

Executive Summary

Minnesota community, business, and policy leaders and their national counterparts increasingly understand that community learning opportunities during the non-school hours are critical to both learning and development. Multiple research studies have documented that organized, high quality out of school activities benefit young people academically, socially, and emotionally. Such activities impact academic achievement (especially learning loss over the summer months), foster a sense of agency (that what they do matters), provide safety and belonging, while at the same time providing youth opportunities to explore their interests and interact with caring adults. For some youth these types of community learning opportunities provide a positive alternative to unsupervised time and activities that could put them at risk. As a result, such community learning opportunities are no longer just nice. Positive community learning opportunities are now increasingly necessary in promoting the healthy growth and development of young people.¹

It appears, however, that an *opportunity gap* in afterschool learning opportunities exists, limiting the number of youth who benefit from participation. It is problematic that Minnesota lacks a clear understanding of which youth participate and the supply and demand for such opportunities—especially from the perspective of parents and youth. The current study helps construct a clearer picture of parent and youth perceptions about how Minnesota is doing in providing an optimal mix of opportunities for young people and the issues and barriers affecting youth participation. The study is one of several efforts by the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development and its partners² to better understand the quality, availability, and impact of community learning opportunities.

Research Approach

Telephone surveys were conducted during the winter of 2007-2008 with a representative statewide random sample of families with youth who were in 7th to 12th grades during the last school year. A total of 1,607 parents and 808 youth were surveyed across Minnesota. Wilder Research Center was contracted to help develop the survey and conduct the telephone surveys. Several questions were patterned after the national study *All Work and No Play? Listening to What Kids and Parents Really Want from Out-of-School Time*,³ conducted by Public Agenda for the Wallace Foundation in 2004.

1. Little, P. M. D., Wimer, C., & Weiss, H. (2007). After school programs in the 21st century: Their Potential and what it Takes to Achieve it. *Issues and Opportunities in Out of School Time Evaluation, No. 10*. Harvard Family Research Project. Available at <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/after-school-programs-in-the-21st-century-their-potential-and-what-it-takes-to-achieve-it>.

2. Special thanks to the Minnesota Department of Education, the McKnight Foundation, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Youth Community Connections, and the Wilder Research for their financial, technical, conceptual and practical support for this work. The study would not have been possible without their efforts.

3. Duffett, A., & Johnson, J. (2004). *All work and no play? Listening to what kids and parents really want from out-of-school time*. New York: Public Agenda. Available at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/Out-of-SchoolLearning/AllWorkAndNoPlay.htm>

The study drew random samples from eight different regions across the state including the Twin Cities and surrounding suburban communities.⁴ Analysis suggested that there are three significant influences that most affect parent and youth perceptions regarding out of school time: the *type of community* in which families reside, their *ethnic, racial, and immigrant background*, and the *economic status* of families. It is through these three primary lenses, rather than just regional geography, that parent and youth views are presented. The following six questions are critical to better understanding the use, supply, and demand of community learning opportunities in Minnesota and provide the outline for this report:

1. How do Minnesota youth spend their time?
2. What is the perceived quality of Minnesota youth programs?
3. How satisfied are Minnesotans with their community's efforts in youth programming?
4. What do Minnesota parents and youth want in programs?
5. What do Minnesota parents and youth value about youth programs?
6. How difficult is it for Minnesota families to find community learning opportunities?

The report concludes that Minnesota is indeed doing better in many ways than a comparable national sample. Unfortunately, however, in many ways there is a significant *opportunity gap* and that gap is more a function of the perceived availability and affordability of such opportunities than either the lack of interest in or demand for them by parents and youth. Only when this gap is closed will Minnesota live up to the vision proposed by the Minnesota Commission on Out of School Time⁵—a vision that seeks to ensure every child is engaged in their own learning and development, every family has access to quality opportunities during the non-school hours, and every community has a clear plan and adequate support for the community learning opportunities its parents and youth need and want.

Summary of Findings

Section 1: How do Minnesota youth spend their time?

Youth have approximately 2000 hours of discretionary time at their disposal every year—equivalent to a full time job. This is time that is not filled with school or family obligations and comprises a considerable portion of each day in the life of a young person. The extent to which this time is spent productively depends in large part upon the availability and affordability of programs and activities to which youth have access and in which they choose to participate. It is also related to choices that youth and their parents make given their values and the fit of available programs in their communities.

