



## **CHARTING THE BENEFITS OF HIGH-QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES**

### **Evidence from New Research on Improving After-School Opportunities for Disadvantaged Youth**

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# CHARTING THE BENEFITS OF HIGH-QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

## Evidence from New Research on Improving After-School Opportunities for Disadvantaged Youth

The after-school movement—and it can now honestly call itself a movement—increasingly finds itself in the fortunate position of being able to use rigorous research to guide improvements in after-school opportunities for young people. The recent *Study of Promising After-School Programs* adds to this research base by demonstrating the protective value of high-quality after-school experiences in the after-school hours.<sup>1</sup> The present paper examines the policy implications of recent findings of the Promising Programs study, which was conducted by researchers at the University of California at Irvine, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Policy Studies Associates, Inc., with support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Additional analyses of data from the study are in process and will be reported as they become final.

Most efforts to improve after-school opportunities focus on strengthening the effectiveness of individual programs. As a result, after-school providers tend to make plans focusing solely on their own organizations and immediate partners and on the expected progress of their own enrolled participants. It has been all too rare for providers to collaborate in community-wide efforts to create after-school safety nets for all youth in a community. Yet this study suggests that failing to encourage such collaboration is a missed opportunity for protecting and supporting youth during the after-school hours.

Current policy tends to push after-school providers to attend narrowly to program-level growth, quality, and sustainability. Even when programs are part of a larger network, they are typically each still accountable only for their own vision of program quality and for the outcomes of the particular youth whom they enroll. The result is that, instead of coordinating services to meet young people's needs on a community-wide basis, providers concentrate on building their own internal capacities to achieve desired outcomes for the youth in their programs. As the after-school field has expanded in recent years, it has generated few incentives to form linkages and collaborations across schools and other organizations, in order to connect with, attract, and support youth after school.

Findings of the Promising Programs study suggest that plans for high-quality after-school programming should span entire communities. When all parties with responsibilities for and interests in the welfare of youth, especially disadvantaged youth, unite to engage them in high-quality after-school experiences, they are more likely to succeed in promoting positive development for the largest number of youth at risk. Working alone, after-school programs,

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<sup>1</sup> See D.L. Vandell, E.R. Reisner, K.M. Pierce, B.B. Brown, D. Lee, D. Bolt, & E. Pechman, "The study of promising after-school programs: Examination of longer-term outcomes after two years of program experiences" (Madison, WI: Center for Education Research, August 2006), for a complete review of the research on which the present paper is based, including citations of relevant research by others.

community-based organizations, and schools can offer only relatively narrow sets of choices, so youth and their families may look to less positive settings for youth to spend some or all of their after-school time. Working together, these same organizations can provide a wider array of opportunities for youth, especially disadvantaged youth, and hence ensure better outcomes for the overall population.

## **Outline of This Comparative Study**

The Study of Promising After-School Programs was designed to explore the ways that high-quality after-school programs contribute to certain desired psychological, social, and academic outcomes for disadvantaged youth. It was grounded in an assets orientation, which assumes that all young people, including those living in poverty, have capacities to make healthy, positive choices if given the opportunity. The research team began by identifying and examining high-quality after-school programs that operated as stand-alone programs. It soon found, however, that youth sampled for the research were participating in many types of after-school experiences in addition to those provided in the sampled programs. Youth were also spending time supervised at home as well as time with no adult supervision at all.

The evidence reported here and elsewhere suggests that varied opportunities, both positive and negative, tend to be available for youth, including disadvantaged youth, in many neighborhoods. High-quality after-school programs are a significant resource in some places, but they sometimes compete to attract youth who may also have access to community centers, sports teams or leagues, and churches and other faith-based organizations that host recreational programs, tutoring, and religious lessons. Also, through new provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, many low-performing schools extend the school day with supplementary academic support programs. On the negative side are homes with no adult present in the after-school hours as well as street corners, shopping malls, and other unsupervised settings.

