



EVALUATION OF THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME INITIATIVE

Report on the First Year

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Executive Summary

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) launched services under its Out-of-School Time (OST) Programs for Youth in September 2005, with the award of funds to support more than 500 programs across New York City. Together, DYCD and the city's nonprofit community, working closely with the New York City Department of Education (DOE), extended services to more than 51,000 youth across the city in the initiative's first year, making OST almost certainly the nation's largest after-school program effort. The OST initiative is designed to address a broad range of developmental objectives for youth and to serve the needs of New York City's families and communities.

This report of findings from the OST evaluation presents data on the first year of program implementation and early findings on participant engagement in OST programs and associated academic and social development outcomes. It describes a program effort that builds on DYCD's historic commitment to New York City's youth and on the work of nearly 200 community-based and other nonprofit organizations with lead roles in implementing the initiative. These findings are based on data collected from multiple sources, including the initiative's participation-tracking database (OST Online), surveys of participants, program directors, program staff, parents, and executive directors of provider organizations, and visits to a sample of 15 OST programs. The evaluation addresses the following core questions:

1. What are the characteristics of programs supported by the OST initiative?
2. Who participates in these programs, and what are their patterns of attendance?
3. What are participants' patterns of social and emotional growth? Do programs affect participants' educational performance and, if so, how?
4. Do programs meet the city's needs for assistance to working parents and for improvement in community-level capacities to serve youth during the out-of-school hours and, if so, how?

The OST evaluation is currently designed to collect and report on data spanning the initiative's first three years of operations. The evaluation's design recognizes that the initiative's first year was focused on launching a very large number of programs throughout the city. Evaluators looked for program providers in Year 1 to hire needed staff, recruit and retain an initial cohort of youth participants, provide safe environments, and deliver activities and services

that generally responded to student and parent interests. As reported here, OST programs achieved these objectives.

In the second and third years, evaluators' expectations will be somewhat higher. In particular, Year 2 data on OST programs should provide evidence that providers are achieving at least some of the quality objectives articulated in DYCD's 2004 Request for Proposals (RFP). Year 3 should generate preliminary evidence of positive early outcomes for participating youth.

This executive summary focuses on findings from programs funded through Option I of the OST initiative. The full report also describes program implementation and participant engagement in Option II and Option III OST programs.

Scope and Extent of OST Programming

By the end of the 2005-06 school year, according to OST Online data, 528 programs were launched and producing data on youth participation, with 417 sites operating Option I programs, 100 operating Option II programs, and 11 operating Option III programs. Among all sites, 314 were based in New York City schools, and 214 were based in other locations (and are known as center-based programs). DYCD awarded over \$44 million to these 528 programs, with an average award of \$84,000 per program and a median award of \$73,000. Award amounts ranged from \$3,000 to \$340,000. Despite some delays in program start-up, the majority of these programs operated for at least nine months during the school year.

Across the board, Option I programs were successful in enrolling participants during the first year of the OST initiative. As described in programs' entries in OST Online, programs served 50,978 students from September 2005 through June 2006. Across all grade levels, Option I programs served more students than were specified in their contracts, with programs funded to serve 31,668 students and actually serving 40,818 students. Seventy-four percent of Option I programs met or exceeded their enrollment targets.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The majority of participants enrolled in all OST programs were in the elementary grades (44 percent) or middle grades (32 percent), according to OST Online. Twenty-four percent of participants were in grades 9-12. OST programs served approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. Across all OST options, Hispanic/Latino participants were the largest group served (39 percent of participants in all OST programs).

Structural and Institutional Features of OST Programs

In the first year of implementation of the OST initiative, programs worked to create program features that would allow them to deliver high-quality services to participants. These features included adoption of program policies and procedures, hiring of staff and development of staff capacity, allocation of program resources to maximize effectiveness, and establishment of strong partnerships with schools and other community institutions. Evidence of success in these areas met the evaluators' expectations for comprehensiveness in first-year start-up efforts.

