

## Making Out-of-School Time Safe for All Youth

*Pam Stevens*

**A**ccording to America's Promise to Youth, safe places with structured activities produce many benefits for children and youth. These places and activities can:

- connect youth to principled and caring adults;
- nurture young people's skills and capacities, including social skills, vocational interests, and civic responsibility;
- protect youth from violence and other dangerous or negative influences;
- create a peer group that exerts positive influence on each other;
- provide opportunities for children and youth to contribute to their community and society; and
- enrich young people's academic performance and educational commitment.

As General Colin Powell recognized, this second promise is "just common sense." The collective work of America's Promise and many

other organizations and individuals has resulted in significant progress in this area. But if we are to make the promise come true, we must make quality and accessibility top priorities for our future work.

First, what will a community look like when it fulfills the second promise? Let's look at the best scenario.

- There will be sufficient numbers of well-run organizations in every neighborhood to offer high-quality programs during the non-school hours (after school, evenings, weekends, school vacations, and summers).
- Youth and parents can find age-appropriate services in convenient locations and with reasonable costs.
- Support will be in place to help the providers of these services maintain and improve the quality of their programs on a regular basis, for example, training to build the skills of staff who work in the programs.
- Partnerships between nonprofits, businesses and corporations, local government, schools, and other public institutions will continue to ensure that all children and youth are well-served by these programs.
- Public commitment to continue these activities today and in the future will be visible and widespread.

Does such a community now exist? Not yet—but there are hundreds of places across the

Museums, libraries, and parks are reaching out to children and youth to join their after-school programs and cultural events.



country moving in that direction. We are seeing signs of how this promise can come to life in rural communities, small cities, and large metropolitan areas. Adults are becoming involved as volunteers in after-school programs and teen centers in places like Peoria (Ill.) and Philadelphia. In Lake Charles (La.) a new information and referral phone line was started to connect residents to resources in the community. In Houston, community businesses are committed to increasing the number of volunteers who work with children during and after the school day. Existing youth-serving organizations are opening their doors to more and more youth each year, while museums, libraries, and parks are reaching out to children and youth to join their after-school programs and cultural events. Boston, Seattle, and Hampton (Va.), to name a few, have implemented citywide strategies for creating youth development opportunities during the non-school hours.

The high profile of the 1997 summit and the ongoing leadership of America's Promise increased the visibility and raised the awareness of the importance of safe places and structured activities. America's Promise challenges businesses, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and civic groups to be more intentional about how their contributions can support the places where children and youth spend their non-school hours.

Many of the America's Promise's strategies were built on the experience and knowledge of innovative leaders in the youth development and education fields. Karen Pittman and Michele Cahill began writing in the late 1980s about the importance of focusing on the positive development of youth to help them develop the skills and competencies for success. Michele Seligson and Michael Allenson created a manual in 1993 that became a resource to practitioners working with children in the after-

school hours. The early research of Search Institute to identify assets for children that could stave off negative behaviors, Chapin Hall Center for Children's work to identify the primary supports needed to raise healthy children and support strong families, and Public/Private Ventures research on mentoring and community-driven youth development initiatives all contributed to the understanding we have today of what it takes to make this promise real.

The progress we see today was also informed by national and local initiatives that sought to increase the resources available to youth in the non-school hours. The Beacon Schools in New York City and L.A.'s BEST in Los Angeles are community strategies that utilize the schools as ready-made resources for after-school programs, and combine public dollars with private grants to sustain the programs. The MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) Initiative was designed in 1994 to build systems in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle that would increase the numbers of youth who could participate in after-school programs and improve the quality of those programs. In each city, the successes of MOST galvanized youth workers, parents, and government officials to strengthen after-school services through new citywide initiatives such as the 2 to 6 Initiative in Boston.

By far the largest national effort began as a partnership between the U.S. Department of Education and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to support the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Over 3,600 schools have received funding to provide academic enrichment and other constructive activities in more than 900 rural and inner-city communities. The



**Outreach strategies should be used to familiarize parents and children with neighborhood programs and after-school activities.**

It is not enough to have more programs and opportunities unless we ensure that all of those programs and opportunities attain a level of quality where we can be certain that the young people who participate in them are getting the best experiences possible.

latest commitment of \$846 million in federal dollars will add nearly 400 new community learning centers in schools around the country.

And yet, the contributions of these many varied efforts are not sufficient to meet the demand from children and their families. Conservatively, between 5 and 8 million youth do not have a safe place or constructive activities during the non-school hours. (The National Institute on Out-of-School Time at Wellesley College estimates that number to be as high as 11 million youth.) We will need ongoing commitments from federal and state governments, local taxes, contributions from national and local funders, and United Way contributions to keep the movement headed in the right direction.

What have we learned from these many varied strategies?