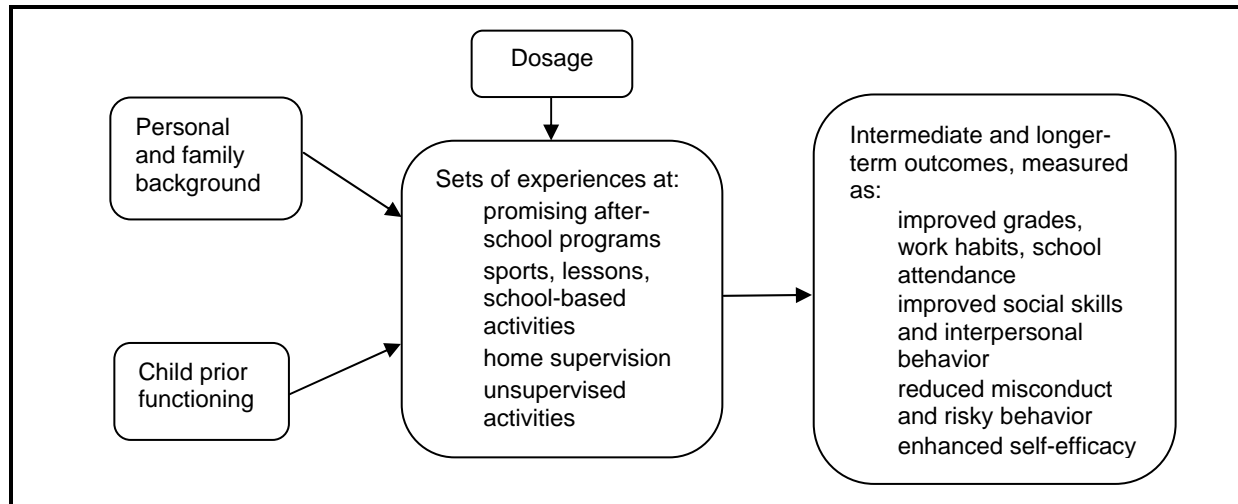
## **The Study's Change Theory**

The theory that formed the basis for this study anticipated contrasting outcomes for disadvantaged youth who participated in high-quality after-school programs in comparison with those who did not participate in such programs. Accordingly, the research design called for identification of a treatment sample of youth enrolled in selected high-quality after-school programs and a comparison sample of youth who attended the same schools as the treatment subjects but did not participate in the selected programs. After analyzing baseline research data on the treatment and comparison samples, however, it became clear that many of the sampled youth did not concentrate their after-school time in any single program or activity. Instead, research subjects across both samples tended to spend time in four predominant clusters of after-school settings and activities, including (1) the identified high-quality after-school programs, (2) other school- and community-based after-school enrichment activities, (3) supervised settings at home with a parent or other adult present, and (4) alone, with peers, or with younger children but with no adult supervision. This discovery led to a re-framing of the study, which resulted in a

plan for a somewhat more complex assessment of the differing outcomes associated with the four separate after-school conditions, as depicted in Exhibit 1.

### Exhibit 1

#### Theoretical Linkages between Sets of After-School Experiences and Outcomes in the Elementary and Middle Grades



#### Selection of the Programs That Were the Study’s Focus

Using evidence from prior research on the characteristics of high-quality after-school settings, the study’s research team initially identified over 200 candidate programs based on a review of published materials, recommendations from after-school experts, and evidence from evaluations. Through telephone interviews, document reviews, and site visits, team members then screened the programs to narrow the list. As a final step, team members conducted on-site interviews and quality-verification observations to confirm the quality of each of the 35 programs.

Each selected program served at least 30 youth in one or both of the two age groups studied, including elementary-grades youth in third or fourth grade and middle-grades youth in sixth or seventh grade. All programs were located in high-poverty communities and offered services four or five days a week. Program leaders expected youth to participate regularly throughout the school year. Program services were offered at no cost to parents. In addition, each program had evaluation data demonstrating positive participant outcomes in prior years of operation.

### Characteristics of the Schools and Students Affiliated with the Selected Programs

The selected programs were affiliated with 19 elementary schools and 16 middle-grades schools. Consistent with study goals, the partner schools primarily served students of color from low-income families.