Option I program directors almost unanimously reported in survey responses that providing a safe environment for youth was a major objective of their OST program (98 percent). They also overwhelmingly reported that they offered open enrollment to all youth who were interested in attending the program (91 percent). In addition, more than half (59 percent) of directors reported that they recruited youth who were recommended by school-day teachers.

Program director and staff qualifications. OST program directors are typically responsible for the day-to-day management of the program, including supervising staff, developing program activities, recruiting participants, and developing relationships with schools and community organizations to facilitate the smooth implementation of the program. Overall, evaluation evidence suggests that OST programs hired a cadre of diverse and qualified program directors to launch the first year of programming under the DYCD initiative. More than half of Option I OST program directors reported in surveys that they had directed an out-of-school time program prior to the OST initiative (60 percent). In general, program directors were also well educated. Eighty-six percent of program directors had completed a four-year college degree or higher. On average, OST program directors reported high levels of satisfaction with their jobs and the level of support they received. Ninety-one percent of Option I program directors “agreed a lot” that they found the work at their program to be rewarding.

Most programs hired experienced professionals to help guide the programs, although many programs also relied on young staff members. Fifty-six percent of Option I program directors reported hiring a master teacher or educational specialist, 62 percent of directors reported employing staff members with teaching certificates, and 78 percent said that at least some staff with a college degree. More than three-quarters (78 percent) of Option I program directors reported having college students on staff, and less than half (45 percent) employed teen staff.

In surveys, all program directors acknowledged challenges in hiring program staff. Thirty-three percent of program directors reported that it was a major challenge to offer the competitive salaries necessary to hire qualified staff, and 25 percent reported that it was a major challenge to find volunteers with the

necessary time and expertise. The surveys permitted program directors to define “qualified staff” and “necessary time and expertise” in any way they chose.

Professional development in OST programs. OST programs provided professional support to their staff members through program-level supervision and professional development as well as through support and opportunities to attend professional workshops offered through the OST initiative and the provider organization. (DYCD provided \$500,000 in technical assistance and professional development to programs through a contract with Partnership for After School Education.) Almost all Option I program directors reported holding meetings with their OST program staff at least once a month (98 percent). Thirty-nine percent of program directors reported holding meetings with their staff at least once a week. A majority (68 percent) of program directors also required at least some staff to submit lesson plans on a regular basis. More than half of program directors (57 percent) used a published or externally developed curriculum. Program directors received technical assistance most frequently in the use of OST Online (83 percent), and about half reported receiving technical assistance in program design and implementation and program management and administration (54 percent and 51 percent, respectively).

Program policies. In the first year of the OST initiative, program directors worked to create program policies and procedures that ensured compliance with city and state regulations and that provided a foundation for a positive program environment. More than three-quarters of Option I program directors reported “to a great extent” that their program had policies in place to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect, ensure enough time for program activities, and deal with participant behavior. Among elementary-grades Option I program directors, 99 percent reported that policies were in place to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect.

Implementation of Process and Content Features

The DYCD OST initiative encouraged programs to offer a variety of rich content-based activities to support multiple domains of youth development. Among Option I programs serving elementary-grades programs, almost all offered homework help to their elementary-grades participants (98 percent), according to surveys of program directors. In addition, 84 percent reported offering many visual arts and crafts activities. Many regularly offered free time for physical play and unstructured time for socializing (59 percent and 57 percent, respectively). Middle-grades programs offered a similar set of activities, although organized team sports and dance/movement activities were more common in the middle-grades programs (reported by 73 percent and 53 percent of program directors). Findings suggest that programs targeting high school youth were more specialized and tended to be more civic-oriented, reflecting the interests of high school youth.

Participant Engagement in OST Services

The DYCD initiative established clear standards for program participation that varied based on program option and grade level served. Option I elementary-grades programs were expected to serve youth for a minimum of three hours a day, five days a week, for 36 weeks, with a participation target of 80 percent. Middle-grades programs were expected to offer programming for at least eight hours per week for 36 weeks, with a 75 percent participation target. Programs serving high school youth were expected to provide a minimum of three hours of programming per week for 36 weeks, with a 70 percent attendance target. Option I elementary- and middle-grades programs were also expected to provide OST service for 10 hours a day on 20 days per year when schools were closed.

