

Talking Out-of-School

by Pam Stevens

To support ALL young people's healthy development, we must look beyond academic achievement to comprehensive development plans with interdisciplinary roots and broad funding sources.

There is a lot of talk and worry today about the “free” time of American children and youth. Schools, community-based organizations, and other local institutions are expected to make the best use possible out of this time. Fulfilling this obligation has not been easy—people have different ideas about how to achieve that goal. These varied perspectives have something in common: an interest in creating safe places for kids with responsible adults to supervise them.

But there are widely differing views about how that time should be filled and which institutions and organizations should be responsible for filling it. Parents, professionals (such as teachers and youth workers), and decision makers who hold the purse strings must come to consensus around some basic issues if we are to achieve the best for kids when they are not in school and not with their parents.

A good place to start is by defining “free” time. This really includes some of the hours after school, in the evenings, on weekends, during school breaks, and summer vacations. A common shorthand term (and one that we adopt in the rest of this publication) is to refer to this period as “out-of-school time.”

A second crucial part of the consensus is the emphasis on supporting the positive development of children and youth. This requires the availability of constructive activi-



ties in a structured and safe environment, including the availability of well-trained, caring adults. The word *structure* does not imply that every minute of every hour has to be filled with assigned activities. It does imply that there is an intentional plan for providing a variety of choices for children and youth—including time to just “hang out” with their friends or to do a crossword puzzle alone.

And finally, the consensus should include adopting a perspective of development that includes social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth—not just cognitive growth as defined by academic success. Practitioners know from their direct experience with young people (and parents know intuitively) that children and youth need supports in each area and that the progress in one area is related to progress in the others.

No Easy Answers

Many things have happened over the past five years to support the out-of-school time hours. Federal funding has increased, schools have opened their doors after the school day ends, new local funding streams have been created (including tax levies in some cities), and evaluation studies are highlighting the benefits of participation in constructive activities. Yet for all of this progress, we haven't been able to fully address the question—what do we do with all of that time?

In communities and at the national level, we debate about whether schools or community agencies are the best providers of services, whether government, or the United Way or the citizens should have authority over the funds, and what types of services are most appropriate for

different children (including whether those whose parents can't afford to pay deserve as many options as those whose parents can pay).

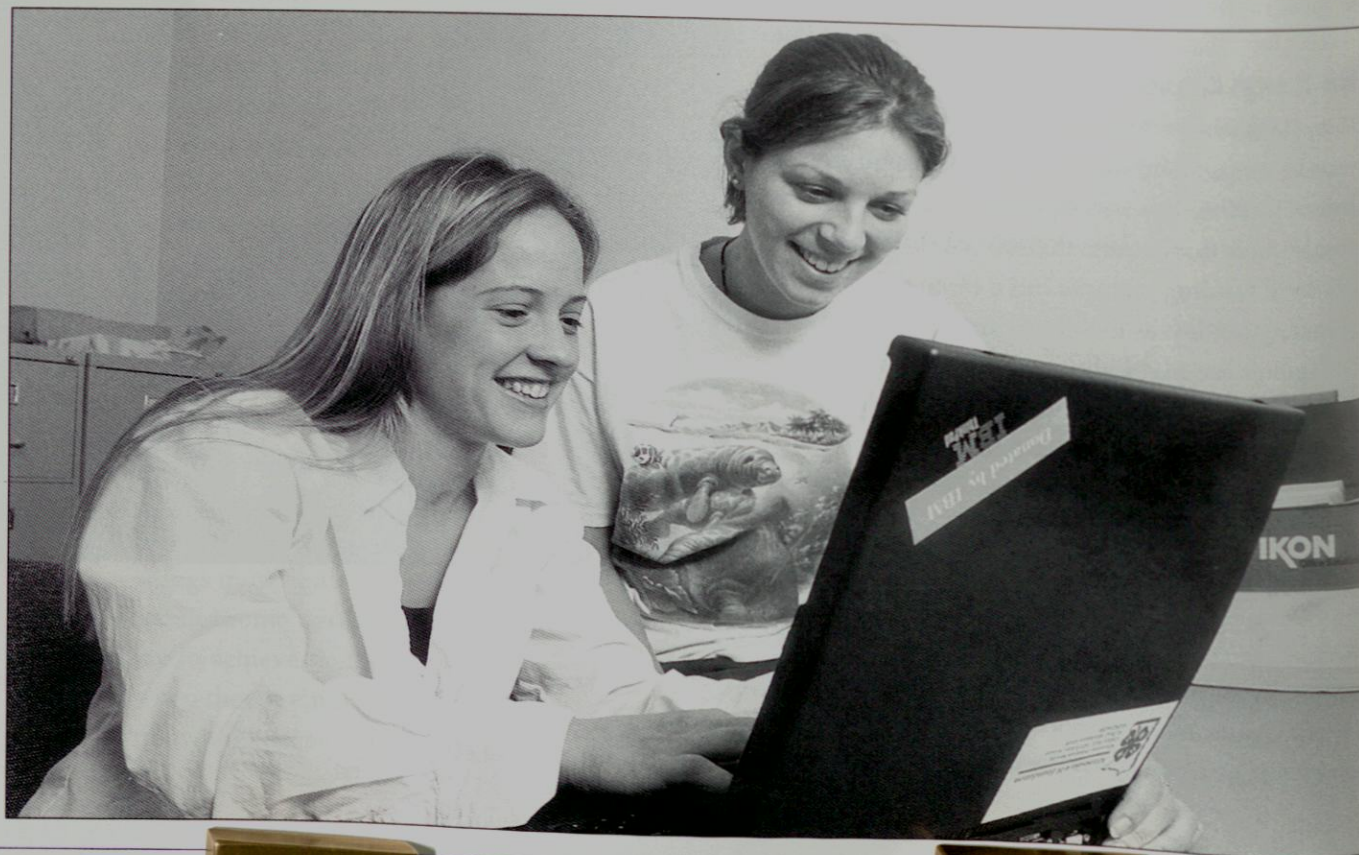
These debates are exacerbated by the absence of a centralized funding stream to support such services, incomplete information about what children/youth and their parents or caregivers want, and misguided notions that any one strategy will meet the demands and interests of every child and family across class, culture, age, and location. A more constructive discussion and comprehensive plans for action would occur if agreement was reached on the following as a guide for making decisions.