<i>Students</i>	<i>Elementary</i>	<i>Middle</i>
Low income	90%	73%
Minority race/ethnicity	82%	70%

The targeted programs had strong partnerships with neighborhoods, schools, and community organizations. These partnerships were instrumental in ensuring that the after-school organizations were well enough established in their communities that they were likely to continue operation over the two-year study period. Through a mix of recreational, arts, and enrichment activities, programs nurtured positive interpersonal relationships among youth and actively engaged them in enriched activities. Programs offered age-appropriate learning opportunities plus recreational activities,

community-based experiences, and arts-related opportunities. Program staff were trained and, in surveys, expressed satisfaction with their working environment. Programs maintained low youth-to-staff ratios and strong connections with partner schools and with parents of participating youth.

### Characteristics of Youth Making Up the Research Sample

The study sample included 2,914 youth in 35 after-school programs. The 19 elementary- and 16 middle-grades programs were based either in schools or in community centers that coordinated with nearby schools. Programs were dispersed across eight states in six major metropolitan centers and six smaller urban and rural locations. All programs served high concentrations of ethnically diverse, low-income youth.

The 1,434 elementary- and 855 middle-grades research participants remaining in the sample in the second year were demographically similar to one another in most respects.<sup>2</sup> The elementary-grades sample was predominantly Hispanic, and almost 90 percent received free or reduced-price lunch at school. Two-thirds of these participants resided in two-parent households, and fewer than half the mothers worked full time. On average, mothers' highest educational attainment was a high school diploma or GED, and annual family incomes were less than \$20,000.

The middle-grades sample was ethnically diverse (about half Hispanic, more than 10 percent Black, and one third White), and about 65 percent received free or reduced-priced lunch. Mothers had about the same level of educational attainment as those in the elementary group, and average annual family incomes were in the \$20,000 to \$25,000 range. As in the

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<sup>2</sup> About 20 percent of the initial elementary-grades sample and 24 percent of the initial middle-grades sample left the study after the first year. Data on these youth were not included in the two-year outcomes analyses. Although this attrition rate is not insubstantial, it was expected. Subjects who left the study were otherwise very similar to those who remained.

elementary-grades sample, two thirds of the middle-grades youth lived with two parents, and about half their mothers were employed full-time.

## Quality Verification of Programs

Because the study was designed to assess the effects of quality on participants, the research team verified each program's continuing quality each year through annual visits to conduct interviews and observe youth activities. Using a rating system developed for this purpose, members of the research team rated programs based on evidence of supportive relationships between staff and youth participants and among participants and on evidence of rich and varied academic support, recreation, arts opportunities, and other enrichment activities. Ratings were consistently positive. Youth typically were highly engaged with one another and with program activities, and group leaders structured activities to maximize learning and positive relationships. Adults facilitated activities without imposing controls that limited youth opportunities. Disruptive or chaotic behavior was rarely observed; when behavioral disruptions occurred, leaders managed them calmly and constructively.

## Collection of Data on Research Subjects

The researchers collected longitudinal data on sampled youth over two years. Classroom teachers in the schools linked to the programs, participating youth, and their parents completed periodic surveys to measure the social, academic, and behavioral functioning of study participants. Teachers and youth completed three rounds of surveys, in fall 2003, spring 2004, and spring 2005. Parents completed surveys in fall 2003 and spring 2005.

The research team used a statistical technique known as cluster analysis to test the benefits associated with youth experiences in after-school programs and other after-school settings. The analysis examined the after-school experiences of all research subjects and categorized them according to four predominant activity patterns:

- ***Program plus activities.*** These young people participated in the study's high-quality after-school programs and also took part in after-school activities in school or in neighborhood or community centers, sports teams, or academic, arts, or religious lessons.
- ***Program only.*** These young people mainly attended only the identified high-quality after-school programs and did so for 2-3 days a week over the two-year period.
- ***Supervised at home.*** These youth did not participate in the identified after-school programs and were most likely to be at home after school overseen by parents or other adults.
- ***Self-care plus activities.*** These youth rarely participated in the targeted after-

school programs, spent 1-3 days a week in settings that were not supervised by adults, and dropped in sporadically on a mix of sports, school-based activities, and academic, arts, or religious lessons.