According to the surveys, much of Minnesota 7th through 12th grade youths' out of school time during the school year is spent around adults. A majority of time is also spent with friends or siblings. During

4. See Appendix B for a more detailed breakdown of the sample and survey procedure.

5. Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School Time. (2005). *Journeys into community: Transforming youth opportunities for learning and development*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota. Available at <http://www.mncost.org>.

both the school year and the summer, few youth this age are home alone. While about half of youth spend most of their out of school time in sports or activities during the school year, only about one-quarter spend a large proportion of their time in activities over the summer. In both the summer and the school year, adult supervision is somewhat more common in the urban metro and least common in the suburbs. A majority of youth in families with incomes above \$50,000 participates in activities during the school year but only a minority of youth with lower family incomes do so. Hispanic, non-white, and immigrant youth have lower levels of activity participation than white youth during the school year but participation rates are much closer during the summer.

Almost all youth participate in some activity at some time during the year. It may be, however, that at any given point in time, many youth (and perhaps most youth in some subgroups) are unlikely to participate in constructive youth programs or activities. The most common activities listed were sports (70%), religious instruction or youth groups (60%), volunteer work (59%), school-based extracurricular activities (56%), and music, dance, or art lessons (56%). Thirty-five percent of youth in grades 7-12 have part-time jobs, though 53% of youth in grades 10-12 had a part-time during the last school year. One in ten youth surveyed participate in the University's 4-H Program. There is greater variety in participation rates by family income and race/ethnic background than across communities.

Action Implications:

- A significant amount of time is available for most Minnesota youth that could be used to enrich learning and development through community learning opportunities—especially for low income families and youth in greater Minnesota and urban metro communities.
- Much lower participation rates during the summer point to a need for more summer options. This is especially true for lower income and minority youth who often suffer from major summer learning loss. Research indicates that high quality summer out of school time opportunities such as camps and enrichment programs help ensure youth perform better when they go back to school in the fall.⁶
- A systematic approach to garnering public, private, and individual resources to provide even the five most popular activities for low income and minority youth could significantly increase the positive impact of youth participation.

Section 2: What is the perceived quality of Minnesota youth programs?

The quality of programs is a critical factor in choices youth make about programs, their decision to stay in them, their level of engagement, and what they gain from participating. In 2002 the National Research Council of the United States identified the following key features of developmental settings for community youth programs: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school and community efforts.⁷

The vast majority of Minnesota parents indicated that the programs in which their teens participated most often are of high quality, slightly higher than parents nationally. About one in four parents feel the programs are average or poor quality in Minnesota. Income and race affect parent ratings of program quality, with non-whites and lower income parents most likely to report youth participation in low quality programs.

The vast majority of Minnesota youth also report that they enjoy going to the activities, feel safe there, and are treated with respect at these activities. However, just over half report that they receive individual attention and that program leaders understand today's youth. Youth with the lowest family incomes are least likely to report that they often have any of these high quality experiences in youth programs. Hispanic and non-white youth and immigrants report less positive feelings across quality dimensions studied.

Since these data are only ratings of the programs parents and youth describe as the ones they spend the most time in, the ratings probably overestimate the average quality of programs in the state.

Action Implications

- A statewide system of support to both assess and improve key dimensions of quality across youth programs would help ensure all youth who participate receive the maximum benefit.
- A key element of ensuring quality programs is the adults who provide and run these programs. They are the people who develop caring relationships with youth and help them learn. Work to strengthen the preparation, selection, and in service training of youth workers and their ability to intentionally support quality programs is essential for maximum growth and impact in the youth development field.
- The University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development's Youth Work Institute and the Minnesota Department of Education and funding collaborators should continue to broaden and systematize policy and training efforts targeted to preparation and support of parents, volunteers, and program administrators in quality improvement efforts.

Section 3: How satisfied are Minnesotans with their community's efforts in youth programming?

Communities are the settings in which out of school programs take place and through which youth encounter most community learning opportunities. These opportunities occur in a variety of ways, including community education, Boys and Girls Clubs, Y's, scouting, 4-H, private lessons, community-based non-profits and faith based organizations, public libraries, and park and recreation centers. Through these experiences, youth learn to be leaders, contribute to community vitality, and become citizens. National research suggests that the supply of high quality programs for youth is not distributed equally across communities.⁸ National surveys suggest that eight of ten parents agree there is a need for public investment to create more and better youth programs.⁹

6. Birmingham, J., Pechman, E. M., Russell, C. A., & Mielke, M. (2005). *Shared features of high-performing after-school programs: A follow-up to the TASC evaluation*. Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates. Available at <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/fam107/fam107.pdf>.

