

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY: INCREASING ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

In Illinois, over half a million children in kindergarten through twelfth-grade are responsible for taking care of themselves after school.¹ Nationally, between seven and fifteen million children go home to an empty house on any given day.² When middle- to upper-class students go home they have a myriad of enrichment activities available to them including Boy and Girl Scouts, music and art instruction, religious group activities, and organized sports.³ Students from low-income families however, are more likely to watch television or play informally with friends during after-school hours.⁴ Since school-aged children spend up to 80% of their time outside of school⁵, after-school hours provide a great opportunity for child development and enrichment.

Unfortunately, there exists a large gap in participation in high quality after-school programs between children from low-income communities and children in mid- to high-income communities. There has been a lot of speculation as to why the gap in participation exists; but there has also been substantial research on this topic. In general, studies show that this gap exists because high quality programs are less accessible to low-income youth than to higher-income youth. While policy-makers and funders are trying to solve this inequality by increasing the

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¹ *Afterschool in Illinois*, AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE, available at http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/policyStateFacts.cfm?state_abbr=IL.

² Linda Lumsen, *After School Programs*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/3400/digest171.pdf?sequence=1>.

³ LB Blume & MJ Zembar, *After-School Programs Promote Children's Development*, EDUCATION.COM, available at <http://www.education.com/reference/article/after-school-programs-development/>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Lillian Coltin, *Enriching Children's Out-of-School Time*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/eeearchive/digests/1999/coltin99.pdf>.

number of programs in low-income communities, this approach assumes the *access*-problem is also a *supply*-problem. However, the numbers disagree.

In this paper I recommend policy-makers abandon the current approach—increasing the number of programs—and instead, advocate for three changes to childcare financial assistance programs. Namely, I recommend childcare assistance programs: (1) Remove work and training requirements for parents applying for after-school childcare assistance; (2) Raise the age at which after-school assistance is cut-off for children to qualify for childcare assistance; and (3) Refrain from conditioning after-school program funding on improved standardized test scores alone. These changes are recommended as a way to maximize participation in high quality after-school programs by youth from low-income communities.

To provide a better understanding of the type of programs that should be funded, Part I of this paper discusses the characteristics of high quality after-school programs. Too often after-school programs are created without regard to evidence-based best practices and thus are not maximizing benefits for the youth that do participate. To help highlight the need for funding, Part II discusses the benefits of high quality after-school programs and briefly discusses how sustained engagement helps maximize these benefits. Part III includes an overview of how after-school programs are typically funded, with a slight focus on programs in Illinois.

Part IV covers participation rates among low-income students and contemplates why these rates are so low. The paper concludes by recommending three changes to childcare assistance programs as a way to improve at-risk youth enrollment and participation in high quality after-school programs.

I. CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS⁶

While studies conducted over the last ten years indicate that participation in after-school programs can help reduce the achievement gap, not all programs are created equal. Participation in low quality programs, or limited participation in high quality programs may not be beneficial at all. Therefore, it is important that programs offer only the highest quality services and follow evidence-based recommendations and best practices.

To provide “high quality” results, the focus of after-school programming needs to move beyond childcare and supervision to enrichment and development.

⁶ While participation in any well-structured, organized group can aid in child development and academic achievement, for purposes of this paper after-school programs include only programs that offer more than one activity and that operate on a regular basis. After-school programs include before school, after school, and summer programs. See Rose Garrett, *Do After School Programs Give Students a Boost?*, available at http://www.education.com/magazine/article/Afterschool_Programs/; see also THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, *Can After School Help Level the Playing Field*, 19, available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

Fostering development allows youth to grow, be creative, and shape their circumstances, not just react to them.⁷ Over the last fifteen years there have been a variety of studies on what makes a program “high quality.” The most recent and well-respected studies share four characteristics that are touted as important, if not necessary, for high quality after-school programming. An overview of all four characteristics follows.

A. Positive and Safe Environment

At a minimum, high quality after-school programs must provide a safe environment for all children.⁸ In a low-income community, youth may face violence on a daily basis. Most juvenile crime and violence occurs in the hours immediately after school.⁹ The constant threat of violence often prevents youth from visualizing and planning for their future because they fear they will not survive into adulthood.¹⁰ Safe after-school environments can provide a reprieve from juvenile violence and help youth cope with unsafe circumstances faced outside the program doors.¹¹

In addition to a safe environment, staff members should provide a positive and supportive environment for all participants. Youth who receive positive reinforcement and encouragement from program staff are more likely to want to participate in after-school programs and are more likely to continue over the long run. Moreover, participants in positive after-school programs can gain additional benefits, such as higher self-esteem and improvements in attitudes and behaviors generally.

B. Well-Structured Programming

Improvements in program structure are necessary to improve the overall quality of existing after-school programs. Improvements to overall structure, if implemented correctly, can help increase program enrollment and more importantly, help maintain youth enrollment and participation. Specifically,

⁷ Lisa Stiegman, *Achievement Gap or Development Gap? Afterschool Programs like All Starts Project, Inc. Could be a Solution* (2012).

⁸ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 19 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁹ Keeping your Child Safe: The Benefits of After-School Programs, FAMILYEDUCATION.COM, available at <http://school.familyeducation.com/school-safety-month/safety/58295.html>.