The four clusters had slightly differing demographic characteristics. Among sampled elementary-grades youth, girls were highly represented in the *program plus activities* group, and boys were highly represented in the *self-care plus activities* group. Among sampled middle-grades participants, girls were highly represented in the *supervised at home* group. Compared with the other groups, more of the *self-care plus activities* students in both elementary and middle grades had mothers who were employed full-time.

The research team used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to examine how these clusters of after-school experiences affected the developmental and academic outcomes of sampled youth. The contrasts found in these analyses allowed researchers to assess the potential benefits and protections provided to youth who were engaged in each set of activities.

## Youth Outcomes Associated with Differing After-school Experiences

The findings of these analyses indicated that elementary- and middle-grades youth benefited from an array of after-school experiences that included participation in high-quality after-school programs and structured school- and community-based activities that were supervised by adults. Findings also pointed to the comparative risks young people faced when they were inadequately supervised, even when they occasionally participated in sports teams, after-school academic and arts lessons, or activities at neighborhood community centers.

### Summary Findings

***Outcomes data on both elementary- and middle-grades youth showed that program-based and other structured after-school experiences, along with adult supervision, improved youths' conduct and work habits during the two-year study period.*** Survey data indicated reduced misconduct among those in structured, supervised settings, compared with their unsupervised peers. When elementary-grades youth assessed their work habits, all three supervised clusters reported improvements over two years, in comparison with youth in the *self-care plus activities* cluster. Among middle-grades youth, the three supervised clusters reported relatively less substance abuse at the end of the second year, compared with the self-care group. Middle-grades youth in the *program plus activities* and *program only* clusters showed moderate improvements in work habits, relative to youth in the *self-care plus activities* cluster.

***Teachers of elementary-grades youth confirmed that those who participated in high-quality after-school programs and other adult-supervised experiences fared significantly better than did their peers who were unsupervised after school.*** In particular, compared with the youth who were unsupervised and rarely attended the after-school programs (the *self-care plus activities* group), teachers reported that youth in the *program plus activities* group and the

*supervised at home* cluster (1) had more positive work habits, (2) were more persistent in completing tasks, (3) performed better academically, (4) had better social skills in relating to their peers, and (5) were less aggressive with their peers after two years of participation in the selected after-school program and in supplementary activities. The *program only* cluster had the same range of improved outcomes, relative to the *self-care plus activities* group, except that there were no differences between these two groups on long-term academic performance. Teachers of middle-grades youth reported small improvements in task persistence for the *program plus activities* group, but did not report comparable evidence of outcomes associated with different after-school experiences.

***Parent reports of youth relationships with adults were more positive among parents of elementary- and middle-grades youth who attended the targeted after-school programs or were supervised at home, compared with the reports of other parents.*** Parent reports did not indicate changes in other outcome areas of interest in the study.

***The advantages of high-quality programming plus additional supervised experiences differed across age groups and within cluster groups, but the disadvantages of self-care, even with additional activities, were consistent.*** In a noteworthy distinction between teacher-reported elementary- and middle-grades youth outcomes, the elementary *program plus activities* group experienced larger relative gains in work habits but smaller reductions in misconduct, compared with the other supervised groups. Among middle-grades youth, the key benefit was seen in youth self-reports of improved work habits and reduced misbehavior, although neither teachers nor parents reported these outcome differences. For older youth, the research found a slight advantage in combining attendance in the high-quality programs with participation in other activities compared with other after-school options.

***High-quality after-school experiences over two years exerted a stronger benefit for youth than did only one year of such experiences.*** While benefits were evident from a single year of involvement, the strongest benefits accrued when children were supervised in various sets of activities over multiple years.

Exhibit 2 presents the statistical effects associated with differing after-school arrangements. Exhibits 3 and 4 describe modal responses of the youth in the four clusters to the various after-school opportunities measured in the study. (These characterizations are not accurate for *all* youth in any given cluster, however.)