7. Eccles, J., & J. A. Gootman. (Eds.) (2002) *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

8. Eccles & Gootman, 2002.

9. Quinn, J. (1999). Where Need Meets Opportunity: Youth Development Programs for Early Teens. *The Future of Children* 9(2): 96-116.

Only one in every four Minnesota parents reported their community is doing very well providing programs for youth. About half believe their communities are doing “OK” with one in four overall reporting their community is not doing very well. Parents in suburban communities were somewhat more likely to rate their community as doing very well (36%) while four out of ten parents in urban communities report their community is *not* doing very well. One in three parents in rural areas and small towns thought their communities were not doing very well in providing programs for youth compared with only one in five in the suburbs and cities around greater Minnesota. The greatest differences, however, are by income level, where a majority of low income families feel their communities are not doing very well—more than twice the rate of parents with incomes over \$75,000. Hispanic and non-white parents have the lowest levels of satisfaction with their communities’ provision of programs for teenagers.

Similarly, while a majority of parents and youth report there are “enough” opportunities in their community, very few report there are too many (7%) and a significant number (over 32%) report there “needs to be more options.” Similar differences by community type, race, and family income are found as those noted above.

Action Implications

- Data collected for this study indicate community learning opportunities are not equally distributed around the state nor equally accessible by families of different types. This disparity contributes to increasingly visible educational and developmental gaps. Addressing these disparities in opportunities must become a higher priority if their power to support learning and development is to become fully realized.
- The need for more youth program options is most noticeable for low income and minority parents and those outside the suburban metro area. Other studies have found that 1) while some communities are opportunity rich others are either opportunity poor or dominated by only what schools provide and 2) that there is a tendency to put services in more at risk neighborhoods but not opportunities.¹⁰
- There is a critical need to better understand the capacity of providers of community learning opportunities around the state and within each community. A study of program providers is needed to gain a better understanding of the factors that affect both the supply of opportunities and the capacity to increase the number of such opportunities in different community types.

Section 4: What do Minnesota parents and youth want in programs?

In the words of John Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, “The child absorbs values, good and bad, on the playground, through the media, on the street—everywhere. It is the community and culture that holds the individual in a framework of values...Values that are never expressed are apt to be taken for granted and not adequately conveyed to young people.”¹¹ The nature and type of opportunities available in a community help convey the values of the community.

10. Saito, Rebecca N., Peter Benson, Dale Blyth and Anu Sharma. (1995). *Places to grow, Perspectives on youth development opportunities for seven to 14-year old Minneapolis youth*. Minneapolis, Search Institute.

11. Gardner, J.W. 1991. “Community.” Unpublished manuscript.

Most Minnesota parents (85%) want programs that teach the value of hard work and help youth explore their interests. Over 70% want opportunities for youth to try new things, volunteer opportunities and programs teaching youth how to get along with others. For youth, the highest three preferences, and the only ones selected by a clear majority of youth, are help exploring interests (71%) followed by 67% who would like athletic activities and programs that focus on getting into college or careers. Forty nine percent of youth want opportunities to try new things. Lower percentages of youth would choose programs that reinforce their religious faith and supervised homework help.

Overall, parents are interested in youth development—learning to get along with others, teaching the value of hard work—while youth are more interested in programs that provide enrichment opportunities in sports and academics. Both parents and youth want community programs that allow youth opportunities to explore their interests. There are small differences in parent and youth program preferences across community types, income levels, or ethnicities. Parents and youth across all categories want very similar types of opportunities; this suggests that there is essentially *no difference in demand* by community type, race, immigrant status, or income. If anything, lower income and immigrant parents and youth want more college and career oriented opportunities.

Action Implications

- Given what parents and youth want from community learning opportunities, it is in the public’s interest to explore new ways to mobilize public, private and individual resources to ensure such opportunities are readily available—especially for families who have less income or are people of color, Hispanic, or new immigrants.
- Similar levels of demand for community programs that promote positive youth development across all community types, family income levels, and background types illustrates the timeliness of exploring ways to create the public and private partnerships necessary to leverage and promote support for existing programs and essential for the creation of more opportunities where they are most lacking.
- Ensuring better communication within communities about the availability of the kinds of experiences youth and parents both want is an important step in increasing demand (for high quality programs) and ensuring that youth and families are aware of existing opportunities.

Section 5: What do Minnesota parents and youth value about youth programs?

Forty-seven percent of Minnesota parents feel the best reason for young people to participate in out of school programs is to develop their interests and hobbies while parents nationally picked “to have fun” as their first choice. In Minnesota as well as nationally, youth most often report that the best reason to participate is to have fun. However, Minnesota parents and youth with low incomes and those who are non-white, Hispanic and immigrants are more likely to report keeping youth busy as the best reason for participation.

