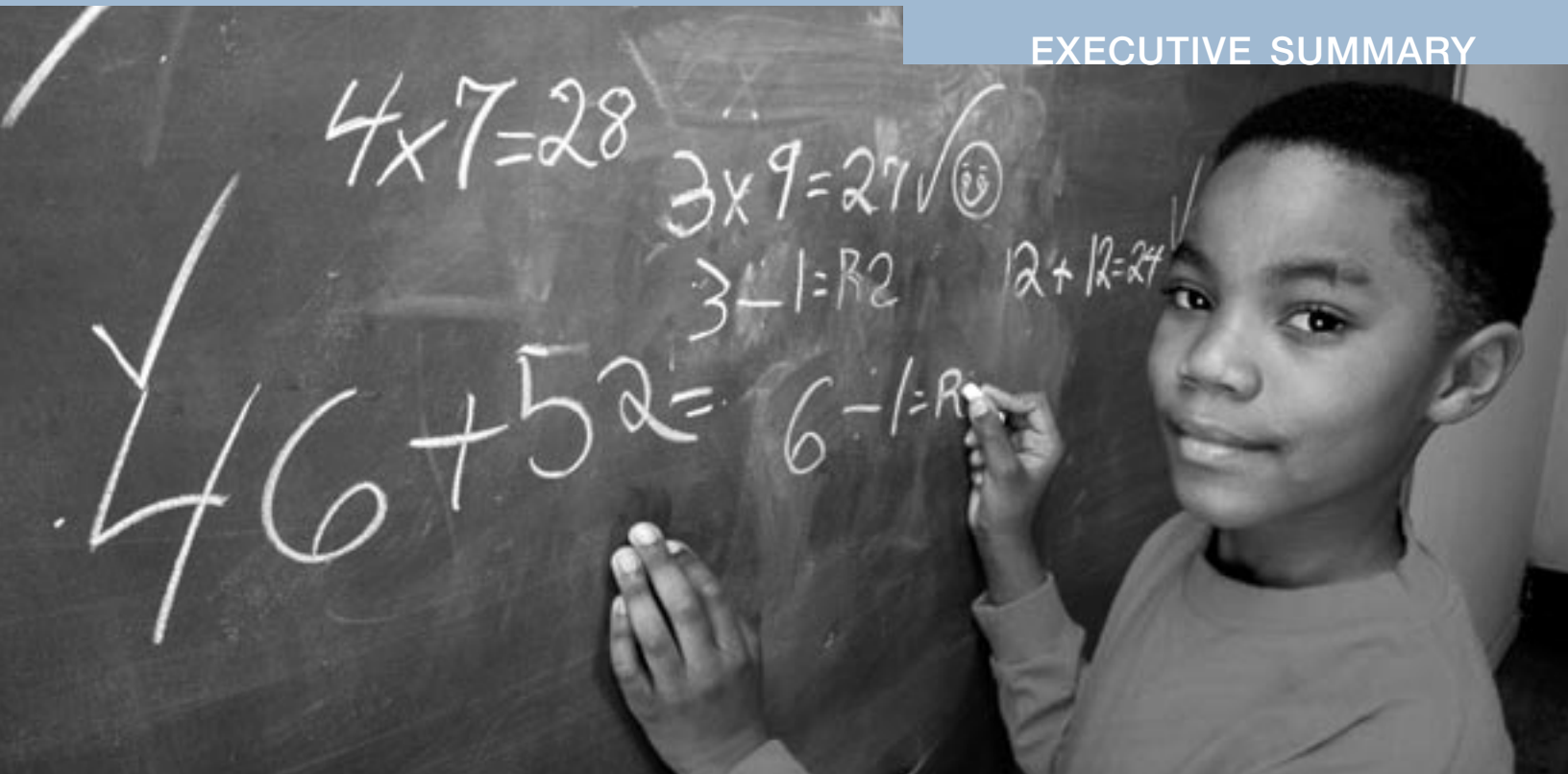


Multiple Choices After School: Findings from the Extended-Service Schools Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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Executive Summary

Communities across the nation are realizing that after-school programs help children become responsible, productive citizens of tomorrow, while helping their parents be responsible, productive citizens today. As a result, new programs are springing up all over the country. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002, the issue of after-school programming will be on the minds and the agendas of more people than ever before.

