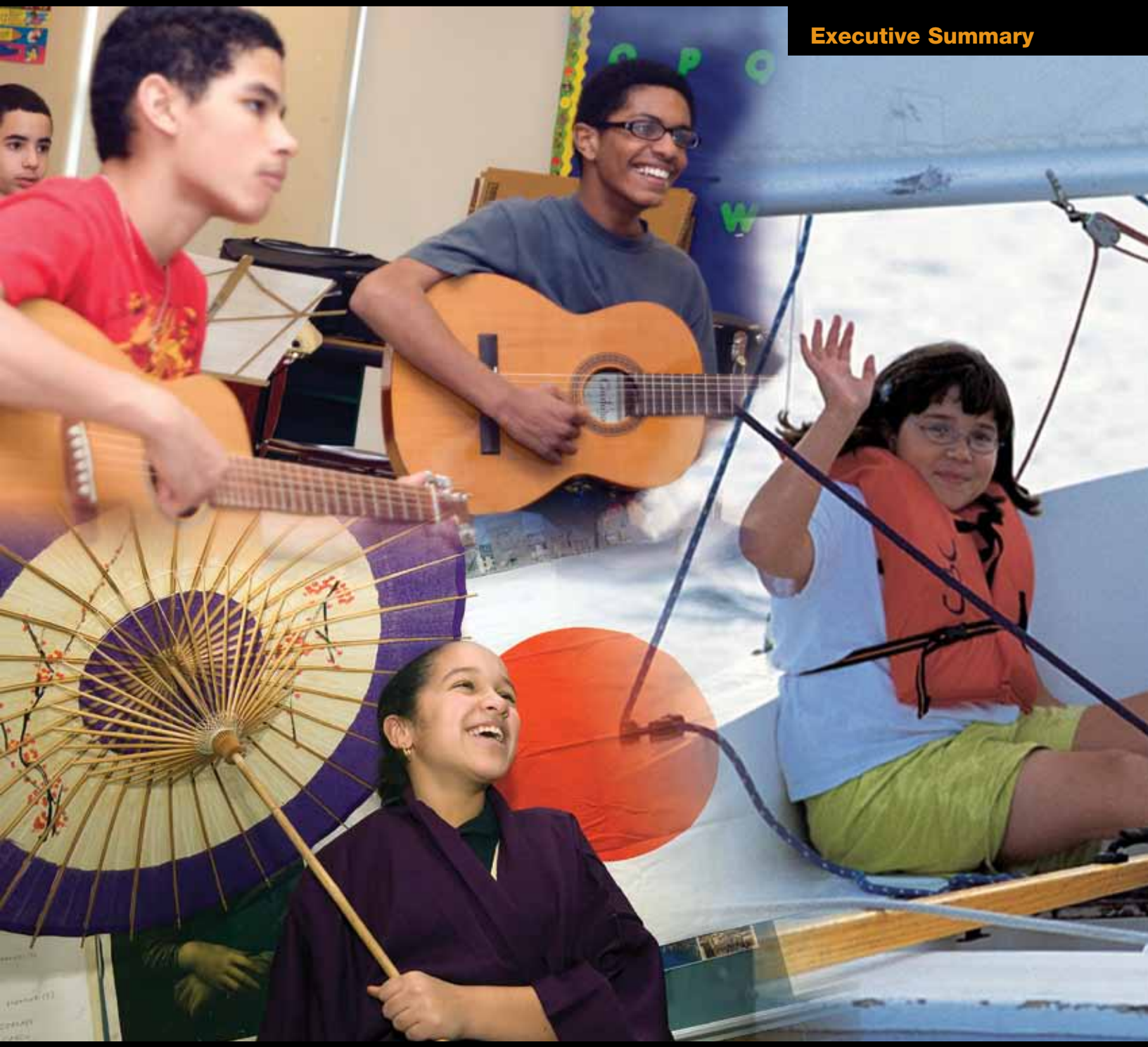
AfterZone: Outcomes for Youth Participating in Providence's Citywide After-School System

Tina J. Kauh

Executive Summary



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https://doi.org/10.59656/YD-OS4259.002

Acknowledgments

We are indebted to many individuals who helped make this study possible. First and foremost, we would like to thank Elizabeth Devaney and Hillary Salmons of the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) for facilitating data collection, providing a wealth of information about the AfterZone initiative and reviewing drafts of the report.