The majority of Minnesota parents—about 90%—agree that youth programs are important to the

positive development of youth and over 70% agree that young people have more than enough academics during the school year so activities should focus on things that capture their interest. Slightly fewer parents (65%) agree that the increasing emphasis on standardized tests and higher academic standards should translate into a focus on academic skills in out of school activities. About half of parents reported that youth spend too much time in organized activities and an equal percentage feel youth do not have enough opportunities to participate in activities. Parents and youth from low income families as well as families of color, Hispanics, and new immigrants clearly indicate there are not enough opportunities.

Minnesota youth are much more likely than youth nationally to report very much looking forward to participating in activities—53% of Minnesota youth compared to only 38% of youth nationally. Most Minnesota young people believe teenagers who participate in programs are better off than those with lots of free time. Over six times as many youth believe youth are better off when they participate in activities (83%) than when they have lots of free time (13%). Further, over half report that they “very much” look forward to participating in activities; only 5% report that they do not look forward to participating. Youth attitudes are strongly related to family income levels with youth at lower levels less likely to look forward to participating and believe youth with more free time do better.

Action Implications

- Study results confirm strong recognition among parents and youth that quality out of school opportunities contribute to positive developmental outcomes for youth. Parents and youth place high value on these programs. Advocacy efforts, such as those being sponsored by Youth Community Connections and emerging policy work to stimulate legislative supports are well placed investments.

Section 6: How difficult is it for Minnesota families to find community learning opportunities?

Less than half of Minnesota parents (45%) believe they have things under control when it comes to having things for their teen children to do during out of school hours. Over half of Minnesota parents report that they occasionally (43%) or often (12%) struggle to find things for their children to do when they are not in school. Parents in urban areas and lower income families struggle more than others to find things for youth to do. These findings for Minnesota parents follow the findings for parents nationally.

Fifty-seven percent of parents in Minnesota report that the summer is the most difficult time to find things for youth to do, while only 15% report weekends as most difficult and 13% say after school is most difficult. However, youth report that summer and after school are equally as difficult to find things to do at 34%, with 28% reporting it is difficult to find something to do on the weekends. Youth are about twice as likely as parents to report that weekends are the most difficult time to find things to do.

Minnesota parents have somewhat less difficulty finding youth programs than parents nationally. The greatest difference between the Minnesota and national results lies in finding programs that are run by trustworthy adults (22% in Minnesota vs. 32% nationally find this somewhat or very difficult). In Minnesota, affordable programs (38%) and high quality programs (34%) are the most difficult to find.

Parents in urban areas consistently have the most difficulty in finding all types of youth programs, with over half of parents reporting affordability and quality programs somewhat or very difficult to find. Parents in the suburban metro area report having the fewest difficulties in finding all but affordable programs; affordable programs are actually the most difficult for suburban parents to find. For parents in small towns and cities in greater Minnesota, finding affordable programs is about as difficult as finding high quality programs. About one out of three of parents in rural areas report having a somewhat or very difficult time finding programs that are interesting to youth, affordable, conveniently located, and high quality.

Over half of all parents with incomes below \$25,000 have difficulty finding programs that are affordable (69%), interesting (55%), conveniently located (55%), high quality (59%), and run by trustworthy adults (55%); nearly half (46%) have difficulty finding age-appropriate youth programs. As income levels increase, parents are less likely to report difficulties finding most types of programs but especially those that are affordable and high quality.

Non-white, Hispanic, and immigrant families are especially likely to have difficulty finding affordable youth programs. Over half of immigrant parents have difficulty finding high quality programs as well. In addition to affordability, among non-white and Hispanic parents, nearly half report difficulty finding high quality programs that are conveniently located.

Action Implications

- Recent work by the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development (and others) is engaging youth to both map and market opportunities in their community. These programs show particular promise and should be evaluated more fully and possibly expanded.

- In general, the power of youth, in partnership with adults, is the largest untapped potential for fundamentally changing awareness and access to youth programs and increasing their availability. Investments to significantly mobilize the power of youth working with adults in a variety of deliberate efforts could yield multiple benefits for youth as well as communities.

- Enhancing affordability and availability is a shared public, private, and individual responsibility. Finding ways to deliberately leverage these multiple sources in a systematic rather than haphazard way holds great promise at both the state and community levels. Everything from challenge grants to providing matching scholarships to cover fees could prove effective in changing the current picture. ■