

After-school programs and academics: Implications for policy, practice, and research ^[1]

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Abstract

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with its emphasis on standards-based accountability, has put educators under considerable pressure to improve student academic outcomes. Much of the funding for after-school programs comes from education budgets and is administered by state and local education agencies. Consequently, after-school programs are often expected to incorporate academic achievement as an important goal. This focus on academic achievement is producing heated debates among after-school practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. Should after-school programs be required to have a positive impact on academic outcomes? Will such an expectation crowd out other important goals and turn after-school programs into an unappealing version of the school day? This report focuses on the growing program-evaluation literature, observational studies, and commentaries and statements of program standards by practitioners and advocates in the context of this debate. I begin by showing that after-school programs can have positive academic effects, though many do not. To understand the ingredients of an effective program, I examine empirical reviews of program evaluations, observational studies, and practitioner writings. It is clear that to be effective, programs should actively involve participants, be intentional about their goals, and focus on the interactions between youth and staff. If positive academic outcomes are one of those goals, programs may need to include specific activities that are focused on academic achievement, but the approach should build on the opportunities presented by the out-of-school setting. The report concludes by identifying some promising approaches to program improvement and arguing that research on ways to intervene to improve program effectiveness is the highest priority.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: school system ^[4]

school-age ^[5]

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