**Exhibit 2**  
**Effects of After-School Arrangements for Elementary- and Middle-Grades Youth,**  
**Compared with Self-Care, Reported as Two-Year Effect Sizes\***

Data Sources and Youth Characteristics	Program Plus Activities vs. Self-care Plus Activities		Program Only vs. Self-care Plus Activities		Supervised at Home vs. Self-care Plus Activities	
	Elementary	Middle	Elementary	Middle	Elementary	Middle
Student report						
Work habits	.41	.33	.24	.20	.29	
Self-efficacy	NA		NA		NA	
Misconduct	<b>-.51</b>	<b>-.64</b>	<b>-.66</b>	<b>-.55</b>	<b>-.66</b>	<b>-.55</b>
Substance use	NA	<b>-.67</b>	NA	-.47	NA	<b>-.61</b>
Teacher report						
Work habits	.35		.31		.33	
Task persistence	.30	.22	.23		.29	
Academic performance	.25				.22	
Interpersonal problem solving	.30		.21		.32	
Positive peer behavior	.21		.23		.31	
Aggressive with peers	-.29		-.34		-.37	
Parent report						
Work habits					.22	
Peer relations						
Cooperation with adults			.31	.33	.34	.25

\* A commonly used statistic known as the effect size (or Cohen's *d*) is employed here to document the protective benefits of the three clusters of after-school arrangements, compared with self-care. An effect size of 0.2 is considered small; 0.5 is considered medium or moderate; and 0.8 is considered large. Effect sizes of less than 0.2 are not reported. **Bold** figures indicate moderate to large effect sizes and highlight the protective benefit of the after-school arrangement. NA indicates that the outcome in the row was not measured for the group shown in the column.

**Exhibit 3**  
**Types of After-School Experiences Included in the Study's After-School Clusters,**  
**for Elementary-Grades Youth**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Program Plus Activities (n = 310)</b>	<b>Program Only (n = 639)</b>	<b>Supervised at Home (n = 535)</b>	<b>Self-care Plus Activities (n = 262)</b>
Targeted after-school programs	Attended 120-179 days in two years	Attended 60-119 days in two years	Did not attend the targeted program	Attended 60-119 days in two years
Coached sports	Once a week	A few times a semester	Once a week	Once a week
School-based activities	2-3 times a week	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	Once a week
Lessons	2-3 times a week	Once a week	Once a week	Once a week
Home alone	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	Once a week
Home with siblings	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	Once a week
Hang out with peers	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	2-3 times a week

**Exhibit 4**  
**Types of After-School Experiences Included in the Study's After-School Clusters,**  
**for Middle-Grades Youth**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Program Plus Activities (n = 310)</b>	<b>Program Only (n = 639)</b>	<b>Supervised at Home (n = 535)</b>	<b>Self-care Plus Activities (n = 262)</b>
Targeted after-school programs	Attended 60-119 days in two years	Attended 60-119 days in two years	Did not attend the targeted program	Attended 10-59 days in two years
Coached sports	2-3 times a week	Once a week	Once a week	Once a week
School-based activities	2-3 times a week	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	Once a week
Lessons	2-3 times a week	Once a week	Once a week	Once a week
Home alone	Once a week	Once a week	Once a week	2-3 times a week
Home with siblings	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	A few times a semester	2-3 times a week
Hang out with peers	Once a week	Once a week	Once a week	2-3 times a week

## The Risk of Unsupervised Care

This exploration of the effects of differing clusters of after-school experiences re-affirms the importance of minimizing the amount of time that young people spend without adult supervision. Exhibits 5 and 6 demonstrate the sharp differences in levels of supervision in the study's four clusters. Approximately three-quarters of elementary-grades youth in the *self-care plus activities* cluster reported being unsupervised one or more times a week, and nearly all of the middle-grades youth reported being unsupervised at least one afternoon a week or more. By contrast, fewer than 17 percent of the elementary-grades youth in the *program only* and *supervised at home* groups were in self-care once a week or more. Fewer than half of middle-grades youth in the *supervised at home* clusters reported being in self-care one afternoon a week or more.