In addition, we are especially grateful to several individuals from Providence, RI, without whom this study would not have been possible. Congressman David Cicilline (former mayor of Providence) provided essential support for the evaluation. Marco Andrade and Sandy Rainone were critical in obtaining school records data. Staff and administrators of the six Providence middle schools participating in this study made data collection feasible: Kadesa Huffman and Bill Weidman (of Samuel Bridgham Middle School), Ellen Albanese (of Esek Hopkins Middle School), Scott Harding (of Oliver Hazard Perry Middle School), Richard Teto and Joseph Prisco (of DelSesto Middle School), Gina Silvia and Ann Cedergren (of Gilbert Stuart Middle School), and Zawadi Hawkins and Mary Burke (of Roger Williams Middle School).

Several P/PV colleagues provided invaluable support with different phases of the study. Alissa Weiss, Deirdre Din and Stacy Woodruff-Bolte oversaw data collection efforts. Nayan Ramirez developed tables summarizing the study's key findings. Nadya Shmavonian, Wendy McClanahan, Amy Arbreton, Carla Herrera, Laurie Kotloff and Bob Granger (a member of P/PV's Research Advisory Board) offered valuable comments on early drafts of the report. The report greatly benefited from the expert editing skills of Chelsea Farley and Jason Warshof, an editing consultant. We also thank the survey firm, Ewald and Wasserman Research Consultants, LLC, for its tireless efforts in collecting data from students each Spring of the study.

The Wallace Foundation made this evaluation possible through its generous funding and longstanding commitment to helping more children and youth realize the benefits of high-quality out-of-school-time programs. We are especially grateful to Ann Stone, Zakia Redd, Edward Pauly and Dara Rose for their guidance and advice throughout the study and their useful feedback on the report. In reviewing drafts, Pam Mendels, a senior writer at the Foundation, skillfully synthesized the comments of the Wallace team—including her own—to improve the report. We are very grateful for their contributions.

Finally, thanks go to Penelope Malish, who designed the report, and to Laura Johnson, who edited the document and single-handedly oversaw its publication and dissemination.

Executive Summary

After-school programs may provide important opportunities for youth, especially those who are at risk for later academic disengagement, future unemployment and poverty. In fact, research has found that participation in *high-quality* after-school programs is related to a host of positive outcomes for participants, including greater self-confidence, increased civic engagement, better school attendance, improved academic achievement and decreased delinquency.[1] Impacts can hinge, however, on how much youth participate, as well as the breadth of their participation across different types of activities and the extent to which they are emotionally engaged in programming. Such opportunities become increasingly important for older youth, whose participation in after-school programs is typically low, in part because programs that meet their needs and interests are few and far between.

Recognizing the need to improve the reach of after-school programs, cities around the country have begun to develop after-school "systems"—citywide infrastructures that connect youth and their families with a network of program providers and city resources. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to increase youth's access to high-quality programming and, in turn, to increase the number of youth who participate in—and benefit from—strong after-school programs. However, the system-building approach for after-school programming is still in its infancy, and the ways in which these systems are structured vary greatly from city to city. Much still needs to be learned about how these initiatives can be best designed to yield positive effects for youth.

1 See: George, R., G. R. Cusick, M. Wasserman and R. M. Gladden. 2007. *After School Programs and Academic Impact: A Study of Chicago's After School Matters*. Chicago: Chapin Hall. See also: Durlak, J. A., R. P. Weissberg and M. Pachan. 2010. "A Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs That Seek to Promote Personal and Social Skills in Children and Adolescents." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45, 294–309. See also: Fredericks, J. A., and J. S. Eccles. 2006. "Is Extracurricular Participation Associated With Beneficial Outcomes? Concurrent and Longitudinal Relations." *Developmental Psychology*, 42 (4), 698–713.

The AfterZone Model

To better meet the needs and interests of middle school youth in Providence, RI, a city whose youth face significant economic and educational challenges, the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) developed the AfterZone. PASA is a partnership among local public agencies and nonprofit organizations, and its AfterZone model has generated significant interest across the country, including from some who seek to replicate the system in their own communities.[2] The AfterZone model encompasses a wide variety of after-school programs (including sports, skills and arts activities) for middle school youth during three distinct sessions (fall, winter and spring).[3] Programming takes place for approximately two-and-a-half hours a day, four days a week, and is open to students in sixth through eighth grades.

