencies, businesses, libraries, museums, and other community-based institutions. All these types of linkages are associated with a common set of beliefs, including recruitment and retention, improved program quality, and academic and social benefits. Such linkages also can facilitate continuity of academic goals and approaches, provide remediation and enrichment, present academic content in nontraditional and experiential ways, and address implementation challenges by promoting resource-sharing. ASP linkages can come in several varieties. Programs often share staff, resources and curricula, by encouraging regular

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<sup>32</sup> Harvard Family Research Project. *Beyond the Classroom: Complementary Learning to Improve Achievement Outcomes*. Spring 2005.

communication between program and school staff, aligning goals and curricula to state and school standards, and coordinating their academic content with school work.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, the importance of collaborative learning follows from the idea that ASPs cannot solely and sufficiently support learning and development. Rather, ASPs are only one integral part of children's lives and their education. ASPs can build shared missions and goals with other institutions, share resources and ideas, build stakeholder buy-in, and provide more coordinated services. In fact, several studies have found that collaboration, in particular the linkages associated with programs, is one of the best characteristics of high-quality, high performing ASPs. Youth in programs that are linked with schools demonstrate better academic and social outcomes. Further, when program staff had positive relationships with school principals, youth were reported to have greater improvements in homework completion, initiative-taking, peer relationships, and positive behaviors. ASP-school linkages also successfully contribute to program retention. School-based ASPs often eliminate the need for transportation, and many programs rely on school staff to identify eligible and at-risk youth.<sup>34</sup>

Complementary learning supports (early childhood education, family support, family involvement at home and in school, and after school programs) are evidenced to work effectively at promoting children's learning and contributing to their success in school. However, it is difficult to implement community learning supports when they are disconnected and operate in silos. So, in order to ensure that these supports work cohesively to improve student achievement, researchers propose that these complementary learning supports be linked and aligned with each other and schools to maximize their effectiveness and contribute positively to students' success.<sup>35</sup>

A current model of complementary learning is the Harlem's Children Zone (HCZ), led by Geoffrey Canada in central Harlem. HCZ's focus is on improving outcomes for low-income children by addressing

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<sup>33</sup> Harvard Family Research Project. *Beyond the Classroom: Complementary Learning to Improve Achievement Outcomes*. Spring 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

the whole community. Two principles are adhered to and followed to accomplish this goal: First, understanding that children are more likely to be healthy and successful when surrounded by adults who can parent effectively and engage with them educationally, socially and culturally. Second, early intervention is essential to successful development. Evaluation is also critical to HCZ, as it is still deemed a largely experimental project. Evaluations lead to determining if individual programs are successful, and whether the integrated network of supports HCZ offers is effective as a whole in improving child and family outcomes. As part of their evaluations, HCZ also has developed a database that includes all program participants and tracks their participation. Early findings from evaluations show a high usage of services by community members and positive outcomes for specific HCZ programs.<sup>36</sup>

Facilitating positive relationships between families and ASPs is also critical. Positive relationships between programs and families can have multiple benefits, as families can play an important part in determining whether or not youth participate in these programs. Youth are more likely to participate in ASPs when their parents are engaged in their lives and schooling, and are less likely to participate when their parents show low levels of support, involvement, and cognitive stimulation. Increases in family involvement in education are also associated with improved academic achievement and improved family relationships. Linking community with ASPs also is a positive relationship. Linking communities, through organizations, to ASPs, can avoid issues of overlap of services, provide more choices for youth, and leverage resources. For example, businesses provide financial support, volunteers, and apprenticeship opportunities, cultural institutions can contribute innovative programming and field trip sites, and neighborhood organizations provide feedback and guidance on the support their members want and need. Further, community factors can have potentially positive effects on participation by serving as target recruitment areas for youth and staff.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Harvard Family Research Project. *Beyond the Classroom: Complementary Learning to Improve Achievement Outcomes*. Spring 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