**Exhibit 5**  
**Percent of Elementary-Grades Youth Unsupervised Once a Week or More, by Cluster**

Setting Type	Program Plus Activities	Program Only	Supervised at Home	Self-care Plus Activities
Home alone without adult	16	17	11	76
Home with siblings without adult	11	5	7	62
Hung out with friends without adult	25	12	14	75

**Exhibit 6**  
**Percent of Middle-Grades Youth Unsupervised Once a Week or More, by Cluster**

Setting Type	Program Plus Activities	Program Only	Supervised at Home	Self-care Plus Activities
Home alone without adult	44	33	33	99
Home with siblings without adult	20	8	16	76
Hung out with friends without adult	46	35	40	89

What is especially vivid from this research are the negative consequences of unsupervised, unstructured time in the hours after school for young people, irrespective of age. Misconduct and, for the older group, drug use were prominent risks for the *self-care plus activities* cluster. This research reaffirms long-standing evidence that young people who establish strong ties with school and community resources, and the adults in these settings, are less likely to take harmful risks and more likely to emulate responsible adults who model and reinforce socially acceptable behavior. While the *self-care plus activities* cluster in this study

was not entirely without adult contact after school, it appears that cluster members did not have access to consistent adult relationships. Without consistency in relationships, young people are unlikely to bond with the social institutions and the individuals who reinforce positive behavior. Hence, the challenge in working with youth in the *self-care plus activities* group is to build on the affiliations they have already established and to ensure increasing opportunities for sustained interactions with adults and peers in supervised settings.

## **After-school Program Quality Features**

When this study began in 2003, a research-based consensus in the youth-development field was already demonstrating the value of offering young people of all ages a broad array of academic, cultural, and recreational enrichment experiences after school. Recent studies have further confirmed the importance of positive peer-to-peer and youth-to-adult relationships in encouraging youth to build long-term commitments to after-school programs. Most importantly, youth attend after-school programs more consistently and for longer periods of time when program options combine engaging and substantive learning with positive adult and peer relationships.

In the Promising Programs study, the selected programs varied in emphasis, content, and structure but displayed consistent quality features. The following composite pictures demonstrate these features. (Names of schools, programs, and partner organizations in these vignettes are fictitious. The descriptions combine features of the actual programs but do not describe any single study site.)

### **After-school Opportunities for Elementary-Grades Participants**

The Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) School, a large elementary school located in a large western city, hosts an after-school program serving almost 300 students and operated by the local Citizen Benefits Board, a multi-service community-based organization (CBO). Citizen Benefits and MLK have partnered with several neighborhood organizations for the past 10 years to serve youth in grades K-5 with an array of after-school program options. Strong collaboration between the school-day and after-school programs is evident at MLK, as is collaboration between the after-school program and its CBO sponsor.

The after-school program's full-time director is present at the school every day from 10:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Among her other work during the school day, she confers with teachers to recruit students who are likely to benefit from the after-school program's services. Largely because of her presence in the school and because of program staff members' close relationships with parents and teachers, most children participate in the after-school program at least three afternoons a week.

The MLK program offers a balance of recreational, academic, and enrichment opportunities that are coordinated with the school-day academic program. About a third of the program staff are either classroom teachers or paraprofessionals who work with both the regular-

day and after-school programs. Two of these day-school staff members help the after-school team design instruction and enrichment activities that are consistent with the standards-based instructional program offered during the day. In addition to the formal after-school program activities, the school also offers its own sports programs, music lessons, and supplemental reading and mathematics tutoring after the regular school day ends. About 15 percent of program participants attend both the after-school program and the school-sponsored activities.

## **After-school Opportunities for Middle-Grades Youth**

The Pathfinder After-school Program at the Hudson River Middle School, located in a small eastern city, serves over 200 sixth- through eighth-graders after school during three 10-week activity sessions conducted in the fall, winter, and spring. Typically, about 15 to 20 Hudson students attend program activities once a week, and the remaining students participate two to four days a week in the program's club-based activities. Activities occur on varying schedules during each session, and at least three activities are available each day after school Monday through Friday.

Academic enrichment projects (such as poetry reading, world exploration, book-making, hands-on science, computer-based research, and community service) form the core of the activity schedule each session, with homework help and tutoring provided to a small group of youth (usually no more than 20 a session). Youth can volunteer to join the homework study hall, but relatively few Pathfinders make that choice. Instead, they fan out into arts and recreation activities including stained glass construction, sign language, theater, jazz dance, hiking, skating, stocking and organizing the community's food bank, and planting and harvesting indoor and outdoor gardens. Community volunteers from the nearby university, local businesses, and nonprofit arts organizations and recreation organizations lead session activities. Teachers from Hudson River Middle School and its feeder schools also offer targeted enrichment activities (such as poetry writing and computer classes) depending on their own interests and those of students.