The AfterZone model has four key features. First, it employs a single set of quality standards and offers training and support to its providers. Second, it is structured around a neighborhood "campus" model, where services are offered at multiple sites in a geographically clustered area, known as a "zone." Each zone includes several programs located in community-based facilities but is anchored by one or two middle schools, where the program day begins and ends for every youth.[4] Third, the AfterZone's structure and organizational practices are designed to be developmentally appropriate for middle-school-age youth, for instance, by encouraging greater independence and exposing youth to new experiences. Fourth, PASA not only coordinates the key players in the AfterZone system but also leads the check-in and check-out process each day at the zones it leads, provides its own academically oriented enrichment activities through "Club AfterZone" and employs AfterZone staff to supervise and coordinate these activities.

2 In November 2010, a group of assistant superintendents, executive directors of after-school programs, foundation officers and city government officials from nine cities (New Orleans, LA; Nashville, TN; Charlotte, NC; Danville, NC; Omaha, NE; Buffalo, NY; Woonsocket, RI; Asheville, NC; Newport, RI) attended a two-day symposium hosted by PASA on how to replicate the AfterZone model.

3 The AfterZone also offers reduced summer programming, which is not part of the current evaluation.

4 Safe transportation to and from community-based facilities and anchor schools is coordinated by PASA.

The Study

In 2007, with funding from The Wallace Foundation, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) launched a study of the AfterZone model, which involved an in-depth look at its implementation, as well as an evaluation of AfterZone youth's participation and outcomes during the 2008–09 and 2009–10 school years. While P/PV's earlier work examined the development and implementation of the AfterZone model,[5] the current study is the first evaluation of its effects on participants as well as one of the few rigorous (quasi-experimental) evaluations of an after-school *system*. As such, it sheds light on the potential of after-school systems to produce benefits for youth. In addition, by presenting an in-depth examination of multiple dimensions of participation (amount, breadth and engagement), the study extends the after-school field's understanding of the relationship between program participation and youth outcomes.

Specifically, the study set out to answer the following questions:

- How much are middle school youth participating in the AfterZone?
- What is the breadth of their participation across the wide range of activities offered through the AfterZone?
- To what extent are youth emotionally engaged in the AfterZone? (For instance, to what extent do they feel like they belong, how supportive do they perceive program staff to be, and how much fun do they think the experience is?)
- Do youth who participate in the AfterZone have better school- and health-related outcomes, social and personal skills, and awareness of and attitudes about their communities, compared with similar youth who do not participate in the AfterZone?
- Is more participation (in terms of amount, breadth and engagement) associated with better outcomes?

Methodology

Our findings are based on a sample of 763 youth from six Providence middle schools who were in the sixth grade at the start of the study. Nearly half (354 youth) participated in the AfterZone during the 2008-2009 school year. To learn about the youth's lives, their experiences in after-school programs and how they benefited from the AfterZone, we gathered data from three sources: youth surveys administered at the beginning of the sixth grade and at the end of the sixth and seventh grades, administrative school records obtained at the end of each school year[6] and PASA's management information system (MIS).

Limitations

As with all research studies, the current study has its limitations. First, as noted earlier, research has shown that youth must participate in *high-quality* programs to derive any sustained benefits from their participation. Yet it was beyond the scope of this study to examine the quality of all the programs offered through the AfterZone system (more than 100 programs and providers are part of the AfterZone, offering approximately 500 individual programs across the three zones each school year). Second, because we employ a quasi-experimental design, we cannot definitively attribute differences in youth outcomes to participation in the AfterZone. It is likely, for instance, that youth who choose to participate in the AfterZone more or less often, or even at all, are inherently different from each other. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that some unmeasured variable explains the different outcomes we observed for participants and nonparticipants, we employ several strategies in our analyses (described in Chapter 5 of the full report) to increase our confidence that these differences are truly effects of AfterZone programs.

5 Kotloff, Lauren J., and Danijela Korom-Djakovic, 2010. *AfterZones Creating a Citywide System to Support and Sustain High-Quality After-School Programs.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

6 Data were obtained from the Providence school district's Office of Research, Assessment & Evaluation.

Key Findings

Findings from this two-year evaluation suggest that youth can benefit from a system modeled after the AfterZone, whose key features include a central coordinating body, a network of school- and community-based programs and strong roots in the school context. Many of the benefits youth experience are not long-lasting, however, which may be due in part to the short periods of time youth typically participate and to their limited overall exposure to programming. The AfterZone seems most effective at yielding benefits that are related to school; increasing youth's participation may be necessary for this model to reach its full potential.

