BARTON J. HIRSCH

Educators need to learn how best to work with after-school programs and use their contributions to young people.

Learning and Development in After-School Programs

After-school programs emerged in the United States in the latter part of the 19th century. These programs often had humble beginnings in church basements, storefronts, and settlement houses. Over time, the programs proliferated and built themselves into major national organizations, such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 4-H clubs, and the YMCA/YWCA. The 40 largest national youth organizations today have a total membership of about 40 million youths.

Over the past 15 years, there has been an explosion of interest in after-school programs. Many major cities, such as Chicago (After School Matters), Los Angeles (LA's Best), and New York (The After School Corporation), have ramped up their after-school programs so that they are increasingly part of their education and youth services infrastructure. During the Clinton Administration, after-school programs began to receive dedicated funding in the federal budget under the 21st-Century Community Learning Centers Act. With the advent of No Child Left Behind, programs have increasingly emphasized academic support services. This has been controversial in the after-school community, resurfacing long-standing tensions between the goals of positive youth development, academic support, and problem prevention.

On balance, participation in after-school programs has been associated with improved academic performance (grade point average, test scores) and psychosocial development (Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan 2010; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, and Zarrett 2009). Recent years have witnessed an increase in evaluation studies, but few of these evaluations have featured rigorous designs and fewer still address the integration of after-school programs with schools.

How, then, do after-school programs address academic learning? How can schools and

BARTON J. HIRSCH is a professor of human development and social policy in the School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.

after-school programs work together for mutual benefit?

Types of After-School Programs

Education practitioners and researchers should have little trouble understanding after-school programs that emphasize academic tutoring. Those programs that have a positive youth development orientation, however, may seem mysterious. Nevertheless, there is often considerable overlap in the objectives of these apparently different sorts of programs and, sometimes, even in their methods.

After-school programs that emphasize academic support services map very well to traditional academic activities found in schools. Activities range from relatively unstructured study halls, in which youths seek assistance on a specific question from the adult supervisor, to regular tutoring sessions, to immersion in structured curricula (Noam, Biancarosa, and Dechausay 2003).

Moving a bit away from pure support activities, but still firmly within a well-understood educational framework, would be STEM programs, such as the Intel computer clubhouses (Kafai, Peppler, and Chapman 2009). These tend to attract a wider range of students than enroll in traditional K-12 computer programming classes. Populated mostly by middle school students, the clubs offer a wide range of design experiences, rather than the math and science curricula found in school classes. Students use high-end software to pursue projects that have considerable personal meaning. The computer comes to be seen as a medium of expression that students can use to achieve creative ends. Programming activities range from constructing robotic inventions to orchestrating virtual dancers to creating animated stories or even customizing virtual cars. Some clubhouses incorporate literacy practices by using specially designed software that supports critical reflection and communication among youths. College students are often the instructors or leaders of these clubhouse activities. However, rather than functioning exclusively as experts, instructors are often learners themselves, lending a certain mutuality to clubhouse engagement.

At still another remove are after-school programs that bear a closer resemblance to school-based extracurricular activities than to traditional academic subjects. After School Matters in Chicago, which our research group recently evaluated, is a good example of this type of program and is probably the best known after-school program for high school students in the country (Hirsch, Hedges, Stawicki, and Mekinda 2011). ASM is similar to many education reform curricula in emphasizing project-based learning. Although some ASM programs feature a science or technology theme, such as computer web design, many emphasize artistic activities or learning how to teach younger children how to improve their skills in sports. The programs are labeled as apprenticeships because they include payment of a stipend to each student and are designed to teach marketable job skills.

Each program is led by two co-instructors who have expertise in that particular subject and often make their living using those skills. The programs are designed to have a final product or performance, but not all of them do. Students learn specialized skills, technical terminology, how problems are understood and approached, and the goals, values, and priorities relevant to that particular craft or line of work. As part of this process, they learn important soft skills, such as teamwork and communication. Sessions are spent practicing these skills, using previously learned skills as the basis for developing new ones, as part of work on specific projects or artistic tasks.

The country's largest national youth program, 4-H clubs, also has a project-based learning orientation, with youths either planning events or completing projects for entry at state fairs or similar competitions. Many projects are scientifically oriented, combining library research with experimental or other studies. Clubs are led by volunteers rather than paid staff. There is active parental involvement and a strong emphasis on youth leadership. Considering all phases of project development, from formulation of the initial idea through research and presentation of findings, youths learn skills in project management, time management, goal setting, teamwork, problem solving, and communication, in addition to content knowledge relevant to the subject of their project.

Finally, still further removed from traditional educational activities would be such youth organizations as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), whose primary focus is on positive youth development rather than academics (Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois forth-

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coming). The BGCA clubs are comprehensive after-school centers that include a wide range of activities, including sports, such enrichment activities as art or dance, field trips to cultural institutions, leadership activities that involve the design and implementation of special activities, exposure to business practices through operation of a club store, and so on. BGCA clubs include an hour set aside for academic support, which mostly functions as an old-fashioned study hall. In addition, it is not unusual for clubs to offer structured programs to prevent problem behavior, such as Smart Girls, which are similar to socio-emotional programs in schools.