In addition to the programs sponsored by Pathfinder with school-based partners, students at Hudson River Middle School also participate in after-school sports teams, school-based music and dance programs, and school-sponsored clubs such as newspaper, yearbook, and community service (e.g., working with older adults in a nearby retirement home, supporting river clean-ups).

Pathfinder coordinates closely with its host school. The program director is a member of the school's regular faculty and conducts individual counseling sessions or targeted tutoring activities with individuals or small groups during the school day, depending on the needs identified by the school's leadership team. Homework help and individual tutoring after school, conducted by university students who serve as mentors to Pathfinders, are jointly supervised by the Pathfinder site coordinator and a classroom teacher whom Pathfinder hires to ensure academic continuity and instructional quality in the after-school program.

## Youth Experiences in the After-School Hours

An important contribution of this study was to document the varied choices that young people and their families make about after-school care and to show that those choices change over time and as children get older. While the majority of the participants in this study were in supervised environments for much of their time after school, a significant minority of participants did not experience supervised care after school. Both school-based extra-curricular opportunities and after-school program opportunities were available to most participants, and this relatively small self-care group attended some after-school activities at least once each week. But for the youth in the study sample who did not take advantage of these opportunities, the risks and losses were clear. The following descriptions present actual examples of youth patterns of participation in supervised and unsupervised programs and settings after school. (Names are changed.)

### After-school Choices by Elementary-Grades Youth

Henry, Jessie, Suzette, and Eddie are fourth-graders at the same school. Henry and Jessie are regular participants in the after-school program. Henry attends activities two or three afternoons a week during the school year. Jessie attends once or twice a week. Neither Suzette nor Eddie attend the after-school program regularly. After school, Eddie typically goes to his aunt's apartment, where she supervises his four siblings, and her own three children. About once a week, he attends the school's sports program and is tutored in reading. Suzette's after-school plans vary each week, typically involving participation in school-based activities, going home alone or with siblings about once a week, or hanging out with friends a few times a week.

On the days that they go to the after-school program, Henry and Jessie leave school and go directly to the program from 3:15 until family members pick them up at about 5:45. Although these two fourth-graders have different schedules and different interests, at the after-school program they routinely participate in homework help or tutoring, varied recreation activities (kickball, basketball, tae kwon do), which are led by the school's physical education teacher, and arts activities (painting, clay work, crafts). Two or three times each year, they also participate in community-based service activities, such as clothing drives, packing cans at the food center, and holiday fund raisers.

Henry is more active in both school-sponsored and program-sponsored activities than is Jessie, but both children participate in organized after-school activities more often than do Suzette or Eddie. Henry, for example, is also on a basketball team sponsored by the neighborhood Police Athletic League and takes music and tutoring classes offered at the school several times a week.

As the annual test program nears in the spring, Henry, a struggling reader, also enrolls in focused tutoring offered three times a week after school by one of the school's teachers. Jessie, who also has reading difficulties, has enrolled in the tutoring program but attends only once each week.

Two years of outcome evidence on the academic, social, and behavioral progress of these four children paint a picture of the benefits of structured, adult-supervised after-school options. In both self-reports and reports by their teachers, behavioral indicators for Henry, Jessie, and Suzette show the benefits of the safety net provided by the after-school program and other school-based activities. By contrast, Eddie, like others who are less intensively supervised by adults, did not demonstrate improvements in work habits, task persistence, academic performance, or social skills.

### **After-school Choices for Middle-Grades Youth**

Alondra, Ivan, and Joseph are seventh-graders at the same school. Alondra is a regular participant in the school-based after-school program and also routinely joins her peers in school-sponsored sports, dance, and yearbook classes. She typically participates in the program two to three days a week during each of the program's three 10-week sessions. Her friend, Ivan, attends the program about as frequently as Alondra does, but he is involved in school-based activities after school only about once a week.

Like Ivan, Joseph attends Hudson's sports and arts programs about one day a week, and a few times a year he participates in school-sponsored community programs. When he is not at school, Ivan's mother picks him up after school so he can help her out with three younger siblings at home.

