

The State of After-School in Maryland: An Assessment of Services, Support Systems and Gaps, Recommendations and Directory of Programs For Middle and High School Youth

The After-School Institute (TASI), with funding from the Maryland State Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH), conducted an assessment of after-school programs that provide opportunities for middle and high school youth throughout Maryland. The assessment, conducted summer 2005, consists of a directory of Maryland after-school programs, identification of strengths and challenges, a needs assessment, and recommendations for strengthening after-school opportunities.

To assure broad representation across Maryland numerous methods of data collection were used, including focus groups, an on-line survey, and key informant interviews. Input was gathered from 357 people across the state.

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus Groups were convened as part of TASI's "Bridging the Gap: Engaging Youth as Trainers" project, at Howard County and Baltimore County after-school programs, at the 2005 TASI Eastern Regional After-School Conference during state network meeting sessions, and at the TASI training for Maryland State Department of Education 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Participants representing all regions in Maryland took part in these focus groups. Common themes that emerged from these focus groups included:

Adults, (mostly program providers) expressed a need for:

- regional and state network meetings
- increased funding
- uniform implementation of quality standards
- more regional trainings
- the development of a youth workers credentialing program
- increased program opportunities for youth

Youth expressed a need for:

- more fun activities
- life skills training appropriate for age group
- interactions with adults who respect their point of view, respect confidentiality, are easy going, and trustworthy

SURVEY

After-school providers in all of Maryland's 24 counties participated in the survey to assess current after-school opportunities for middle and high school youth. The survey consisted of three main categories: directory questions (name of program, phone number, type of program, ages served, etc.), extent of local support for after-school programs, and extent of statewide support for after-school programs.

According to survey results, most programs (48% and 39% respectively) are school-based (connected to a school) or community-based (connected to the community, e.g. community recreation center). The remaining programs take place in other settings (10%) -- such as buildings provided by partnering organizations -- or are faith-based (connected to a place of worship) (3%). Forty-four percent (44%) of programs serve both middle and high school

youth, 44% serve middle school youth only, and 12% serve high school youth only. Fifty-six percent (56%) of programs operate during the school year only and 44% operate year-round.

Most programs (39%) serve 0-50 youth annually, 25% serve over 200 youth, 24% 50-100 youth, and 10% serve 100-150 youth annually. A majority of programs (77%) do not charge a fee for participation. Snack is served in 92% of programs.

A majority of programs (81%) implement quality standards. A variety of opportunities are available in Maryland's after-school programs: the top program areas identified were academic enrichment (82%), recreation (81%), and artistic development (66%), followed by civic development (55%), workforce development (42%), college prep (24%) and other (30%), such as life skills, character education, service learning, leadership, entrepreneurship.

Staffing consists of program managers (82%), school teachers (69%) youth workers (56%), and college students (44%). Parents (37%), professional artists (30%), and others (32%) make up the rest of the staffing, with "other" being represented by consultants, community leaders, senior citizens, social workers, and other school employees.

Regarding health or risk reduction issues, 88% of respondents reported programming in youth development. Other health/risk reduction issues addressed in Maryland's after-school programs included peer pressure, nutrition, fitness, violence prevention, substance abuse, and sexuality. Only 6% of respondents indicated not addressing health/risk reduction issues directly.

When asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the extent (quantity) of after-school opportunities available in their jurisdiction, most respondents reported being satisfied (34%), dissatisfied (27%) or neutral (24%), with the remainder being very satisfied (9%) or very dissatisfied (6%).

Program strengths included qualified staff (81%), sufficient indoor environments (67%), youth utilization and retention (53%), community partners who help make up for shortages of space (49%), and youth leadership (48%). Less often identified as strengths were: parent engagement (40%), summer learning opportunities (40%), and sufficient outdoor environments (41%). Adequate funding was least identified as a program strength (25%).