However, creating these linkages can prove difficult and tedious. Thus, ASPs linkages need to be done strategically in ways that are engaging, effective and sustainable. Programs that hope to facilitate positive relationships between families and ASPs have to work to create program environments and events that welcome families, support families' needs as well as youths' needs, communicate and build trusting relationships with families, respect cultural diversity, hire and develop a family-focused staff reflective of the parent population.<sup>38</sup>

### *Recommendations*

Researchers suggest various ways to produce effective ASPs. In choosing techniques and practices that will help ASPs successfully implement their programs, some researchers suggest it's important to develop resources and training that will help ASPs increase student achievement. Identifying successful program components, i.e. techniques and practices that have proven effective, and then developing tools and training to help other programs implement those same techniques and practices in their programs.<sup>39</sup> However, without first addressing the limitations in ASPs analyzed in the four studies above, it would be difficult to offhand provide recommendations for successful program implementation. So, in order to provide some possible recommendations for successful ASP implementation, it's important to revisit the most pronounced limitations, and then suggest some likely ways of remedying those limitations.

### *Recommendation #1: Staff trainings & workshops*

In the KidzLit evaluation, low implementation scores were particularly high for staff members who had little or no experience working with youth groups. Thus, training ASP staff members is critical

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<sup>38</sup> Harvard Family Research Project. *Beyond the Classroom: Complementary Learning to Improve Achievement Outcomes*. Spring 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Hoover, W.A., and Pollard, J.S. *Times Have Changed After School*. SEDL. May 2006.



due to the fact that many ASP staff members are not trained teachers.<sup>40</sup> It's important to build the capacity and effectiveness of ASP staff to ensure that they are capable of making a significant difference in student achievement. Further, when an ASP focuses on staff effectiveness and capacity, the program has a better chance of producing positive outcomes for youth participants. Essentially the argument is that positive staff-youth relationships enhance a youth's enjoyment in the program, creating a greater likelihood that they will increasingly engage and continue their participation in the program, resulting in a better outcome. This was evident in KidzLit, where staff reported that trainings and workshops were a tremendous help and major contributing factor to their success. Staff also reported the strongest benefits of KidzLit were that of improved lesson planning, more structured and organized ways of working with youth, better communication/relationships with youth, and more enthusiasm for exposing youth to reading and books.

Similar to KidzLit, in the ASPs under TASC, the program director hired staff that were relatively young (some in high school or in undergraduate programs) and had some experience working with children, but did not have formal teaching degrees. Working with those youth and other staff members who are not certified teachers, could help staff members build a higher capacity to meet the educational needs of program participants. So, instituting a program component that builds staff capacity through trainings and workshops could help to improve how staff members at ASPs deliver program services effectively to youth participants.

#### *Recommendation # 2: Incorporating complementary learning*

There's also the option of incorporating complementary learning into education reform to enhance and promote learning and development in youth in ASP, and encourage engagement, a prominent limitation in several ASPs. In the 15 ASPs under TASC in New York, the greatest limitations were retention and keeping students invested and engaged in the programs. Additionally, in the McREL

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<sup>40</sup> Hoover, W.A., and Pollard, J.S. *Times Have Changed After School*. SEDL. May 2006.

evaluations, kindergarten students did not maintain reading achievement through the second grade. Understanding the connections between several established institutions and how they intersect, can help to expand the extent to which children are engaged in ASPs and maintain investment to continue their academic progress. Also taking into account the importance of incorporating community and family into this web of connections is essential in helping students gain and maintain interest in participation in ASPs. Without having community and particularly family support, it may be difficult to reach out to students to recruit them for ASPs, and even more difficult to keep them invested in the program. Having a sound and basic knowledge of how to draw groups from the community is highly important in advancing complementary learning in ASP implementation. Reiterating the four steps to advance complementary learning beyond a conceptual framework: (1) Recognition of and investment in nonschool learning settings, (2) Increasing the number of organizations, programs, and resources that are connected, and enhancing the quality of those connections, (3) Increasing funding for collaboration, and (4) Researching and evaluating to understand which types of connections provide the most benefit, and how to improve those connections once they are made.

