

*Positive Out-of-School Time Hoopla***Why Should We Care?***by Mary Marczak and Rachel Moreau*

There's more to the positive out-of-school time movement than drop-in centers and photo ops. It is built on solid developmental theory and a growing body of research and evaluation.

People in the youth development field have a vision of a world where all youth live in supportive, enriching environments; where all youth are caring, compassionate, contributing people who will in turn make the world a better place. While they struggle to help youth reach these lofty goals, researchers, policymakers, and funders throw out buzzwords like “positive out-of-school time” (POST) and “developmental assets.” So what’s all the hoopla about? And more importantly, why should we in 4-H and other youth-serving organizations care about POST?

The “Hoopla”

Two major reports published in the early '90s caught the attention of policymakers, government agencies, and researchers. *The Forgotten Half* (William T. Grant Foundation, 1998) and *A*

Matter of Time (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992) both documented a need for community-based, structured programs and opportunities for youth. These reports also alerted readers to the scarcity of such opportunities, especially for the most at-risk youth, and the consequences of not providing them.

Additionally, a series of reports by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) and other reports showed the extent to which kids spend time alone and unsupervised. According to a report titled “Working for Children and Families: Safe and Smart After-school Programs,” 69% of all married couple families with children ages 6–17 have both parents working outside the home and in 71% of single-mother families and 85% of single-father families, the parent works outside of the home (Department of Education and Justice, 2000).

This report also noted that the time between when children get home from school and when their parents come home from work can amount to 20–25 hours per week.

The GAO reports indicated that the lack of affordable and accessible after-school opportunities meant an estimated 8- to 15-million children were home alone on any given day. They also found that after-school programs for school-age children met as little as 20–25% of demand (GAO, 1997, 1998). These reports, coupled with an FBI report that juvenile crime and victimization peak from 2 to 8 P.M., when children get out-of-school and before their parents come home, got the attention of policy-makers and the concern of the general public. In public polling data (Afterschool Alert Poll, 2000) 8 out of 10 voters said access to after-school programming in the community is important and should be available to all children. Yet, nearly two-thirds of the voters also reported that it is difficult to find programs in their communities.

Funding and Accountability

All this attention has resulted in more money for out-of-school learning opportunities and increased concentration by researchers, evaluators, and practitioners on how best to fill that time, what youth need, and what experiences are most effective in producing “essential” youth outcomes.

The increased funding comes from a variety of sources. For example, the Federal Department of Education 21st Century Community Learning Center grants promoting after-school programs across the country have increased from 1 million in 1995 to an estimated 1 billion in 2002. In addition, the majority of states are increasing funding for after-school programs and opportunities (National Governors Association, 1999). Private

foundations have stepped up to the plate, like the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation’s \$83 million investment and DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund investment of \$9.7 million for Making the Most of Out of School Time (MOST), and \$13 million for the Extended-Service School (ESS) Adaptation Initiative.

With funding came a focus on “accountability” and research for out-of-school time efforts. The 1995 study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters demonstrated the value of mentoring (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). A study by McLaughlin and colleagues showed that participation and engagement are critical to positive development for high-risk youth

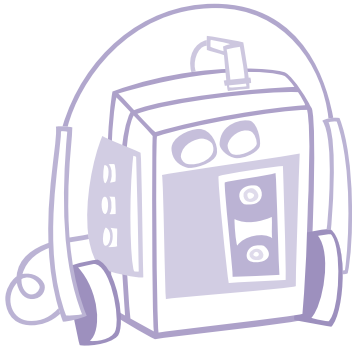
Field Notes

"This is actually the first time I've heard of the acronym POST. What it describes isn't new . . . I have been working in this field for 17 years. If this new buzzword will help to organize and mobilize existing resources and strengthen youth development practice, I'm all for it. If it is a phrase that proves to be confined to the halls of academia and philanthropy, I'll be disappointed."