Most respondents (69%) indicated that the top challenge to delivering more and better after-school programs was the lack of adequate funding. This was followed by: lack of parent engagement (48%), lack of transportation (37%), insufficient support from local government (34%), competition among programs (28%), insufficient indoor and outdoor environments (both 22%), lack of qualified staff (23%), lack of professional development (22%), and under-utilization/retention (21%). Few respondents (12%) identified lack of community partners as a challenge.

Most programs (58%) have never had to turn a family away because the program was full.

Training provides after-school providers with a diverse skill base from which to develop quality programs, while technical assistance provides more intensive, institutional instruction to help organizations meet quality standards. Over 95% of programs have been able to take advantage of training and technical assistance opportunities.

Main challenges to attending training and technical assistance opportunities were lack of staff coverage (54%), lack of knowledge/awareness of opportunities (44%), lack of funds (41%), distance (20%), and other (13%), including other priorities and time conflicts.

According to 83% of respondents, technical assistance opportunities were sufficient to meet program needs. When asked to recommend ways to improve technical assistance opportunities, respondents made the following suggestions:

- More funding and staff coverage to take advantage of technical assistance and training opportunities
- Scheduling training that doesn't impact program time
- More information targeted to middle school and high school
- Grant writing and management
- More opportunities for providers to share experiences and best practices

Sixty-three percent (63%) of respondents indicated that training opportunities were sufficient. When asked about improving training opportunities, the most frequent recommendations were the need for a statewide training effort, funding to attend trainings, and training scheduled during times when staff could attend (this included suggestions for weekend trainings, evening trainings, short trainings, full day trainings, etc.). Several respondents suggested specific topics for training in the areas of computers, incorporating academics into after-school programs, and working with older youth (e.g. high school age).

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with various after-school stakeholders throughout Maryland (see *full report for list of key informants and professional affiliations*). Each interviewee brought a specific area of expertise to the conversation, which, when combined, provided a wide-ranging, informative perspective on the state of after-school opportunities for middle and high school youth in Maryland. Numerous themes emerged from these interviews:

- Statewide Network -- All key informants stated that there is a need for a statewide after-school network to facilitate communication and sharing.
- Funding and Sustainability -- Overwhelmingly, key informants cited sustainability as a concern. Sustainability refers to the ability to maintain a program over time, and while interviewees identified funding as a key component of sustainability, they also identified qualified staff, training, and resources as elements of a sustainable program.
- Staffing and Professionalizing After-School -- The hiring and retention of quality staff was mentioned by all stakeholders. This could be addressed through the creation of a statewide certification program for after-school professionals
- Program Quality and Standards – A statewide approach to implementing quality standards for after-school is needed.
- Programming Opportunities for Older Youth – After-school needs to involve older youth as equal partners in program planning, and package a variety of activities of interest to these youth.
- School to After-School Linkages -- While schools are under tremendous pressure to improve test scores, after-school programs are feeling the pressure to show academic results for participating students. As a strategy to move to scale and maximize resources, school-based after-school programs are growing in popularity.

ON-LINE DIRECTORY OF AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS SERVING MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH

A directory of programs in Maryland, searchable by zip code, is now available on the TASI web site. To access go to <http://afterschoolinstitute.org/TASI/abouti/default.aspx>. "Find a Program" is in the upper-right side of the page; enter a zip code and click "Go". To be added, send a brief description and contact information to info@afterschoolinstitute.org.

RECOMMENDATIONS

So much information has been gained from the extensive assessment detailed in this report. The recommendation is to apply the knowledge gained and strategically apply it to enhance after-school opportunities in Maryland. This must occur, and can happen through the following actions:

1. Widely disseminate this report, particularly to funders, state agencies and policy makers. The dissemination plan may include presentations at state and local conferences, and meetings, newsletters, listserves, and websites.
2. Widely disseminate the directory so that parents and youth can access local programs. The dissemination plan should include websites and parent newsletters.
3. Widely disseminate the directory to after-school program providers so that they can use it as a resource for developing quality programs, for networking and for sharing information.
4. Convene a stakeholders meeting at a state level to create strategies to address common areas of needs, set priorities and policies, and implement and monitor success.

The full report and an executive summary will be available soon.