### *Recommendation #3: Targeting specific groups*

Another important recommendation to consider is targeting certain ASPs at specific groups. For example, some ASPs are specifically concentrated in high-need neighborhoods, determined by size of youth population, youth poverty rate, percent of youth disconnected from school or work, number of English language learners in public schools, number of single-parent families, and number of children eligible for state subsidized childcare. These programs exist to directly refer to and meet the needs of students who are deemed high-risk, and most needful of additional skill building in ASPs, such as those that are reading and literacy-based. This was the case for the TASC programs, which specifically targeted low-income and high risk schools, and were able to reduce risky behaviors among participants. Another prominent target group for special attention is middle school students. Considering that middle

school students do not draw the same benefits from ASPs that younger and older students do, it's important to provide programs that are specifically geared at targeting the problems that middle school students face in improving literacy scores. As was the case in the McREL evaluations which showed that middle school students did not perform as well academically as younger and older students did. Also as important is recommending that students start early in ASPs that provide skill building and offer specified instruction in areas of math or reading. As previously mentioned in the McREL evaluations, early intervention seems to work best in helping students receive the most beneficial gains out of these programs.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, evaluators and researchers find that ASPs can produce a variety of positive benefits for the youth. Particularly, an effective ASP can significantly improve a youth's feelings and attitudes, behavior, school grades and level of academic achievement. However, the lack of clarity in evaluations and studies, specifically in how findings are reached and concluded, makes it more problematic to replicate effective strategies and techniques for ASPs. Thus, there is a need to not only continue to invest in ASPs, but also to acknowledge the best methods, techniques and practices to produce effective ASPs.

Recognizing the importance of identifying what works or is effective in ASPs, and putting that into practice is probably the most important and yet most challenging strategy. There is no cookie cutter format for all ASPs to follow, as programs are as diverse and complex as can be expected. Additionally, the needs of one ASP may vastly differ from the needs of another. Therefore, it is important that program directors pinpoint what limitations and struggles exist in their programs, and work to remedy those program shortcomings. Thus, it's important to create a design of some kind or a layout for best practices and strategies for that particular ASP to ensure that students get the most out of the program, meaning it provides a solid and positive impact on their academic success and

achievement. Holding staff meetings and seminars where staff can share and discuss issues and problems inherent in the program such as structure limitations, lack of goal setting, or poor methods of implementation, just to name a few could be pivotal in finding out what is going wrong in the problem, and how to fix it. No ASP is perfect, so there will always be some amount of room for improvement. So, internally staff has to be willing to set aside time to work on what will be most beneficial to their students and result in an effective implementation of their program.

Externally, researchers and evaluators need to produce a more compact and replicable model of how to measure program success and achievement. Many studies on ASPs are often inconclusive and complicated, and cannot be readily replicated. Establishing sound and clear methods of measuring program effectiveness and defining what is meant by a 'quality' ASP could help to provide a model of evaluation that is easy to follow and put into practice. For example, in the KidzLit study, evaluators found that students experienced greater reading efficacy as a result of participating in KidzLit. However, what exactly defines 'greater reading efficacy' was not explained. Does 'greater reading efficacy' mean there were improvements in reading skills or percentile gains in literacy tests? Similarly, CASEL's evaluations neglected to describe how 'improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem' were measured. Explaining terms like this, and making clear descriptions of results would help in understanding how to implement effective ASPs. Also, it's important to acknowledge that every model has its flaws and limitations, and studies should always address what those flaws are, and how they can possibly be fixed. For example, though a program is deemed effective and successful because it reduces risky behaviors or results in high percentile gains on literacy or math tests, what are the 'unspoken' limitations of this program? Are there any missing factors that also explain the successful outcomes? Has parental contribution been taken into account (parental income is highly correlated to student success)? Does the student or students simply possess self-motivation to do well? Addressing these

questions and questions similar to these, as well as exploring outliers and external factors contributing to student success in ASPs should also be mentioned in these studies and evaluations.

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