Participation

Youth participated intensely—but for short periods of time. From Fall 2008 through Spring 2010, more than half the study participants (59 percent) attended an AfterZone program for at least one day. And participants typically attended AfterZone programs with a high level of intensity during the sessions in which they were enrolled: On average, each year, youth attended approximately two thirds of the days they were enrolled, a proportion that compares favorably to middle school youth's attendance in other after-school systems. Yet nearly half of the youth who participated in the AfterZone enrolled for only one of the three sessions offered during the school year. As a result, the total number of days youth attended was relatively low (on average, about one quarter of the days available to them over the course of the year).

The extent to which AfterZone youth are taking advantage of the broad range of activities available to them depends, to some degree, on the consistency of their participation. Youth who enrolled in the AfterZone for at least two sessions during a single school year were much more likely to participate in more than one kind of activity than youth who enrolled for only one session (75 percent compared with 26 percent). Among the more consistent participants (i.e., those who enrolled for at least two sessions), nearly one third participated in all three types of activities (sports, skills and arts).

AfterZone youth are generally engaged in their programs, but their relationships with staff are a potential area for improvement. The majority of AfterZone participants reported that they felt a sense of belonging, perceived the program staff to be supportive and had more fun at the programs than at other places where they spent time. While most AfterZone participants perceived program staff as supportive, the actual rates (62 percent in 2008–09 and 56 percent in 2009–10) are somewhat low compared with youth who attended after-school programs outside the AfterZone system. In addition, AfterZone youth were less likely to perceive staff as supportive in the seventh grade than in the sixth.

Program Benefits

Participation in the AfterZone yielded a broad range of benefits—including strikingly higher school attendance—after one school year. However, most of these benefits diminished by the end of the second school year. Interestingly, effects on attendance increased in magnitude with longer participation in the AfterZone. At the end of the sixth grade, AfterZone participants had more positive attitudes about community resources, better social skills, stronger feelings of connection to school and better school attendance than peers who did not attend the AfterZone. The school-related benefits were particularly strong—one-and-a-half times the magnitude of impacts typically achieved by after-school programs.[7] Benefits associated with social and personal skills, however, were smaller than we would have expected (at only about two thirds the size suggested by previous studies).

Among youth who participated in the AfterZone during both years of the study, benefits persisted through the seventh grade in only one of seven areas tested: school attendance. The effect on absences, however, increased from one-and-a-half times the expected impact to more than double the expected impact. In addition, one new program benefit emerged at the end of the second school year: AfterZone participants earned higher grades in math—by about one third of a grade—than comparison youth. Taken together, these findings suggest that the AfterZone yields benefits for seventh graders that are limited in scope but fairly large in magnitude.

7 We compared the size of the impacts yielded in this study with the average impact of after-school programs reported in the meta-analysis conducted by Durlak, Weissberg and Pachan. For more detail about the meta-analysis and the benchmarks used as points of comparison, see Durlak et al., "A Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs."

More participation and greater breadth of participation in the AfterZone were associated with better school-related attitudes, behavior and performance, while greater emotional engagement in the AfterZone was associated with improvements in social and personal skills. Youth who attended their AfterZone program for more days and those who participated in a broader range of activities had better school attitudes, behavior and performance at the end of each year. Dosage (the number of days youth attended) seems to be particularly important for school-related benefits. In the sixth grade, these benefits appeared to peak for youth after attending the AfterZone for 32 days, or approximately eight weeks—around the length of a single session.[8] However, at the end of the seventh grade, youth who had attended AfterZone programs for fewer than 50 days (or roughly 13 weeks) over the course of the two-year study period were no different from their peers who did not participate in the AfterZone at all. Together, these findings suggest that although short-term benefits can be experienced after participating for just eight weeks (or one session), youth need to continue their participation for a longer period of time to experience more sustained benefits. These findings are in keeping with other studies of after-school programs suggesting that longer participation is necessary to achieve sustained impacts.

While the amount and breadth of youth's participation in the AfterZone were associated with school-related outcomes, youth's emotional engagement was related to changes in social and personal skills. Youth who felt a sense of belonging and perceived the program staff as supportive reported having better social skills, were better able to control their emotions, thought more about their future and had more supportive adults in their lives than AfterZone youth who did not feel a strong sense of belonging or did not perceive the staff as supportive. Moreover, in many cases, youth who were emotionally engaged in AfterZone programs fared better socially and personally than their peers who did not participate in the AfterZone. Interestingly, however, youth who were emotionally *disengaged* in AfterZone programming fared worse than their peers who did not participate at all.

8 Conversion to weeks is based on the assumption that youth attend each of the four days the AfterZone is offered throughout the week.