*—Patty, High School
Employment Counselor*



Photo: Don Breneman



(McLaughlin et al., 1994). Twelve-plus years of research by Deborah Lowe Vandell documented the positive benefits of children's participation in high-quality after-school programs (Vandell & Posner, 1999; Vandell & Shumow, 1999).

The evaluations of major initiatives such as 21st Century grants (Riley et al., 2000), MOST (Halpern et al., 1998), and ESS (Grossman et al., 2001), all show that quality opportunities and programs are effective in increasing positive outcomes and decreasing risk behaviors.

Results of meta-studies across diverse programs with solid evaluations also showed youth development approaches can increase positive behaviors and decrease problem behaviors (Catalano et al., 1999; Hawkins et al., 1999; Roth et al., 1998). These studies noted that quality programs that are long-term and include elements of the youth development framework (such as caring adult-youth relationships) produced positive changes in youth behavior. Youth improved their interpersonal skills, peer and adult relationships, self-control, problem solving, cognition, self-efficacy, commitment to schooling, and academic achievement. There were also reductions in problem behaviors including drug and alcohol use, school misbehavior, aggressive behavior, violence, truancy, high-risk sexual behavior, and smoking.

Why Should We Care?

Ultimately, it is our job to care. But there are other reasons why it is important that people working with youth care about out-of-school time. Researchers and practitioners agree— young people need enriching, supportive environments, not just at certain times of the day, but 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365

days out of the year, and throughout their youth. With about 20% of adolescents' non-sleeping hours spent in schools (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2000) and even less than that spent with their families, a big chunk of time is left that, depending on their experiences, could advance or diminish their ability to develop positively.

Schools focus on academic outcomes, while parents (with their busy lives) often struggle to support the wide-ranging and complex developmental needs of their children. Youth-serving organizations can provide a seamless, developmentally enhancing transition from school to home and may even have an advantage over schools and parents. Unbound by the rules and expectations faced by schools, and the responsibilities faced by parents, youth-serving organizations have the freedom to consider youth development holistically with as many resources as there are people working



Photo: Don Breneman and Dave Hansen



Photo: Don Breneman and Dave Hansen

with youth. Studies find that after-school opportunities are effective in meeting the developmental needs of youth precisely because they can quickly shift, modify, and transform their way of working to better fit the changing circumstances, strengths, and needs of youth (McLaughlin, 2000; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Vandell & Shumow, 1999).

At times it feels silly to cite research and government reports to make a case for out-of-school time and the youth development approach—as the author of a 1998 *Newsweek* article so aptly wrote, “It doesn’t take a Ph.D. to figure out that young people need some place positive to go after school . . .” (cited in DeAngelis, 2001), nor does it take a rocket scientist to tell us that kids need caring, responsible adults in their lives or that they need to be supported as they navigate their social world. Nonetheless, as youth workers we should see the value of words like “positive out-of-school time” and “developmental assets” as opportunities to value what we do, jolt us out of

complacency, and make us reflect on our own practices. While there is much to be learned “in the trenches,” there are also things that can be learned from “other ways of knowing.”

While far from exhaustive, the following questions (raised by findings from research and evaluation) suggest ways to strengthen our work with youth.

■ Are we providing quality out-of-school opportunities for older youth?

Right or not, society appears to have defined age 12 as appropriate to begin regular self-care (Belle, 1999). With more than 35% of 12-year-olds regularly unsupervised, this percentage grows exponentially as youth age (GAO, 1997). This is also the age when youth are more likely to drop out of after-school programs, putting them at a disadvantage just when they are about to launch into adolescence, a time of great developmental change. Not surprisingly, when Deborah Belle examined 26 empirical studies looking at the



relationship between well-being and self-care (without an adult physically present), older youth were more consistently experiencing negative consequences from self-care than their younger counterparts (Belle, 1999).