- One size does not fit all. Children and youth have different skills and interests, so programs and communities need flexible structures in which to provide services. In some communities, this may mean relying on the schools; in others, it means a combination of school-based and other types of organizations such as the YMCA, grassroots youth programs, local religious institutions, and 4-H. It also means offering a range of program activities—those that help youth excel academically, try out their artistic or musical skills, participate in sports or other physical activities, learn to use the computer, read for pleasure, or contribute to their neighborhood through community service.
- Partnerships have to be authentic, long-lasting, and coordinated. People in different types of institutions, organizations, and

businesses may have different languages, expectations, and measures of success. Often a “translator” is needed to make sure that the partners can have a genuine dialogue about strategies, barriers, and potential resources. Goals for the partnership should be clearly articulated and each party held accountable for its role.

- The more people involved in the design, implementation, governance, and assessment of the activities, the more likely that these programs will have buy-in from youth participants, their parents, staff, and community residents. Programs are better when young people are actively involved in the decisions about program delivery and content.
- Many communities have little infrastructure in place to support the work on the ground. National initiatives may bring much needed resources to the table, but sustainability will not be achieved if knowledge and skills are not built into the community. Intermediary organizations can work hand-in-hand with providers to offer staff training, raise funds, assess program effectiveness, and build public support for ongoing programming during the non-school hours.
- We must take a multifaceted approach to building the kind of resources that will be most effective for our children and youth during the non-school hours. Those approaches include reaching out to youth who are not involved in constructive activities, evaluating promising practices and translating the findings into advice and resources for program providers, and involving important constituencies (such as parents) to improve services and build public support.

How do we take the next steps to fulfilling the promise?

## Improving Program Quality

It is not enough to have more programs and opportunities unless we ensure that all of those programs and opportunities attain a level of quality where we can be certain that the young people who participate in them are getting the best experiences possible. Current research and evaluation tells us that young people can get different kinds of benefits from the involvement in out-of-school time activities. Yet we are reasonably sure that not all programs live up to the promise of a quality experience for youth.

The National 4-H Council's Innovation Center considers the following elements essential to quality youth programs:

- a stable place which is theirs and where they feel safe;
- access to basic care and services that are appropriate, affordable, and if necessary, confidential;
- high-quality instruction and training;
- opportunities to develop social and strategic networks;
- opportunities to develop sustained, caring relationships;
- challenging experiences that are appropriate, diverse, and sufficiently intense; and
- opportunities for real participation and involvement in the full range of community life.

Important efforts are under way to define standards for quality and help organizations meet those standards in order to improve the quality of activities. Several years ago, the National School Age Care Alliance (NSACA) developed quality standards for after-school programs primarily focused on serving elementary aged youth in the after-school hours. Kansas City and Baltimore are examples of cities that have created quality standards for local

providers. In both cases, local intermediary organizations (Youth Net in Kansas City and BBravo for Youth in Baltimore) are providing technical assistance and training to area providers and plan to use the standards to measure the effectiveness of programs. National youth-serving organizations and networks such as the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, YouthBuild, and the National Youth Employment Coalition have their own set of quality standards in place for members. At the national level, the Promising Practices network, managed by the Center for Youth Development in Washington, D.C., with funding from the Mott Foundation, has convened experts in the field to help define program quality and develop strategies to help organizations achieve high-quality programs.

Out-of-school time programs need to address the different interests and skill levels of children and youth by having a variety of age-appropriate activities and structures. Not all options have to exist in every neighborhood, but there should be a reasonable array of high-quality options from which to choose. Providers should take advantage of existing resources to expand options. In Chicago, museums and cultural institutions provide staff to run after-school activities on painting, music and dance, and protecting the environment. Youth are encouraged to attend cultural events at these institutions with their families, and in some cases, may be hired as interns to work with younger children during the summer.

Right now, schools have become the focal point for out-of-school time activities (at least during the hours immediately after the school day), and yet, that setting may not be the most appropriate for all children and youth or for different times of the day or year. While many of the national initiatives are effectively targeting school-based services, we need to look beyond those boundaries to identify and

strengthen other types of providers, including grassroots organizations, community-based programs, parks and cultural institutions, and universities and community colleges.

While the skills and knowledge of the adults who work in these programs are critical factors in determining program quality, recruiting and preparing new staff, and access to ongoing support and professional development are often given short shrift. In addition, wages and benefits for staff are typically low, and staff turnover in some programs may reach 50% in a given year. If we are truly trying to reach the millions of children and youth in the country, we must grow and nurture a skilled workforce.

We can learn from existing work how best to do this. For example, the BEST Initiative has helped expand youth worker training in 15 cities through partnerships with local intermediary organizations, professional associations, and community and four-year colleges. Concordia College in St. Paul (Minn.) created a distance learning degree program in youth and child development that now includes students from several states. In Washington, a state-funded “Career and Wage Ladder” project will supplement workers’ wages based on levels of staff education, experience, and job responsibility. We must come to expect that all adults will be adequately prepared and adequately compensated for this most important career—and that the cost of operating programs includes resources to meet this goal.

