

The Future of Youth Development

Building Systems and Strengthening Programs

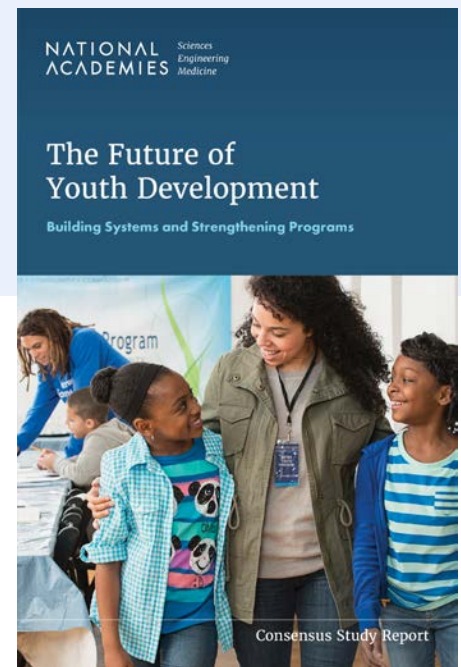
INTRODUCTION

Out-of-School Time (OST) programs play a crucial role in child and youth development, serving as a bridge between school, home, and the community. They offer structured environments where young people can engage in meaningful activities, build relationships, and develop essential life skills. OST programs foster personal growth, academic support, career exploration, and social-emotional development. Since the release of the National Academies' 2002 foundational report, *Community Programs for Youth Development* (the "Blue Book"), OST programs have evolved significantly. This report examines their effectiveness, identifies access and quality improvements, and outlines a future research agenda.

In addressing its task, the committee found that in the past two decades the field of youth development has seen a number of changes: OST programs and activities have become increasingly varied in their settings, programming, and children and youth served; there has been a greater consideration of cultural responsiveness that has changed how the field is considering high quality programming; and public and private funding and support for programs has increased, but so has demand. These changes serve to remind us that while the contexts, including the state of children and youth, that surrounded the Blue Book are different, the value and interest in OST programs as an opportunity for youth to experience positive developmental settings remains strong.

SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SPACES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

OST programs offer safe and supportive spaces where children and youth can develop critical skills and explore their interests beyond the school day. These programs serve as essential resources for families, particularly working parents who need reliable, enriching activities



for their children outside of school hours. High-quality OST programs offer opportunities to develop social and emotional skills and capabilities, foster positive relationships with mentors and peers, and build interests in academic domains that can contribute to school success.

THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

Intermediaries, such as state afterschool networks, municipal agencies, and nonprofit organizations, are central to the OST ecosystem. These entities coordinate efforts among program providers, help secure funding, and support the implementation of best practices. By facilitating partnerships among schools, community groups, and government agencies, intermediaries play a crucial role in enhancing the accessibility and quality of OST programs.

UNMET DEMAND FOR OST PROGRAMS

Despite the benefits of OST programs, millions of children lack access to them. In 2020, an estimated 24.6 million children wanted to participate in OST programs but could not due to various barriers. Among low-income families, 11 million children were unable to enroll in programs, suggesting that barriers to participation in OST are not evenly distributed. The most common barriers include high program costs, lack of reliable transportation, and limited awareness of available opportunities. In response, some communities have introduced financial incentives, such as stipends for older youth, and expanded outreach efforts to increase participation.

RECOGNIZING THE OST WORKFORCE

The OST workforce is fundamental to program quality, yet it often faces challenges such as low wages, high turnover rates, and job-related stress. These issues impact program stability and limit the ability of OST staff to build long-term relationships with youth. Investing in professional development, providing competitive compensation, and creating clear career pathways for OST workers are essential steps toward strengthening the workforce and improving program quality.

INDICATORS OF OST PROGRAM QUALITY

Since the Blue Book, research has shown additional program practices that can help create positive experiences for children and youth, including culturally sustaining practices, building supportive youth-adult relationships, co-creating and co-designing programs and activities with youth, and intentionally creating positive program climates. High-quality programs are often flexible, project-based, grounded in real-world issues, and offer links to young people's daily lives and opportunities to explore their identities. Further research is needed to refine quality indicators and identify the specific program elements that have the greatest impact on youth development.