■ **Are we serving all youth?**

Too often, when we argue for all youth, we mean those who walk through our doors looking for opportunities or those whom we can draw in easily. However, all youth also means the most vulnerable or disadvantaged youth, the ones who may be least likely to be engaged. How can we be more intentional about targeting those youth as well?

■ **Are we targeting the whole youth or specific outcomes?**

Researchers seem to agree that an effective youth development approach means a holistic approach. For example, Jane Quinn, one of the authors of *A Matter of Time*, reminds us that there is a complex set of youth outcomes, none of which are inconsequential.

It is important that we not be narrow or get fixated on one specific outcome (Harvard Family Research Project, 2001). Those who looked across effective programs also agree that quality programs address a wide range of positive youth development objectives (Catalano et al., 1999; Roth et al., 1998). Roth and colleagues, for example, looked at six community-based programs that were considered holistic and nine that targeted specific behaviors or skills to avoid risk-taking behaviors. The programs using the most holistic, least targeted approaches produced more positive outcomes in a wider variety of domains, including academic and risk-taking behaviors.

■ **Do we provide “quality” opportunities and experiences?**

The quality of after-school opportunities and experiences is critical to producing positive outcomes. Belle’s four-year longitudinal study of the after-school lives of children and youth found that youth in poor quality after-school programs (e.g., poor relationships with adults, being bullied by other children, poor activity choices, etc.) experience more negative outcomes than those in self-care. Fortunately there is general consensus about the kind of environment that produces positive youth outcomes. The environment should include adults who respect, care for, and guide youth; challenging opportunities for youth to grow and learn; enriching, creative activities; and opportunities to experience and exercise leadership and decision making. In addition, the environment should nurture the youth’s growing sense of autonomy guided by adults and provide all these things long-term (DeAngelis, 2001; Roth et al., 1998; Catalano et al., 1999).

■ **Do youth perspectives guide our efforts and our accountability?**

According to the Community Counts study of 120 youth programs (McLaughlin, 2000), those that are most attractive to kids and produce positive outcomes are programs that change with youth over time, that accommodate the kids, and that are co-constructed by the kids and adults. It is critical to gain the youth perspective when designing and evaluating programs—in the end, it is really only the youth’s perspective that counts. If the youth think the program is good, then they are more likely to invest, come regularly, and

have positive outcomes. If they think it stinks, then there is little that you can do to keep them from dropping out. This is also true for accountability. For example, when the primary goal is building positive adult-youth relationships, one really needs to understand how youth perceive that relationship rather than simply assuming that the opportunities provided are experienced by the youth as intended.

■ **Are we working with other agencies and organizations?**

If there is another point of agreement around





opportunities in out-of-school time, it is that the need is great and there are not nearly enough quality opportunities to fill it (Belle, 1999). Faced with such shortages, the recurring debate about “duplication of services” in youth programming seems like utter nonsense. Rather than worrying about duplication of service, programs and agencies should work together to share “what works,”

see which youth are falling through the cracks, and decide how best to provide a seamless transition in out-of-school opportunities for all youth in their communities.

Rather than being frustrated by it, we should be glad for all the “hoopla” around youth development in out-of-school time—not only because it brings a critical matter to the public’s attention, but because it stimulates people with eclectic backgrounds to explore, think about, and care about youth development issues. And at the end of the day, we all share the same vision—a world where all youth live in supportive, enriching environments, where all youth are caring, compassionate, contributing people who will make the world a better place. ☘

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A B O U T the Authors

Mary Marczak, Ph.D., is a youth development evaluation educator and researcher at the Center for 4-H Youth Development, University of Minnesota Extension Service. She is committed to preparing people and data to enhance decisions and program impact.

Rachel Moreau, M.Ed., is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota and a graduate research assistant in program evaluation at the Center for 4-H Youth Development. Before moving to Minnesota, Rachel worked as a counselor in an alternative high school and as an individual and family therapist with disadvantaged youth.