PERSPECTIVE

QUALITY THAT LASTS:

BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE OF OST

This is a moment of opportunity, change and challenge for the out-of-school time learning field. Federal, state, local and private funding is flowing more rapidly into programs, spurred in part by heightened expectations that time well-spent outside the school day will also pay off for kids in school, and over a lifetime. A growing number of cities – including New York, Providence, Boston, Chicago and Washington – are taking serious steps to enhance program quality, tailor services to specific age groups, develop their OST workforce, or coordinate out-of-school time approaches and content with school improvement efforts. In the midst of a fiscal crisis, California voters in 2002 passed Proposition 49 that promises $400 million in new annual funding for after-school programs – and its proponents, led by the governor, have promised a long list of benefits including higher academic performance and lower juvenile crime.

We have designed this symposium to seize on this moment of opportunity by inviting collective thought on two interlocking issues that we believe can help frame a more productive and fact-based national conversation: *quality*, and *sustainability*. Policy discussions about OST have surfaced many questions, challenges, and areas of agreement and disagreement, about both of these issues. By considering them in a more unified and holistic way, we believe that this gathering can help advance the national conversation by bringing greater clarity and realism to the core challenge facing the OST field, identifying areas of common ground, and suggesting possible avenues for collective action.

The core challenge for the OST field, as we see it, can be captured in a single, action-oriented question:

What will it take – what must happen, what resources are needed, and what obstacles overcome – to build and sustain a rich variety of high-quality out-of-school learning opportunities for children and families, especially for those with the least access to such opportunities?

Providence Mayor David Cicilline, who is currently leading a top-to-bottom restructuring of OST services in his city with Wallace support, states the essence of this challenge

The Wallace Foundation®

Supporting ideas.
Sharing solutions.
Expanding opportunities.®

well: "This is not about just getting more money to programs. It's really about developing a system of high quality, and a way to measure outcomes, a way to increase our services to kids and to understand that the value is not only for the kids. This is not about quick fixes, but about a sustained investment in building something that will survive and will benefit the children of the city for generations."

Embedded in that capstone challenge are a host of other issues and tradeoffs that have often been raised, but not yet fully addressed, in policy conversations and in a growing body of research. Among them:

- What does "quality" really mean, not only in the features of programs (such as a safe environment, appropriate content and well-trained staff), but in the benefits and measurable results they actually deliver?

- Given the multitude of differing expectations that parents, kids and communities themselves have, how can local communities begin to think about assuring that programs achieve quality and tangible results?

- Would embracing "quality" as the basic driver lead to a tradeoff with "quantity" by directing money to fewer numbers of programs and kids served?

- Especially in communities with struggling school systems, is there a chasm of expectations between what advocates, politicians and others are currently claiming for OST, and what even high-quality OST programs are likely to accomplish in terms of measurable academic or youth development outcomes? If so, what are the implications of that chasm for the

public discussion about OST and for its long-term sustainability?

- In the context of scarce resources and competing priorities, what kinds of evidence about performance and results need to be produced and shared in order to build a convincing and lasting case for the public value and the benefits of OST?

- If programs are expected to meet higher standards of quality and performance, what kinds of infrastructure are needed to support them and at what levels should they be built: local, state and/or federal?

"This is not about quick fixes, but about a sustained investment in building something that will survive and benefit the children of the city for generations."

- What are the most urgent internal capacity-building needs of OST programs, and what are the most effective and economical ways to address them?

- What are the costs of building and sustaining high-quality OST opportunities that serve kids who aren't currently getting them? How can those costs be accurately calculated and met over the long haul with public and private dollars?

RAND's recently-published report, *Making Out-of-School Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda*, reinforces that there are many unknowns about quality, participation, cost and sustainability that need answering if the national discourse about OST

and the actions being taken by local communities are to proceed on the basis of fact rather than faith.

For example, we don't yet fully understand what parents and children want from OST. Local communities need, but currently lack, the tools and the knowledge to conduct market research to determine customer preferences; analyze the costs for programs that will produce the desired benefits; map the current supply of programs in order to pinpoint neighborhoods in greatest need of services; and assess the key components of the system such as provider capacity, the workforce, available funding streams and other assets such as parks and libraries.

According to RAND, there is at least some consensus about program attributes that could be associated with better outcomes (although clear evidence on the effectiveness of these attributes is lacking). They include: a clear mission, high expectations, a safe environment, small enrollments relative to size of staff and type of program, stable and well-trained staff, appropriate content, and frequent assessment. But more information is needed about which program attributes are most likely to promote specific academic or youth development benefits for different age groups.

Much also needs to be learned about increasing participation and how much is necessary to achieve desired benefits. And policy discussions about

OST have surfaced questions and disagreements, but few clear-cut facts, about the level of unmet demand, if any, for OST programs.

Despite these and other uncertainties, it's equally true that the field is not operating in a total void of knowledge or relevant experience. Nor are local communities or public and private funders avoiding concerted action simply because there are important knowledge gaps. But providers, policymakers and public and private funders are also on the lookout as never before for

ally want, the availability of those programs in their neighborhoods, and the reasons they do or don't choose to participate in what's currently offered. To date, few communities have systematically gathered such demand-oriented information in allocating OST resources. If the goal is to increase participation in high-quality programs, a more consumer-driven model informed by hard data about the preferences of parents and children seems an essential first step.

youth living at or below 200% of poverty, and low performing schools. Zip code level data are being used to further target services in neighborhoods most in need.

