

Afterschool Achievement

Strengthening Literacy & Other Skills

By Geoffrey Alan

Question: Where did middle school students recently work with a professional journalist to write articles, lay out a newsletter, and distribute the publication to local community members? Answer: In the exemplary afterschool program operated by a private company called Citizen Schools. As schools increasingly are called on to sharpen students' literacy skills, researchers and practitioners are discovering ways to provide much more than daycare after school is dismissed.

"Students are writing about topics that interest them," says Ned Rimer, cofounder and managing director of Citizen Schools, explaining the program's effective approach. "They are practicing their writing skills. With practice, people develop their skills."

A national network that links thousands of young "apprentices" with volunteers in hands-on learning activities, Citizen Schools is just one of the

afterschool programs leading the literacy charge today. Over the course of weeks, participating children create performances and products that contribute to the community. The demand for such programs has only intensified in recent years.

The No Child Left Behind Act requires schools not only to show student proficiency in reading, but also to provide supplementary services, such as afterschool programs, for those who fail to meet expectations. Although research on such activities is limited, the encouraging news is that out-of-school-time (OST) programs can raise reading achievement among struggling students, according to a recent research synthesis of 56 rigorous studies conducted over the past 20 years. OST programs are especially effective for readers in kindergarten through second grade and when they incorporate one-on-one tutoring, say Mid-continent Research for Education



and Learning researchers in *The Effectiveness of Out-of-School Time Strategies in Assisting Low-Achieving Students in Reading and Mathematics*.

Because of such findings, a new generation of afterschool programs is helping children master the reading, writing, and communication skills they need to succeed. Literacy skills are necessary for young people, at first, to decode sounds and words and, later, to read and learn across the curriculum, the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning notes in its *Afterschool Training Toolkit* (see page 4 for more information about the National Partnership and the toolkit).

Why After School?

The toolkit, featuring research-based resources to facilitate achievement as well as fun, emphasizes that after school is an excellent time to foster fluency and a love of reading. When school lets out, learning is still fresh. Moreover, students are ready to apply and extend their learning in exciting activities. Studies show that engaging activities increase children's chances of success, and success enhances their motivation in literacy learning.

Afterschool programs can engage students through such diverse activities as sustained silent reading, playing reading and writing games, discussing favorite stories, researching topics of interest, keeping journals, composing comic strips, writing to pen pals, acting out plays, communicating about sports or the arts, and collaborating on projects. These are activities that the time constraints and curricular pressures of busy school-day classes often do not permit.

"Afterschool programs offer opportunities for children to pick tasks and stay with tasks according to their own needs and interests," says researcher Marilyn Jager Adams, chief scientist at Soliloquy Learning, a private company that uses speech-recognition technology and intervention tools to sharpen children's literacy skills. She contrasts "the regimen of the classroom" with the opportunities for open-ended exploration offered by afterschool programs, where children can become "captivated" by whatever subject intrigues them.

"Afterschool programs provide an opportunity to work with kids in a different way than during the school day," adds Rhonda Lauer, CEO of Foundations, Inc., whose strategies are incorporated into the National Partnership's toolkit. This more relaxed, playful, and nurturing atmosphere allows adults to emphasize the social aspect of literacy.

Perhaps most significantly, afterschool programs give children a rare chance to read. Most children read only a few minutes a day, and they have little

Recommended on the Web

Afterschool Training Toolkit

<http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/literacy/>

Standards for the English Language Arts

<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>

Supporting the Literacy Development of Low-Income Children in Afterschool Programs

http://www.robertbownefoundation.org/pdf_files/occasional_paper_01.pdf

Literacy in Afterschool Programs: Literature Review

http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/literacy/pdf/AST_lit_literature_review.pdf

opportunity to read in the classroom, laments Adams, author of the landmark *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. "Literacy is a product of having read a lot," she observes. "Your ability to do that depends on the time you have to invest."