This act converted the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) from a federally to a state administered program. Every state is eligible to receive a portion of the billion dollars appropriated for the program, giving all the states a concrete funding opportunity to address the after-school needs of school-aged children. With this opportunity will come the need to make many decisions about the goals, design and content of the after-school programming, decisions that will influence which children and youth participate, what they experience and how they may benefit. This report aims to put policymakers and program operators on firmer ground as they make these decisions by sharing lessons learned about the design and content of existing school-based, after-school programs.

In 1997, amidst the growing interest in after-school programs, the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds launched the Extended-Service Schools (ESS) Initiative, which supported the creation of 60 after-school programs in 20 communities around the country. Each community adapted one of four nationally recognized models that had been successfully developed and implemented in other cities around the country. These models—the Beacon, Bridges to Success, Community Schools and the West Philadelphia Improvement Corporation—all seek to promote academic and non-academic development of young people during their out-of-school hours, but differ in organizational structure and management and, to a lesser extent, in programmatic emphasis. At the same time, the models share several key features. They all operate their programs in school buildings; involve partnerships between community-based organizations (and/or universities) and schools; and offer a range of activities to the children and youth who participate, including academic and enrichment activities, and sports and recreation. In addition, in all four models, the financial resources

are under the control of the partnering organization rather than the school.

As a result of this “sameness” within variation, ESS provided an almost unique opportunity to identify and examine overarching issues involved in providing opportunities to youth in their after-school time—issues that transcend local context and the formal elements of specific models. In particular, the ESS initiative allowed a focus on four central questions:

- Which children and youth came to the after-school programs? Why did they come? Were the programs attracting the young people who could most benefit from participation?
- What were the characteristics of high-quality activities in these programs—activities that promoted the positive development of the children and youth who attended?
- What benefits did the children and youth gain from participation?
- What was the cost to operate the after-school programs, and what were the ways to finance them?

Starting in May 1998, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) began the evaluation of this large-scale initiative. We used a multi-method approach designed to provide both an understanding of the breadth of programming experiences and the ability to more deeply delve into particular issues. To learn about the activities of all the ESS programs, we asked all the school site coordinators and city-level program directors to complete annual organizational surveys summarizing what their programs were doing. To gain deeper insight into individual sites and learn about promising practices, we conducted multiple in-depth site visits to 10 cities during 1999–2000, interviewing staff, partners, students, parents and key city officials.

We also intensively focused on programs in a total of 10 schools in six of these cities. During 2000–2001, we collected computerized attendance records from those programs and gathered cost data. We administered a baseline questionnaire to fourth- to eighth-grade students between Fall 1999 and the end of 2000 as they enrolled in the program or the research. In Spring 2001, we administered a follow-up survey to fourth- to eighth-grade students who

had ever enrolled in ESS and were still in the school (although not necessarily currently participating in ESS). A telephone survey of a sample of those students’ parents was also conducted to learn about the program from their perspective. And, finally, in 3 of the 10 schools, we conducted multiple observations of the after-school activities.

What Have We Learned?

We found that, across all of the sites, the school-based, after-school programs could be put in place fairly quickly. It typically took from six to nine months for programs to find organizational partners and staff, assess community needs, pool additional community and financial resources, identify activity providers and recruit participants. The initial planning time was critical and, importantly, the ESS programs each received a grant of \$25,000 to \$50,000, as well as technical assistance, to help support this process. Over the next three years, the programs matured and demand for their services grew. Programs became better able to identify and address core goals, honed their recruiting strategies and, for the most part, developed strong relationships with their host schools. They also began to more directly focus on addressing program quality, rather than just program provision. Still, they continued to face operational challenges. These included funding constraints, staff shortages and retention, and difficulty in creating and implementing approaches for monitoring and assessing program quality.¹

The remaining pages of this executive summary focus on key findings from the 10 intensive-study, after-school programs.

Who Participated?

1. Demand for the programs was substantial.

Parents enrolled their children in large numbers. Among the 10 programs we intensively studied, eight considered themselves to be operating at capacity—serving as many students as they could within their available resources—by their second year of operations. In fact, interest in the after-school programs was so high, relative to available resources, that three of those programs capped their enrollments; and one

program, in its effort to meet the demand for registration, limited the number of days a week for which each youth could register. Across the eight sites that collected participation data on all youth who were enrolled in ESS, slightly more than half of the schools' total populations were attending the after-school programs.