As part of Providence's OST planning process, market research has provided eye-opening findings about current participation levels, satisfaction with offerings, barriers to participation, and interest in specific types of organized out-of-school activities. More than nine out of 10 parents put safety first as a criteria for selecting OST activities for their kids, followed by quality program leaders. Kids, by contrast, named "fun" as their top consideration. Parents expressed the greatest preference for arts and cultural activities, while kids leaned most heavily toward field trips and sports. But nearly 70% of the city's parents and students in the survey expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and number of OST offerings available to them. And nearly half the students don't participate at all in structured OST activities.

"Children are most likely to benefit if they and their parents are able to put together a mosaic of positive experiences."

---

also on the lookout as never before for promising ideas, guidelines, tools and solutions – aware of the high stakes in ensuring that the current wave of public enthusiasm and support is not dissipated through poorly informed decisions or misplaced expectations.

From a growing body of research we and others have commissioned, as well as out-of-school learning initiatives Wallace has sponsored over the years, we believe that some early lessons are emerging that may be useful in developing a framework for effectively building both quality and sustainability into OST:

In determining what kinds of programs should be provided and supported, the needs and preferences of parents and kids must be sought out, and heard.

While policy discussions frequently center on the need for adding more slots in existing programs, often not enough is known about what kinds of programs parents and kids actu-

Providence and New York City, the two cities currently participating in Wallace's *Learning in Communities* initiative, undertook systematic market research to arrive at a clear understanding of the unique features of local demand, and match those preferences against available OST resources. New York developed baseline demographic data on school-age children by neighborhood, mapped the available OST services, conducted an opinion survey of 1,000 households with children 5-18 years old, and held five focus groups with parents, youth and providers. This work documented that OST services had not kept pace with population shifts producing new concentrations of immigrants and low-income families. The result was that huge pockets of the city have few OST services, high unemployment rates and some of the lowest-performing schools.

Using these findings, the city is considering ways to re-allocate OST resources to its 10 school regions based on share of the total youth population,

When it comes to OST offerings, one size doesn't fit all. A rich variety of accessible, high-quality programming is most likely to effectively meet the range of consumer preferences and provide OST's hoped-for benefits.

Children expect and want many different things from OST, especially as they get older. This essential point was emphasized in *Multiple Choices After School*, a report by Public/Private Ventures highlighting key lessons and findings from Wallace's *Extended-Service Schools (ESS)* initiative. The report concluded that children "are most likely to benefit if they and their parents are able to put together a mosaic of positive experiences – broadening the range of activities, widening their

geographic horizons, and increasing their network of adults and peers."

All Work and No Play, a recently-published national survey of parents and kids by Public Agenda and commissioned by Wallace, shed further light on the range of needs and preferences of parents and children. Most strikingly, it found considerable differences in what poor versus well-off families are looking for, with the less-well-off much more inclined to want academic and homework help for their kids. Soberingly, the report also revealed much higher levels of dissatisfaction among poor and minority families with the OST choices available to them.

If local communities are to successfully reorganize their systems of out-of-school learning so that quality and increased participation are the key drivers for allocating resources, engaging top leadership is a necessary first step.

In rethinking the delivery of OST in any city, building a solid corps of public and private leaders is essential not only creating an inclusive planning process that builds broad buy-in for a system based on high quality, but also in laying the groundwork for long-term institutionalization of the changes made and the necessary funding to sustain them.

In both Providence and New York, planning has included scores of top public and private leaders from all sectors of the community with stakes in OST. Above all, the mayors and their deputies in both cities have been closely involved, have publicly communicated that OST is a top priority, and have shown a willingness to use their clout to keep everyone at the table when the decisions and tradeoffs have been difficult.

As Mayor Cicilline has said, "If you intend to be successful in this work, it has to be on your short list, as something that you're really committed to, and that you understand that it has benefits to your community and your city and your kids and your economy."

The OST field is at a key point in its evolution. Public support is at an all-time high, as are the expectations for results. With that support comes appropriate questions about the public value OST provides: What does a quality program look like? How does it differ by age group and program focus? How can understanding market demand help improve participation? How can we improve long-term participation to ensure intended benefits are realized? We believe that the answers to these questions are inextricably linked, and that OST programs of high quality in which kids are actively engaged and which can measure impact are likeliest to win sustained public commitment.

We have an opportunity to take a major leap forward in answering these questions, but only if we are ready to have a candid, fact-based assessment of the issues and obstacles the field faces. We hope our symposium on April 21 will be a step in that direction.

Sources cited:
Susan Bodily, Megan K. Beckett, *Making Out of School Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda* (RAND Education and RAND Labor and Population, 2005)

Ann Duffett, Jean Johnson et al., *All Work and No Play? Listening to What KIDS and PARENTS Really Want from Out-of-School Time* (Public Agenda, 2004)

Jean Baldwin Grossman et al., *Multiple Choices After School: Findings fromn the Extended-Service Schools Initiative* (Public/Private Ventures, 2002)

(These and other reports on OST can be found in The Wallace Foundation's Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org).