Academic Boost

One of the most important outcomes of an effective afterschool program, of course, is improved learning. Afterschool activities shown to be the most successful in raising achievement include reading aloud, dramatization, and book discussion, according to the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) 2005 literature review, *Literacy in Afterschool Programs*.

Through such literacy activities, students are "honored" for their accomplishments, says Adams. As a result, afterschool classes become "a time when this is considered a treasured activity," when children gain a sense of personal progress.

Rimer adds that such efforts are most effective when they incorporate hands-on, project-based activities led by an enthusiastic adult expert and directed toward a real-world audience, as in the Citizen Schools community newsletter described above. "Kids want to create a thing of quality, particularly where there's an authentic audience for it," he says.

Afterschool programs also can nurture broader academic skills. For example, Homework Zones provide an afterschool forum within urban middle and high schools where children not only do homework but learn specific language arts and general academic skills, such as how to effectively study, do research, and complete collaborative projects. The drop-in program, established by Foundations, Inc. around Philadelphia and Camden,

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New Jersey, normally runs for at least 2 hours after school.

“It’s not just reinforcement or doing homework,” emphasizes Lauer, a member of the National Partnership steering committee. “More important is acquiring other skills that are going to make you successful in school and later in life.” Indeed, important as academics are, the NWREL literature review concludes that the function of an afterschool program “should not be to duplicate what happens during the school day, but to serve a complementary role and provide additional experiences and purposes for engaging in literacy.”

Targeting Subgroups

More and more, afterschool programs are asked to meet the needs of student subgroups, such as disadvantaged and at-risk children. Many do not have access at home to literacy-building resources such as books, magazines, the Internet, and other technology-based materials, Adams says. In addition, they may lack English-fluent or literate role models, (that is, family members who can add to students’ vocabulary, knowledge of communication nuances, and the sort of “cultural capital” that can enhance literacy).

Researcher Robert Halpern notes that 25% of low- and moderate-income children now regularly attend afterschool programs, a percentage that is growing. Ideally, he says, such children find a setting that celebrates their cultures, respects their interests, validates their voices, affirms social connections, and

demonstrates the relevance of curricular learning. “Afterschool programs can provide opportunities for children to learn the literacies of their own heritage—the forms, the stories, the particular uses of language—and can make connections between the literacies of home or community and school literacy,” Halpern asserts in the Robert Browne Foundation’s *Supporting the Literacy Development of Low-Income Children in Afterschool Programs*.

In Philadelphia, for instance, many Puerto Rican students routinely travel to and from their native country, often for months at a time. Homework Zones and other Foundations, Inc. afterschool activities encourage these students to write and talk about their unique cultural celebrations and experiences as immigrants, Lauer says.

Step by Step

What are the key ingredients for success? Researchers and experts recommend the following steps for establishing afterschool literacy programs:

- Set goals based on local needs. Consider children’s needs, such as grade-level benchmarks they must meet, to identify specific objectives. Structure activities to build skills and allow students to show their mastery. Generic approaches suggested by research are no guarantee of success, Lauer says.
- Use engaging literature. Read good books to target specific reading strategies based on students’ needs. Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension are integral to early literacy development, according to the National Reading Panel. Combine writing with reading and, when appropriate, allow children to choose their own material. Use resources that appeal to various students’ interests, Adams says.
- Incorporate real-world activities. Read recipes, write to family members, and discuss science and politics to engage children. Connect them with adult experts who convey excitement and passion about topics, says Rimer.
- Assess students’ progress over time. Ask about their favorite stories and topics. Consider their academic and social needs. Check on their development and provide thoughtful, constructive feedback. Mostly, this means knowing what they’re doing in school and what they find interesting. As Lauer says, “Know your audience.”
- Provide ongoing training for staff. Arrange structured time for staff meetings and discussion. Invite a district reading specialist, teacher, or professional development personnel to train afterschool staff. Offer staff the same nurturing guidance that promotes growth among afterschool participants.



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