■ **Use flexible learning environments in multiple settings**

The education during out-of-school time may be less structured than during in-school hours, but it must be intentional if positive learning is to occur. Out-of-school time brings opportunities for children and youth to experience a different style of learning by exposing them to different types of activities, such as acting in a play, cleaning up a park, or visiting a museum. They learn by doing, by contact with new adults and youth who have different experiences than they do, and in interaction with community resources and organizations. Research substantiates a belief that children learn in different ways and that different opportunities can generate positive outcomes.

Right now the biggest thrust in many communities is to open school buildings for after-school programs to encourage academic success. While this is a laudable goal, it can confuse people about the purposes of out-of-school time versus the purposes of formal education. Instead of looking to the after-school programs to meet the schools' objectives, we should find ways to connect learning that happens during the school day with the learning that occurs during out-of-school time. The out-of-school time does not have to be constrained or defined by the requirements of the public school systems; rather it should build on the ever-stronger evidence that youth participation in quality out-of-school time activities leads to better social and emotional health as well as improved cognitive skills. These outcomes are truly, but indirectly, tied to improved academic achievement.



■ Match resources with need

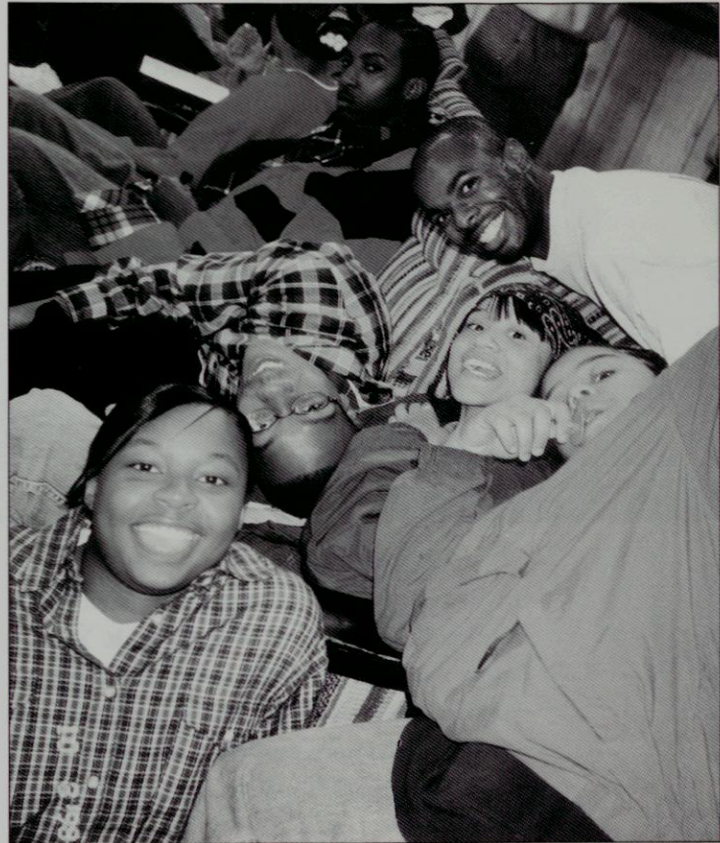
This may seem obvious. But how many neighborhoods or communities work together to ensure that there is a good match? And, of course, the resources should be consistent with the outcomes expected by families and the communities in which they live. If much is expected, many and diverse resources will be needed.