### Increasing Accessibility to Program Services

Barriers keep some children and youth out of these youth development programs even when they exist. Cost and transportation are two major reasons that participation is not feasible for some families. Many of the new initiatives address the cost factor by providing free or low-

cost programs. However, cost may still be a barrier if parents are expected to buy uniforms or equipment for their children to participate in certain activities, or pay additional fees for field trips, meals, or special activities.

The transportation barrier—which is, like every other priority, a financing issue—has been difficult for most communities to overcome. School buses, public transportation, or organization-owned vans combine to help children and youth get to program locations. However, these resources are usually quite limited. For example, school buses may be available to drop youth at an after-school program near their homes, but are not available to get them home at the end of the day. For older youth who can take public transportation, that service may have limited hours of operation in the evenings and on weekends. We should look for opportunities to experiment with the use of school or public buses, and form partnerships with city planning agencies, the bus drivers’ union, and other specialized resources to tackle this issue.

Another, sometimes less obvious, barrier for children and youth is the atmosphere or culture of the organization where non-school hour programs are offered. Active outreach strategies should be utilized to familiarize parents and children with neighborhood programs and to identify and encourage participation by youth who are not as likely to “walk in the door” on their own. The Children’s Aid Society in New York made special efforts to contact youth who had been suspended from school or were involved in gangs by delivering services at different locations in the city. The Forest Hills settlement house in New York created the “HotSpots” program in which they sent staff out to street corners and other places where teens congregate. Staff got to know the young people on their own turf and helped to connect them to a variety of resources in the community. Boys and Girls Clubs of

America and 4-H have successfully implemented another type of outreach strategy—they started new clubs in public housing developments and Indian reservations—to place the services in communities where none existed.

Finally, ethnicity and class issues continue to interfere with our ability to ensure that all children and youth can take advantage of positive supports and opportunities during the non-school hours. We must be vigilant against policies, practices, and funding priorities that exclude some children and youth because of their academic skills, cultural backgrounds, age, residence, or ability to pay. Safe places and structured activities during the non-school hours are not just for some kids. We need to make it a promise within the promise that every child has the right to participate.

### Bibliography

Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Leffert, N., and Roehlekepartain, E. C. (1999). *A fragile foundation: The state of developmental assets among youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

McLaughlin, M. W. (2000). *Community counts: How youth organizations matter for youth development*. Washington, D.C.: Public Education Network.

National 4-H Council (March 1999). *Youth Leadership for Development: Civic activism as a component of youth development programming*. Chevy Chase, MD: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development ([www.fourhcouncil.edu/cyd](http://www.fourhcouncil.edu/cyd)).

Roth, J., Brooks-Gunn, J., Murray, L., and Foster, W. (1998). Promoting healthy adolescents: Synthesis of youth development program evaluations. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 8 (4), 423–459.

Seligson, M., and Allenson, M. (1993). *School-age child care: An action manual for the 90's and beyond*. 2nd Edition. Westport, CT: Auburn House.

Tierney, J., and Grossman, J. with Resch, N. (Nov. 1995). *Making a difference: An impact study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*. Public/Private Ventures ([www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org)).

### Conclusion

Quality and accessibility must be addressed as we move forward to reaching the promise of safe places with structured activities during the non-school hours. We should be pleased about the heightened attention to this cause and the new resources that have made more out-of-school time programs available. But we will not be finished with our pledge until we make sure that all children and youth who need them can be a part of high-quality, easily accessible programs and services that meet their developmental needs for support and opportunities during the non-school hours. America's Promise, national and local youth-serving organizations, local parent groups, and key community decision makers must continue to bring positive pressure on all of us as citizens, policy makers, practitioners, and funders to make this promise a reality for this generation and those to come.

U.S. Department of Education (September 2000). *21st century community learning centers: Providing quality afterschool learning opportunities for America's families*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education ([www.ed.gov/21stcclc](http://www.ed.gov/21stcclc)).

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice (April 2000). *Working for children and families: Safe and smart after-school programs*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice.

Author's notes:

For information about professional development and wage strategies, contact the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at [www.niost.org](http://www.niost.org); the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work at [www.nti.org](http://www.nti.org); and the Finance Project at [www.financeproject.org](http://www.financeproject.org).

For information about quality standards, contact Boys and Girls Clubs of America at [www.bgca.org](http://www.bgca.org); YouthNet of Greater Kansas City at [www.kcyouthnet.org](http://www.kcyouthnet.org); the National School Age Care Alliance at [www.nsaca.org](http://www.nsaca.org); and BBravo for Youth in Baltimore at 410-332-7467.