EFFECTIVENESS AND OUTCOMES

OST settings provide a responsive place for the social and emotional development of children and youth, provided they are well designed and offer high-quality experiences that intentionally support these areas. Whereas OST programs vary in how they affect immediate improvements in grades or test scores, they can foster academic motivation, increase school attendance, and promote long-term educational success. OST programs are most likely to affect outcomes that they intentionally support with specific program content and opportunities that promote development. Research and evaluation need to move beyond studies that seek to reach general conclusions about whether OST programs are effective to understanding which aspects of quality in which activities are associated with positive developmental outcomes for which groups of youth.

FUNDING AND POLICY COORDINATION CHALLENGES

Funding for OST programs remains inconsistent and fragmented, with providers relying on a mix of public and private funding sources. This piecemeal approach creates financial instability and makes it challenging to expand programs to meet demand. Additionally, many providers face complex administrative requirements when applying for and managing grants, further limiting their capacity to serve youth effectively. A more coordinated funding strategy is needed to ensure sustainability and access to high-quality OST programs for all children and youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING OST PROGRAMS

Providing high-quality OST experiences for all children and youth requires strong OST systems and organizational capacity, a stable, supported, and well-trained workforce, and high-quality programming that is responsive to the needs of the populations being served. Current funding levels and support structures are insufficient for meeting these requirements and for meeting the demand for OST programs.

The committee outlined six goals to improve OST programs: (1) support funding stability, (2) invest in intermediary organizations, (3) advance program quality efforts, (4) create stable, supportive environments and career pathways for youth development practitioners, (5) broaden understanding of OST programs and participation, and (6) improve understanding of OST program effectiveness and outcomes. Recommendations include:

SUPPORTING STABLE OST FUNDING

- **Recommendation 1-1:** Funders should provide long-term, flexible funding for OST programs, covering staff pay, operating costs, and evaluations to ensure sustainability and growth.
- **Recommendation 1-2:** Funders should streamline grant processes and coordinate funding to ease administrative burdens on OST programs.
- **Recommendation 1-3:** Funders should align funding priorities with youth development needs and engage communities in designing funding opportunities.
- **Recommendation 1-4:** Dedicated funding should help reduce participation barriers by covering transportation, financial incentives, culturally relevant programs, and outreach efforts.

SUPPORTING LOCAL INTERMEDIARIES

- **Recommendation 2-1:** Government and philanthropic funders should provide sustained funding for intermediaries that support OST programs.

- **Recommendation 2-2:** Public funders should prioritize partnerships with local intermediaries for grant allocation and quality improvement support.
- **Recommendation 2-3:** Where no coordinating body exists, governments should establish or support intermediaries to enhance OST program coordination.
- **Recommendation 2-4:** Local intermediaries should assess and address gaps in OST program access using data-driven tools.

ADVANCING PROGRAM QUALITY

- **Recommendation 3-1:** Funders should support quality improvement efforts, including technical assistance and capacity building for data use.
- **Recommendation 3-2:** Local intermediaries should regularly review and update program quality initiatives based on research and community needs.
- **Recommendation 3-3:** Intermediaries should collaborate with schools, universities, and agencies to share data for program improvement while maintaining clear data-sharing agreements.

SUPPORTING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS

- **Recommendation 4-1:** Funders should invest in workforce development to strengthen career pathways for OST practitioners.
- **Recommendation 4-2:** Colleges and universities should expand coursework and practical experiences in youth development.
- **Recommendation 4-3:** The Office of Management and Budget should create a standard occupational classification for OST practitioners to enhance workforce research.

BROADENING UNDERSTANDING OF OST PROGRAMS

- **Recommendation 5-1:** Federal agencies should support ongoing research to track OST program supply, demand, and participation.

- **Recommendation 5–2:** Government agencies should collect and publicly share data on OST participation, considering a variety of demographic factors.

IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING OF PROGRAM OUTCOMES

- **Recommendation 6–1:** Funders should support rigorous research on OST program effectiveness—across a wide range of short- and long-term outcomes—as well as studies that include measures of participation, program duration, program quality, and implementation.

CONCLUSION

OST programs provide safe, enriching experiences that support learning and development outside of school hours. However, greater investment and policy coordination are necessary to expand access and improve program quality. By securing stable funding, strengthening intermediaries, enhancing program quality, and supporting the workforce, OST programs can continue to serve as essential resources for families, children, and youth. Policymakers, funders, and community leaders must collaborate to build a sustainable OST system that meets the evolving needs of young people across the country.

COMMITTEE ON PROMOTING LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN K-12 OUT OF SCHOOL TIME SETTINGS FOR LOW INCOME AND MARGINALIZED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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