Implications

After-school systems that are strongly rooted in the school context can have a positive impact on school-related outcomes, even without significant resources directed toward intensive academic support.

One finding that emerged consistently across the numerous analyses conducted for this study was the link between participation in the AfterZone and reduced absences. It is rather striking that a network of after-school programs that does not directly target school attendance seems to shrink absences among its participants by 25 percent after two years—especially given that the AfterZone has no explicit school-day attendance policy, as do some other after-school systems. Moreover, individual after-school programs have generally not been found to yield significant impacts on attendance.[9] In addition to reduced absences, we found that youth who participated in the AfterZone for two school years earned math grades that were higher than those of their nonparticipating peers, further suggesting that the AfterZone may have the potential to bolster youth's academic performance.

The improvements we found in school-related outcomes are notable for three reasons: First, as mentioned earlier, youth did not attend the AfterZone with that much frequency—only about 25 days out of each year on average. Second, programs offered through the AfterZone do not provide intensive tutoring or remediation. Some of these programs, particularly skill-building programs, do provide enrichment by introducing academic concepts, with the goal of getting youth interested and excited to learn. But overall, AfterZone programs are not academically focused. Third, the AfterZone consists of more than a hundred programs each year. P/PV's earlier implementation study and PASA's internal assessments suggests that, on average, AfterZone programs are well implemented, but these data are only "snapshots" of the entire system. While it is quite likely that the programs vary in quality, we still found evidence of program benefits.

The AfterZone offers programs from a wide range of substantive areas that take place in both school and community settings. The system, however, is

9 Durlak et al., "A Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs."

grounded within the school environment. The participating middle schools act as the hub of AfterZone activities for program participants: Each day, the program begins and ends on school grounds, and for most participants (94 percent), the program itself takes place on the school campus.[10] Our results suggest that after-school systems that are deeply connected to the school campus—for instance, through operation of the daily check-in and check-out process at school or inclusion of numerous school-based programs—can markedly improve youth's school attendance and may support their academic achievement.

More research is necessary to determine whether changes in school-related behaviors lead to long-term improvements.

Perhaps the most immediate effect of AfterZone participation is that it motivates youth to come to school more regularly, which has the potential to lead to important long-term benefits. Youth who are absent from school receive fewer hours of instruction and have fewer opportunities to interact with their peers and teachers and to develop bonds to the school environment. In fact, prior research has shown that absenteeism is linked to poor academic performance and alienation from classmates, teachers and school as a whole.[11] Studies have also shown that chronic absences are associated with engaging in substance use, delinquency, dropping out of high school and unemployment in adulthood—problems that numerous truancy-prevention programs have been developed to address.[12] Future research is needed to assess whether better school attendance as a result of participation in after-school systems actually leads to the kinds of long-term benefits that school districts are intensely interested in—such as better standardized test scores and higher graduation rates.

To improve youth's social and personal skills, after-school systems must find ways to emotionally engage youth.

Through its wide range of activities, the AfterZone aims to have a broad positive effect on youth, improving their social, personal and academic skills. Past research suggests that programs like those offered through the AfterZone typically have their greatest success at influencing youth's social and personal skills.[13] But, somewhat surprisingly, we did not find clear and consistent evidence of such benefits among AfterZone participants. We did find evidence, though, that youth who were more emotionally engaged in the AfterZone experienced bigger improvements in their social and personal skills than those who were emotionally disengaged.

One potential benefit of the AfterZone model is that it provides a broad array of after-school programs to youth throughout the school year, and that increased accessibility might lead to higher participation overall *across* the system. However, more varied participation also means that youth's involvement in any one program is rather short-lived. Systems utilizing the AfterZone model should identify strategies to foster deeper bonds to the program and stronger relationships with staff, which our results suggest are important for having an impact on social and personal skills.[14]

The AfterZone model should incorporate new strategies for increasing consistent participation over the course of the school year.

System developers who plan to implement the AfterZone model should focus efforts not only on recruiting as many youth as possible in the sixth grade but also on retaining those same youth over time. Findings presented throughout this report point to the importance of increasing the

10 Estimate is based on youth who enrolled in at least one activity during either year of the study.

11 Gottfried, M. A. 2009. "Excused Versus Unexcused: How Student Absences in Elementary School Affect Academic Achievement." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31 (4), 392–415.

12 Sutphen, R. D., J. P. Ford and C. Flaherty. 2010. "Truancy Interventions: A Review of the Research Literature." *Research on Social Work Practice*, 20 (2), 161–71.