Based on data from OST Online on programs that provided services for the full school-year and that also entered reliable participation data into the system, participants in Option I elementary-grades programs attended their OST program for an average of 311 hours during the year, compared to the expected average of 432 hours. Participants in middle-grades programs attended for an average of 154 hours, compared to the target of 216 hours. Option I high school participants surpassed their targeted attendance of 76 hours, attending for an average of 97 hours. Across all participants, a quarter of elementary- and middle-grades participants met the targeted number of hours (25 percent and 26 percent, respectively), while 39 percent of high school participants met attendance expectations. These calculations of attendance levels may, however, have been suppressed by program-level difficulties in entering activity and attendance data into OST Online.

Social Development Outcomes of Youth

Out-of-school time programs can play an important role in helping youth to develop the social skills with both adults and peers that they need to mature into successful adults themselves. In addition, by providing engaging programming that exposes youth to opportunities that they would not otherwise experience, OST programs can increase their draw for participants and their capacity to contribute to youths' academic and social development.

Overall, about half of OST participants “strongly agreed” that their program had exposed them to new and interesting activities in Year 1, according to a large sample of OST participants. Across all grade levels, 53 percent of youth “agreed a lot” that the program gave them a chance to do “a lot of new things.” In addition, more than half “agreed a lot” that the program activities “really got them interested” (56 percent).

Evaluators examined social interactions in OST programs. The survey asked participants in elementary-grades programs a series of questions about their interactions with their peers, and youth reported positive peer interactions. Youth most frequently reported that they “had a good time playing with other kids in the program,” with 70 percent agreeing “a lot.” Participants also tended to “agree a lot” that they had “a lot of friends in the program” (69 percent) and that they “got to know other kids really well in the program” (64 percent). In general, participants also reported positive interactions with OST program staff members. Across all grade levels, 68 percent of participants “agreed a lot” that staff treated them with respect, and 67 percent reported that staff thought that they could learn new things, although only 44 percent of youth “agreed a lot” that staff always kept their promises.

Overall, Option I participants across all grade levels reported relatively high levels of attachment to their OST program. Across all Option I participants, 74 percent of youth “agreed a lot” that they felt safe in the OST program, and 60 percent “agreed a lot” that they felt like they “belonged” in the program and that the program was “a good place to hang out.”

Youth Content/Academic Skill Outcomes

OST programs promote many types of skills and knowledge, depending on the organizational focus of their sponsoring organization and the skills of their staff. The evaluation asked youth to report on a series of measures of the academic benefits of participating in an OST project. In general, participants in elementary-grades programs were significantly more likely to report high levels of academic benefits compared to either middle-grades or high school participants. For example, the majority of elementary-grades participants (67 percent) “agreed a lot” that the program helped them finish their homework more often, significantly more than the 58 percent of middle-grades participants and 33 percent of high school participants. Elementary-grades youth were also significantly more likely to report that the program helped them feel better about their schoolwork, compared to middle-grades youth and high school youth (53 percent, compared to 35 percent and 31 percent respectively). A similar pattern emerged in participant reports of academic self-esteem, which decreased significantly between each grade cohort from elementary grades to middle grades to high school. Students reported significantly higher levels of academic self-esteem on the following measures compared to both middle-grades and high school participants; middle-grades participants had significantly more positive responses on these same items compared to the high school participants. For example, 81 percent of youth in elementary-grades programs agreed a lot that they tried hard in school, compared with 68 percent of youth in middle-grades programs and 51 percent of youth in high school.

Associations Between Program Features and Participant Experiences

An objective of the evaluation is to determine whether specific program characteristics are statistically associated with participants' engagement in the OST program and their social development and educational outcomes. Evidence from Year 1 indicates that participants who attended programs with a strong academic focus reported more academic benefits from OST participation and higher academic self-esteem. (For this analysis, the evaluators created and employed a variable measuring program-level academic focus, based on program directors' survey responses regarding activities supporting literacy-skill development, cognitive development, and academic achievement.) In addition, higher levels of arts activities were also positively associated with self-reported academic benefits and academic self-esteem. Positive correlations were found for academic self-esteem and frequency of OST attendance, especially in school-based programs. In contrast, analyses found a negative association between participant reports of the quality of their interactions with OST program staff and the level of academic activities offered in the program. High levels of physical fitness activities were negatively associated with participant reports of (1) new and engaging experiences in the OST program and (2) positive interactions with program staff.