2. On average, students participated in ESS for 20 days in a typical semester. They also tended to participate over an extended period of time, not just a single semester.

Students who enrolled in ESS attended slightly under two days each week, on average. While this participation rate could suggest that students might not be attending often enough for programs to achieve their goals of strengthening youth's academic and social skills, it is important to understand that many of the participants attended these programs over an extended period of time. More than a third (35%) of the enrollees participated all four semesters that were covered by this study and, overall, 84 percent participated in two or more semesters. These participation patterns suggest the possibility of a cumulative effect of less intensive participation over time. In addition, for many youth, ESS was only one aspect of their participation in organized after-school activities, and those other activities also have the potential of providing supports and opportunities for positive development.

3. Higher-needs students and older youth were more difficult to attract to the after-school programs.

In ESS, as has also been found in other after-school programs, younger children attended more frequently than older youth. In addition, the students who were most easily recruited for the program tended to be those who were already "joiners." As the programs developed, staff began to more specifically target some of their recruitment strategies toward attracting the most high-needs youth—the "non-joiners"—students who were failing courses, were disengaged from school and had behavior problems. However, the challenges of attracting and retaining older and higher-needs students remained an ongoing issue for the programs.

4. Programs that required registration for a greater number of days per week were able to more intensively serve participants, but those programs served fewer students overall.

Required four- or five-day-a-week enrollment increased both the number of scheduled days and days attended, but allowing youth to register for only a few days a week meant that programs could serve greater numbers and, perhaps also, more diverse groups of youth. The ESS programs also found that required five-day-a-week enrollment resulted in low attendance rates unless they had a well-articulated and enforced attendance policy.

What Was the Quality of the After-School Activities?

1. The ESS activities were, on the whole, well designed and well implemented; and different kinds of activities provided opportunities for youth to develop in different areas.

Among the 30 activities that we observed, all but two provided at least some developmental supports and opportunities for youth, although the types of supports varied. Academic activities like homework help and tutoring are a "given" in school-based, after-school programs, and when done well, they provide youth with strong adult support that is valuable even beyond the activities' immediate purpose of building academic skills. Among the ESS programs, however, the enrichment activities provided youth with the richest environment for positive development. In addition to fostering strong adult-youth relationships, they provided opportunities for cooperative peer interaction and collaborative learning, and for youth to develop decision-making and leadership skills. A number of these activities also incorporated such academic skills as writing, math and problem solving.

2. It was not the topic or skill that was being addressed, but the ability of the staff member leading the session that was the key to high-quality activities.

While youth came to the activities with some initial interest in them, that interest was most likely to be heightened and sustained when specific practices were in place. These included the

activity leader's ability to create a positive social environment, where both adult-youth and peer relationships were warm and friendly, *and* a supportive but challenging intellectual environment where the adult actively motivated youth, pushed them to achieve beyond their (the youth's) initial expectations, encouraged them to persevere and praised their accomplishments. It did not seem to matter whether the activity leader was a youth worker from a community-based organization (CBO) or a teacher from the school. Teachers could be as warm and responsive to youth as were experienced staff from CBOs, and the latter were just as successful in instructing youth as were the teachers.

they had started skipping school during the period between the baseline and follow-up surveys.

It is important to note that some of the apparent benefits associated with risk-taking behavior and school attitudes may reflect the fact that better-behaved and more academically inclined students participate in school-based, after-school programs. However, in the telephone survey, 80 to 90 percent of parents agreed with statements that ESS was helping their child make new friends and get along better with their peers, stay out of trouble, like school more and try harder in school, learn new skills and become more self-confident.

What Were the Benefits to Participants?

1. Participation in school-based, after-school programs was associated with behavior that could help youth stay out of trouble.

One key goal of after-school programs is to provide youth with productive ways to use their out-of-school time and, thus, reduce their opportunities for risk-taking behavior. Our findings are consistent with ESS having this effect. Youth who attended the after-school programs reported less often that they had started drinking alcohol, and indicated more often than youth who did not attend ESS that they handled their anger in socially appropriate ways.