13 Durlak et al., "A Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs."

14 For instance, a core component of the model is Club AfterZone (CAZ), which offers a prime opportunity to provide consistency for participants, across sessions and even school years. During the second year of the study, CAZ had begun taking steps to fulfill this potential by assigning youth to relatively permanent same-grade peer groups led by the same staff member on consistent days and times each week. Due to the timing of these changes relative to the study, we were unable to assess if they helped increase youth's emotional engagement in the AfterZone, but future research should address this question.

consistency of youth's participation over the course of the school year. However, at the time the study was conducted, the AfterZone model did not have an explicit goal to recruit the same set of youth session after session. Rather, it operated on a first-come, first-served philosophy each session.

After-school systems that employ the AfterZone model should identify strategies for increasing the consistency of youth's participation throughout the school year. Other after-school systems have employed various strategies for increasing program retention over time. One study found, for instance, that offering more leadership opportunities for participants was the strongest single predictor of retention in programs serving older youth.[15] However, P/PV's AfterZone implementation study found that instructors in the AfterZone system were not fully enabling youth to make plans and decisions during activities.[16] At the program level, this may be a key area for improvement.

At the system level, intermediaries (or other organizations that coordinate the registration process) could make a more concerted effort to encourage "alumni" participants to reenroll by individually contacting those youth and/or their parents or guardians *before* registration is opened to other students. This individual attention might also help bolster youth's emotional engagement in the programs, increasing their sense of belonging and the extent to which they perceive staff to be supportive. Moreover, AfterZone staff could take this opportunity to personally introduce different types of programs offered during upcoming sessions, thereby encouraging greater breadth of participation. Alternatively, a certain percentage of slots for each program within the system could be reserved for returning participants.

Finally, a broader system-wide change could entail adding a programming component for elementary school students that specifically targets younger siblings of AfterZone participants. Prior research has found that at least one in five youth who do not participate in after-school programs are *unable* to do so because of family responsibilities, like caring for siblings.[17] In this study, youth (on average) were needed at home after school about one day per week for sibling care; providing programming for the younger siblings of these youth could address an unmet need. Such proposed system-level strategies would require significant resources, and without any expansion beyond current funding levels, such intensive services would likely require serving a smaller number of participants.

The AfterZone model must balance sometimes-competing approaches to increase youth's participation in after-school programs.

In line with prior research, our findings suggest that extended, consistent and more varied participation is important for achieving benefits. And current "best practices" hold that to successfully recruit and retain participants, after-school programs must provide offerings that are appropriate for their specific age group.[18] The AfterZone model, for instance, seeks to increase participation by breaking the school year into three relatively brief, independent sessions—a structure that enables youth to participate even if they have other commitments or activities during the remainder of the school year. This freedom is likely valued by older youth and may initially encourage their involvement in after-school programs. Yet the structure also creates a fairly short window of time for each session, perhaps inadvertently deterring sustained participation, which both this study and past research suggest are vital for long-term benefits. System developers interested in employing the AfterZone model need to be cognizant of how some efforts to increase participation may actually counter other aspects of "what works" and must identify strategies for maneuvering around those competing approaches.

15 Deschenes et al., *Engaging Older Youth.*

16 Kotloff and Korom-Djakovic, *AfterZones*.

17 Harvard Family Research Project. 2004. "Moving Beyond the Barriers: Attracting and Sustaining Youth Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs." *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation*, 6, 1–16.

18 See: Kauh, T. J. 2010. *Recruiting and Retaining Older African American and Hispanic Boys in After-School Programs: What We Know and What We Still Need to Learn.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. See also: Deschenes et al., *Engaging Older Youth.*

Final Thoughts

After-school systems are developed to improve youth's access to high-quality after-school programs. Currently, though, relatively little is known about how these coordinated citywide efforts affect the lives of the youth who participate in them. The AfterZone model, in particular, has generated significant interest across the country because of its unusual approach of offering a large network of school- and community-based programming to older youth. P/PV's previous implementation study documented PASA's success in brokering partnerships among the schools, city departments and nonprofit community to create the AfterZone model. And, findings from the current evaluation lend preliminary support to the notion that systems modeled after the AfterZone can bring about short-term positive changes in youth's lives, including improved school attendance. But to yield long-term impacts, particularly in academic areas, these systems must work to ensure that youth participate for a sustained period of time. Along such lines, system administrators may need to make a difficult choice about where to focus their resources—either on reaching more youth for shorter periods of time or keeping the same youth involved over longer periods.

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August 2011