Systems Outcomes

The evaluation collected data to assess the extent to which the OST initiative is increasing the capacity of provider organizations to deliver high-quality OST services, increasing the capacity of private nonprofit providers and public agencies to function as a coherent system, and meeting the needs of working parents.

Effect on provider organizations. For the most part, the OST provider organizations funded in Year 1 operated with sizable budgets: 52 percent of executive directors reported that their annual organizational budget was more than \$3 million, and an additional 10 percent had an annual budget of more than \$2 million.

On average, organizations drew 59 percent of their OST budgets from DYCD funding. Twenty percent of organizations relied exclusively on DYCD funds for their out-of-school-time programming budget.

When asked how the OST contract had affected the organizations' operations, executive directors reported that participation in the DYCD OST initiative had had the most effect on staff opportunities for training and technical assistance: 74 percent responded that DYCD participation increased their opportunities to participate in training either "to a great extent" or "somewhat."

For the majority of providers, DYCD participation also increased their opportunities to partner with city agencies (62 percent), a public school (58 percent), and cultural organizations (55 percent).

Increase in system capacity. The majority of provider organizations had extensive experience operating out-of-school time programs prior to the DYCD OST initiative, according to survey responses. Eighty-seven percent of executive directors surveyed said that their organization had previously operated an after-school or out-of-school time program. Seventy percent of provider organizations had operated programs since at least the 1997-98 school year, although almost half (44 percent) of program directors reported that the initiative brought out-of-school time programming to their location for the first time.

Meeting the needs of working parents. A key goal of the OST initiative is to support the needs of working families. Indeed, the majority of parents who responded to the parent survey (conducted in 15 OST programs) indicated that they were working parents. More than three-quarters of responding parents (81 percent) reported that they worked at least 20 hours per week. About a third of parents (34 percent) responded that they were enrolled in school.

Overall, parents were satisfied with the quality of the OST program their child attended. Sixty-two percent of parents rated the overall quality of their programs as excellent. Parents were particularly satisfied with their OST program's ability to provide a safe space for students to participate in activities and interact with other youth. Sixty-seven percent of parents strongly agreed that their child was able to join activities that they would not otherwise experience, 67 percent felt their child was safer in the out-of-school hours as a result of the program, and 62 percent reported that their child made new friends.

In addition, about half of responding parents "strongly agreed" that their child benefited academically from participation in the OST program. Fifty-five percent "strongly agreed" that their child was getting the academic help he/she needed, 54 percent felt that their child talked to them more about what was going on in school, and 54 percent "strongly agreed" that their child was doing better in school overall as a result of participating in the after-school program.

Parents also expressed satisfaction in terms of how well the OST program met their own needs. Seventy-one percent of parents "strongly agreed" that the program hours fit their needs, 63 percent reported that they missed less work than before the program, and 61 percent reported that the program made it easier for them to keep their job.

Conclusions

The evaluation's major findings for action in Year 2 focused on four areas. First, although OST programs successfully enrolled students in the initiative's first year, programs seem to have struggled to maintain high participation rates. Some of these apparent attendance issues may actually reflect program-level deficiencies in keeping activity-participation data current in OST Online. Second, all data sources available to the evaluation confirmed that programs consistently provided safe and structured environments for participants to spend out-of-school time, a noteworthy achievement in the initiative's start-up year. Third, OST programs experienced challenges in hiring program staff members who were well qualified to provide effective OST programming. Limited resources for staff compensation contributed to these challenges. Finally, evidence of differing participant reactions to school-based and center-based programs suggests that each program type has strengths relevant to the operations of programs that provide high-quality experiences for youth.