2. Participation in the after-school programs was associated with positive effects on school attitudes and behaviors, but it is too early to know whether it has an impact on students' grades and test scores.

A second important goal of after-school programs is improved academic outcomes for youth. Because most of the ESS programs were new and students participated, on average, fewer than two days a week and only for a year, we did not expect to find changes in grades. Thus, we instead examined indicators of academic improvement, such as youth's sense of competence in school and their level of effort. We found that youth who attended ESS reported more often that they really paid attention in class and were very proud to belong to their school, and they less often reported that

How Much Did the Programs Cost?

1. The costs were reasonable but varied considerably.

The 10 intensive-study ESS programs cost, on average, approximately \$150,000 per school year (excluding the use of the space) to serve 63 youth each day after school for five days a week. This translates into an average cost per day per youth slot of about \$15 when all activities were in session. Among the 10 programs, however, this cost ranged from \$8 to \$36. This range resulted from a variety of factors, including requirements of the community setting (for example, the need to provide transportation home for participants at the end of the day); the programs' administrative structure; the kinds of activities offered and the staff-to-youth ratio; and investment in such factors as fundraising and the future sustainability of the program.

2. Schools and school districts were essential sources of support.

Both school districts and individual schools that hosted the programs made important cash and redirected (non-cash) contributions. In the 10 intensive-study ESS sites, these partners contributed, on average, more than 20 percent of the cost of the program, including some or all of the cost of transportation, custodial assistance and snacks for participants. This contribution was in addition to the rent-free use of the school building.

3. About 60 percent of the programs' budget needs were funded by cash grants. Raising these funds to sustain the programs over time remains challenging for the sites.

The cash budget is the core of the program—it pays the salaried staff who administer the program and leverage the redirected contributions from schools, CBOs and other partners. For the ESS sites, a large percentage of their cash budget came through support from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds. Sustaining the programs over time, after this initial funding ends, is likely to be an ongoing challenge. Strong leadership—whether it comes from a CBO, the school district or another partnering organization—will be a key to success. Thus far, several strategies have seemed promising: starting out the initiative in the Bridges to Success model, which has funding from the United Way; having strong lead agencies for whom the ESS initiative fits a need; and developing strong partnerships with other providers and funders. Some sites have collaborated with other youth-serving initiatives to work toward the ultimate goal of dedicated state funding, but this is a long-term strategy. More immediately, they are likely to have to rely heavily on local resources for youth programs, and the availability of those resources varies across cities.

What are the Policy Implications of these Findings?

1. Locating the programs in schools serving low-income families was an effective means of targeting low-income children. However, special efforts are required if programs are going to be able to attract older youth and the most high-needs students in those schools.

In ESS, participants reflected the demographics of their schools. Across the sites, the children and youth were overwhelmingly low-income, with almost three-quarters eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. However, while locating programs in schools where students have identifiable needs can go a long way toward effectively targeting services, the sites found that engaging older and higher-needs youth was a challenge. It seems likely that after-school

programs, in general, would benefit from more information on attracting and serving these populations.

2. Choices about program requirements and content influence which children and youth enroll in the after-school activities and how often they attend.

Program characteristics affect participation patterns. At the ESS sites, planners had to make decisions about the goals and design of their programs that ultimately had an effect on which children and youth chose to participate and how often they attended. These decisions inevitably involved some trade-offs. For example, planners who decided that the program should serve, in part, as child care for parents were more likely to require, or at least allow, five-day-a-week enrollment. However, programs that designed their activities in a more flexible manner (for example, art on Mondays, judo on Tuesdays, etc.) and permitted registration for fewer days per week touched the lives of larger numbers of youth and may have attracted youth with more diverse interests. In addition, more flexible programs are likely to be more attractive to older youth and those who want to participate in other activities, such as sports.

Survey responses of ESS participants and their parents suggest that there are no easy answers for program planners as they make their decisions. Substantial proportions of both the youth and parents said the youth did not attend ESS more often because they had other things to do elsewhere. Some of these youth and their parents did not want to commit to more intensive participation in a single program. At the same time, however, a significant number of parents said that restrictive enrollment policies limited the amount of time their children might otherwise have participated in ESS. Clearly, no approach serves the needs of every child or parent equally well, but the findings emphasize that planners could benefit by getting input from their communities.