There are basic questions that any community or neighborhood needs to answer. Where do the children and youth live and go to school in your community? What forms of safe transportation are available, and to whom? When is it available? What do families and the children and youth want from the out-of-school hours? What resources are available in those neighborhoods and how appropriate are they to filling the demands by families for out-of-school activities? The answers give the residents and others the information necessary to make decisions about what additional resources are needed to address unmet needs and what barriers have to be overcome.

Communities need to tackle a range of questions including types and quality of services, program hours, cost to families, and transportation. A new National Research Council report concluded that "a diversity of program opportunities in each community is more likely to support broad adolescent development and attract the interest of and meet the needs of a greater number of youth."

■ Involve stakeholders

Stakeholders include parents, caregivers, young people, youth workers, and school administrators. Add to that list local businesses, municipal government, funders, and



community-based organizations and you have a large group of people who have a stake in how the out-of-school time is organized and what is achieved. Those of us "in the field" often make the mistake of not consulting the full range of stakeholders. Building community-wide networks of stakeholders will also reduce the chances of having good strategies thwarted by uninformed potential allies.

Making authentic decisions about the fate of children and youth in the out-of-school time takes a process where different voices and opinions are heard and addressed during the planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs. Holding community meetings,

creating partnerships, reaching out to diverse parents and youth, and involving key personnel and decision makers will not only help to ensure that plans can be carried out, but that those plans are built on a sound foundation of developmental theory, real need, and available resources.

By helping create activities that meet their needs and interests, young people become enthusiastic advocates for programs and policies and gain decision-making and critical-thinking skills.

Involving young people as leaders and decision-makers is often seen as difficult. Yet, we know that incorporating youth experiences and opinions makes for higher-quality, better-attended programs and often boosts the morale of organizations. By helping create

activities that meet their needs and interests, young people become enthusiastic advocates for programs and policies and gain decision-making and critical-thinking skills.

■ **Be equitable**

People may get worried when we talk about equity or a fair distribution of resources. Does this mean that every child or youth gets the same opportunities? That would be a noble but unachievable short-term goal given our nation's economic disparities. A more realistic notion of equity would argue for having a fair number of resources where they are most needed and ensuring that the available resources meet a standard of quality, regardless of the neighborhood location or average household income. It would include consideration of the local context when making these decisions, for example, accounting for language and culture when deciding where and when to offer services during out-of-school time.

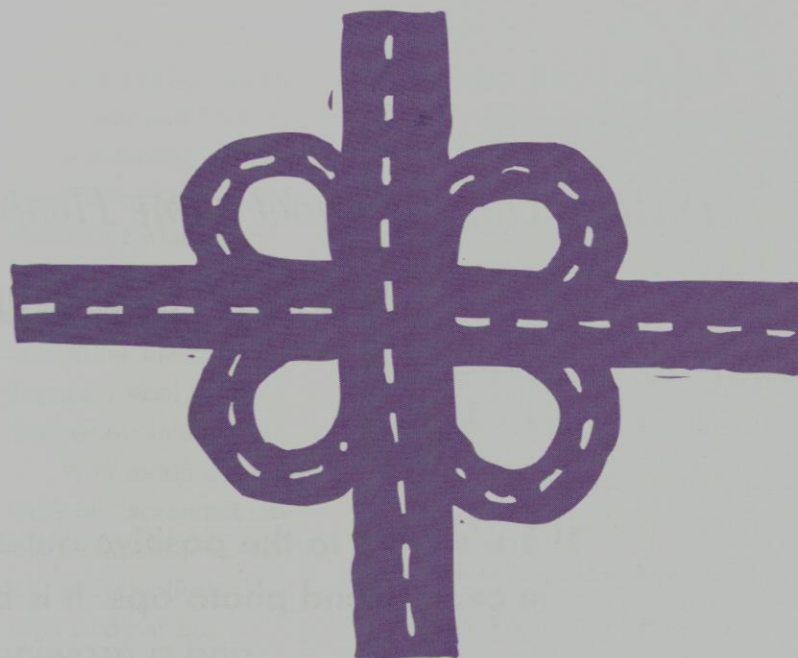


Photo: Don Breneman

Working Together

These different points have two important concepts in common. The first is partnerships. No agency or person or school can meet this challenge alone. Partnerships across different local organizations and regional institutions are critical for a program's success. The second concept is advocacy—people coming together to push for their agenda. Whether it is getting the school district to open schools for evening activities or getting the city council to allocate city funds to support after-school programs, the potential for achieving these goals will be heightened if people work together across organizational boundaries.

The good news is that the youth development field has moved well beyond just “talking out-of-school.” Now, we must move to “act out-of-school” and put what we know to work at the next level of community development and public policy. ❁



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A B O U T

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