The heart and soul of the BGCA clubs are in the mentoring relationships that club staff form with the youths at the site (Hirsch 2005). The mentoring is not typically based in a formal mentoring program, but arises naturally out of interactions between youths and staff. Staff provide information, guidance, and emotional support regarding a wide range of issues that youths face in often high-risk neighborhoods. The mentoring and close affective ties help youths cope with myriad stressors, develop positive identities oriented to prosocial activities, and steer them away from risky, problem behaviors. A number of the older youths, who are recipients of mentoring from adult club staff, in turn mentor younger club members (Deutsch 2008).

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One of the strongest draws of the clubs is that they're a place where young people can have fun with their friends. This is a fundamental feature of youth culture. Schools, of course, do their best to keep social interactions among friends limited so as to keep students on task with academic activities. In the dangerous neighborhoods in which many BGCA clubs are located, young people can't congregate in the streets or in the parks for fear of being targeted by gangs or other unsafe elements. So, the clubs provide a safe environment where young people can enjoy being with friends. Many youths attend the clubs regularly for years and come to describe the club as "a second home." In this way, the social and relational environment of the clubs is experienced as similar to what they find in the homes of kin and is a clear contrast to the more confining atmosphere that they report at school. This is not a meager accomplishment insofar as these are often young people who have difficulty becoming attached to adult-run organizations, such as schools. Indeed, we've come to see the

clubs as providing a transitional environment, similar enough in important ways to what they find among their (extended) family, but staffed by adults who aren't, in fact, kin. In this way, the clubs provide support in becoming comfortable and competent in the nonfamilial world, a critical developmental task.

After-School's "Value-Added"

What, then, are the advantages of after-school programs as compared to schools? One set of advantages relates to opportunities for project-based learning, which is a staple of many education reform efforts. After-school programs are more open to experimentation than are schools. Schools are bound by curricular requirements set by policy makers at the district or state level; no such mandates exist for after-school programs. A clear benefit of this less structured policy context is a much greater block of time available for young people to work on a project. They may work on a project for several hours a day and continue to work on a project over several months. Youths also are typically allowed much greater autonomy in choosing their project than is allowed in school. This often results in selecting topics that, at least from the perspective of youths, are seen as more authentic. Thus, after-school programs can provide opportunities for more ambitious and personally meaningful project-based learning experiences.

Furthermore, after-school programs or centers that have a positive youth development mission provide settings that allow the positive aspects of youth culture to flourish, while constraining more negative tendencies. The positive aspects include strong relationships, spontaneity, creativity, expressiveness, engagement with music, knowing how to have fun, and idealism.

Many after-school programs focus on socio-emotional development. The staff typically come from the same or similar neighborhoods, providing them firsthand experience and understanding of the stressors that youths face. The programs see it as part of their mission to help young people cope with those stressors and develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will enable them to grow toward positive adulthoods. By contrast, many school-based educators don't believe they have the experience or training to help students cope with life outside of school. There have been many complaints that schools are burdened by having to take on these additional responsibilities.

As after-school programs grow, they'll provide increased supports for young people in nonacademic realms. There are, accordingly, a variety of ways in which after-school programs complement and extend the efforts of school to help young people learn and develop.

Linking School and After-School

There are numerous ways in which schools and after-school programs can exchange information and coordinate activities so as to benefit young people.

First, a professional can work with youths in both school and after-school settings. For example, a program developed by faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and McLean Hospital focuses on prevention work in mental health (Noam, Biancarosa, and Dechausay 2003). Practitioners work in classrooms providing academic and behavioral support services, with special attention to at-risk students. The practitioners continue to work with students in an onsite, after-school program using additional methods. This kind of approach might appeal to teachers — whatever their subject — who feel constrained in what they can do in their regular classrooms and want to experiment with new methods. In the after-school setting, teachers aren't bound by formal curriculum requirements and can pursue additional topics or allot more time to them or have relationships with young people in ways that aren't typical in school.

Second, a liaison position can be created for linking school with after-school programs. This position, which tends to be more administrative than direct service, focuses on exchanging information and coordinating activities.

A third approach to transferring knowledge and practices between school and after-school programs involves researchers who cross boundaries and cross-fertilize. This has been the approach of our research group at Northwestern University. As part of our evaluation of After School Matters in Chicago, we developed a mock job interview for high school students that was administered by human resource professionals. Extensive debriefing of the human resource interviewers revealed that many youths had experiences and skills that would be valued by employers, but the youths often had no idea this was true and didn't always successfully communicate their credentials in the interview. We discussed those findings with Chicago Public Schools administrators, who invited us to develop a curriculum to teach high school students how to do well in interviews for internships and jobs. We're currently in the midst of evaluation and further development of this curriculum and hope to scale it up both in Chicago and elsewhere. Of course, this curriculum could also be implemented in after-school programs.

After-school programs have only recently emerged in the national consciousness. Educators need to learn how best to work with these programs and use their contributions to young people as the education system broadens and evolves. **K**

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