3. To provide a range of developmental supports and opportunities to children and youth, after-school programs should offer a variety of activities staffed by skilled leaders.

Activities of all types—be they academic, enrichment, community service or sports—can provide children and youth with valuable developmental supports and opportunities. By participating in a range of challenging and interesting activities, young people have the chance to develop new skills and interests, build positive and supportive relationships with adults and peers, and develop a sense of mattering through making decisions and taking on leadership roles. Staff practices and behaviors are the critical ingredient. Staff in high-quality activities set up physically and emotionally safe environments in which they heighten and sustain the youth’s interest, making the activity challenging, as well as promoting learning and self-discovery in multiple areas (academic, social, personal). And yet, low wages and part-time hours driven by too-tight budgets, along with the limited supply of qualified youth workers, combine to make staff shortages and retention one of the largest continuing challenges for after-school programs.

4. Cost depends as much on program choices, opportunities and local conditions as on the number of children served.

The cost per youth slot per day ranged from \$8 to \$36 across the 10 intensive-study programs, suggesting that there is no one “right” cost of an after-school program. In fact, the cost of individual after-school programs depended on a number of factors, including decisions about the types of activities provided, the staff-to-youth ratio, and the extent of investment in such factors as fundraising and the future sustainability of the program. Looking across programs at a high or low level of expenditures in each of these areas, policymakers and practitioners should ask, “What does the program and the community gain from higher expenditures?”; and, “What does the program and the community do without by holding expenditures at the low end of the range?”

5. As after-school programs multiply, the challenge of raising both cash and non-cash funding is likely to increase as more programs compete for limited resources.

The experience of the ESS sites suggests there are challenges involved in finding sustainable sources of cash funding. While policymakers acknowledge the need to subsidize after-school programs in poor communities (as evidenced by the 21st CCLC funds, some state and local funds, and much philanthropic support), the current system still requires programs to live year to year scrambling for funds. There are few long-term and stable financial resources for after-school programs.

While much of the focus on planning and sustaining programs tends to be on raising cash funding, the non-cash portion of the budget cannot be taken for granted. Across the 10 intensive-study programs, 40 percent of the budget, on average, was obtained through contributions from partner organizations. However, as after-school programs grow to scale, this form of support is likely to become more tenuous. For example, while school district contributions to the after-school programs grew over the course of the initiative, districts in several of the ESS cities felt the pressure of providing “free” services without additional income. A similar dilemma exists for CBOs. Currently, many CBOs share their resources with fledgling after-school programs. However, CBOs’ resources are limited. While the marginal cost of contributing to one after-school program may be small, contributing to many after-school programs in a city would require expanded resources for CBOs.

6. Policymakers need to shift their thinking from creating *the* program to expanding the set of options available in a community.

As children become older, they begin to search for a wider range of experiences. This expansion in their worlds is developmentally appropriate, but it means that the participation rates of older youth in any particular program—be it ESS or something else—will likely be relatively low. They are most likely to benefit if they, and their parents, are able to put together a mosaic of positive experiences—broadening the range of activities, widening their geographic horizons, and increasing their network of adults and

peers. If there are several opportunities in their community that attract them, they can still be well served even though no one program seems to be engaging them intensively. As a recently released National Academy of Science report emphasizes, “The diversity of young people, their particular needs and their surrounding environments argue against the notion that a single [type of] program will fit all situations.”²

Given the increasing challenges to children’s lives and the increasingly more complex sets of skills and abilities that are required for success in the workplace of the twenty-first century, we need to revisit how and where we make investments in our nation’s children. This report has examined one type of investment—school-based, after-school programs run by CBOs in collaboration with schools. We found that these programs, which are not strictly academic, appear to help participants work on many of the competencies they will need for their future. When well planned and implemented, such programs can be a substantial option within a potentially larger network of diverse programming that provides a range of opportunities for all children and youth.

Endnotes

1. The ESS sites’ planning and early implementation experiences are examined in *Extended-Service Schools: Putting Programming in Place*. Karen E. Walker, Jean Grossman and Rebecca Raley. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, December 2000.
2. Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer A. Gootman. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001.



Public/Private Ventures
2000 Market Street
Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19103
Tel: 215-557-4400
Fax: 215-557-4469
Url: <http://www.ppv.org>