Alondra and Ivan are engaged in varying activities after school that involve adult supervision, and are at home alone or with peers only about once a week. Less frequently—a few times a semester—they are helping to take care of siblings because their parents are unavailable. These two students experience frequent adult guidance and engagement. By contrast, their friend, Joseph, drops by the sports program, the school's theater program, and the literacy tutoring program that the school offers about once a week. As often as three times a week, Joseph is on his own without adult supervision.

Over two years, Alondra and Ivan report strong improvements in work habits and sense of self. Moreover, their self-reports indicate that they engage in significantly less misconduct and substance abuse than do peers like Joseph, who are more likely to be on the fringes of the available structured after-school activities and less likely to be supervised by responsible adults.

### **Effects of Varied After-School Experiences**

This study found positive outcomes among youth who regularly attended the targeted after-school programs and who also took advantage of varied sets of additional enrichment experiences available in their schools and neighborhoods. In contrast, self-care plus intermittent participation in an unstructured program of extra-curricular activities posed the greatest developmental risks to both elementary- and middle-grades youth. Members of this group, especially those in the middle grades, posted moderate rates of participation in school- or community-based activities (although not the targeted after-school programs), but they differed from their peers by not being closely supervised after school on a regular basis. Thus, the risks

they faced likely occurred both because of the limited adult supervision they experienced and because of the inconsistency of their experiences and relationships with adults. Other research has shown that, without consistent contact with caring adults, young people may not readily bond with social institutions that can reinforce positive behavior.

The study focused on economically disadvantaged, minority youth, many of whose families were recent immigrants. The research team could not know for certain whether the same sets of experiences or outcomes would occur among youth in different cultural groups. The findings, however, demonstrate the benefits of continuous participation in high-quality after-school programs, community activities, and supervised home settings for youth from economically disadvantaged families. They underscore the need for strong coordination among leaders of all after-school programs within a community, so that families, working with educators and others, can assemble positive, supportive sets of daily after-school experiences capable of fostering the healthy development of their children.

## Implications for Policy Planning

The central policy implication of this study is the importance of taking coordinated steps to increase the availability of high-quality after-school programming and reducing the incidence of unsupervised time on the part of elementary- and middle-grades youth. Immediate efforts in this regard might include the following:

1. ***Encourage the creation and operation of new structures for collaborating to extend high-quality after-school to all youth in targeted communities.***

Policy makers can use their legislative, financial, and advocacy tools to encourage the formation and operation of community-wide coordinating bodies to serve as forums for after-school providers to collaborate, especially around the recruitment and retention of unserved and under-served youth. Funding for these entities might be structured to encourage cross-organizational collaboration along with program development and staff training.

2. ***Reduce unintended incentives that promote competition, rather than collaboration, among providers.***

New collaborative bodies, as described above, need to recognize and facilitate multiple involvements by young people across varied activities and settings. This is especially important for middle-grades and high school youth, who are especially likely to engage in multiple after-school activities. The collaborative bodies might be designed to promote (1) information dissemination and counseling to encourage youth placement and retention in appealing after-school opportunities, (2) adoption of information systems capable of tracking a young person's involvement in multiple after-school programs and settings, (3) vouchers to facilitate transportation after school, and (4) collaborative arrangements to promote the sharing of program capacities and facilities across programs.

**3. *Increase the availability of information about positive school- and community-based opportunities for youth in targeted communities.***

As serious as the need may be for positive after-school options in low-income communities, available resources sometimes tend to be under-utilized. Innovative marketing may be needed to inform parents and youth of after-school opportunities and their benefits. Policy makers can assist programs and their sponsors in getting the word out about available resources and in creating incentives that reward the regular, sustained participation of all youth.

**4. *Support longitudinal research to measure the types of after-school learning opportunities available in targeted low-income communities, youth participation across available opportunities, and the outcomes of young people who experience each type or cluster of settings.***

This two-year study revealed the complexity of existing patterns of after-school experiences for disadvantaged youth. While high-quality after-school programs are essential, there is much to be learned about other positive learning opportunities in low-income communities and the different effects of varying sets of experiences. At the same time, a better understanding is needed of the causes and effects of varying degrees of self-care for children and youth at different ages.