¹⁰ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 19 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

¹¹ Keeping your Child Safe: The Benefits of After-School Programs, FAMILYEDUCATION.COM, available at <http://school.familyeducation.com/school-safety-month/safety/58295.html>.

research recommends tailoring programs to youth interests, needs, and schedules¹², in addition to maintaining an educated and well-trained staff.¹³

Tailored Programs

An oft cited reason for low-participation in after-school programs among teens and older youth is lack of interest. The more the program resembles glorified childcare, the less likely the young adult will want to participate; and who can blame them? In an effort to increase enrollment and maintain engagement throughout the life of the program, there needs to be a greater focus on tailored experiences.¹⁴ When programs are relevant and created around the needs and interests of students, the programs are more attractive to youth and ultimately, should result in higher enrollment. Moreover, if programs can provide activities that are tailored to each individual, youth are likely to be engaged in a more meaningful and reflective manner.¹⁵

To maximize the benefits of tailored programs, after-school programs should provide tailored, long-term activities. Tailored, long-term projects and productions require student commitment and can help youth develop long-term planning skills and project development experience.¹⁶ This type of programming can help maintain sustained, consistent youth participation. Meaningful, reflective engagement in tailored, long-term projects and productions can maximize benefits received from high quality after-school programs and help participants give-back to the community. As David Cherry, Director of Chicago's All Star Project was quoted saying, "For so long the poor have been related to as recipients, receivers. Poor people, as well as wealthy people, have something to give."¹⁷

Well-Trained Staff

When programs can afford to do so, they should hire educated staff with background knowledge in childhood development and experience mentoring youth.¹⁸ However, the cost of hiring highly educated or experienced staff is often prohibitive for many after-school programs. When unable to hire the most qualified staff, research shows that regular staff trainings can help improve program quality.

¹² After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 6, (2008).

¹³ Sheldon, Jessica, et. al. *Investing in Success: Key Strategies for Building Quality in After-School Programs*, Am J Community Psychol, 401 (2010).

¹⁴ After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 6, (2008).

¹⁵ Lillian Coltin, *Enriching Children's Out-of-School Time*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/ecearchive/digests/1999/coltin99.pdf>.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Lisa Stiegman, *Achievement Gap or Development Gap? Afterschool Programs like All Starts Project, Inc. Could be a Solution*, (2012)(quoting David Cherry, Director of All Stars Project, Inc.).

¹⁸ After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 6 (2008).

Not surprisingly, one-time staff trainings have proved unsuccessful in helping staff provide youth with high quality after school care and development.¹⁹ However, quantity of training alone may not impact quality of the after-school program either.²⁰ As with after-school programs, staff trainings should focus on quality over quantity.²¹ Staff should be trained on how to build relationships with youth, how to facilitate discussions, and how to maintain youth engagement. These trainings should be tailored towards the community served by the program. Moreover, staff should be encouraged to be positive and supportive, not punitive or negative. Programs are most effective when staff view youth as “resources to be developed, rather than problems to be managed.”²²

C. A Wide Variety of Activities and Programs

A study conducted by The After-School Corporation (TASC) found that the primary feature of high-performing after-school programs is a diverse program offering.²³ In fact, an all-encompassing and exclusive focus on academics may be detrimental to academic achievement, especially for low-performing students.²⁴ Instead, after-school programs should provide a multi-faceted approach to academic improvement, offering participants apprenticeships, skill-building activities, leadership development, and other experiential learning opportunities.²⁵

Programs that provide mentoring and community service experiences can provide youth an opportunity to explore a variety of work environments in which they may find competencies and interests in areas they had not considered.²⁶ Therefore, when school-aged children do not perform well academically, it is even more pressing that they are involved in enriching after-school programs.

D. Community Partnerships

Another characteristic common among high quality after-school programs is community partnerships. Community partnerships can be between the program and all places where students are learning, such as schools, home, religious establishments, businesses, libraries, community learning centers, and other after-

¹⁹ Sheldon, Jessica, et. al. Investing in Success: Key Strategies for Building Quality in After-School Programs, *AM J COMMUNITY PSYCHOL*, 401 (2010).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² Linda Lumsen, *After School Programs*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/3400/digest171.pdf?sequence=1>.

²³ *Id.* at 3.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 5.

²⁶ Lillian Coltin, *Enriching Children's Out-of-School Time*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/eeearchive/digests/1999/coltin99.pdf>.

school programs.²⁷ The idea of school partnerships, according to the Harvard Family Research Project, is not to replicate in-school learning, but to support it.²⁸ These partnerships can help support academic success and introduce children from low-income families to new ideas, programs, people, and environments; all of which can help children develop new skills and academic interests, and help promote sustained participation in after-school programs.

II. BENEFITS OF HIGH QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

After-school programs with characteristics of those discussed above provide a variety of benefits, especially for disadvantaged youth. While these programs help support working families by playing a childcare role²⁹, they should be recognized as more than glorified childcare. After-school programs provide youth with academic supports and enrichment activities they are unlikely to receive if left unsupervised during after-school hours.³⁰

A. Benefits

At a basic level, after-school programs reduce risky behavior and juvenile crime. Unsurprisingly, the peak time for juvenile crime is between 3-6 pm, the hours that youth are most often left unsupervised.³¹ When youth are left unsupervised they are more likely to participate in risky behavior such as drug use, violence, and sex.³² As unsupervised hours increase, the likelihood of participation in risky behavior rises. By engaging at-risk youth in high quality programs during after-school hours, the opportunity to participate in illegal behavior is reduced. This benefit is realized not only because the youth are supervised for more hours, but arguably, because they are experiencing positive interactions with adults in the community. Support for this argument was found in a study of Chicago neighborhoods in which overall violence was reduced when community residents increased their level of positive involvement with children.³³

After-school programs also offer a variety of health benefits. For some low-income youth, the hours after school are a time to rummage the snack cabinet and watch television; for other low-income youth, the hours after school may be spent hoping they get dinner. After-school programs provide an avenue for low-income youth to learn about proper nutrition, avoid unhealthy snacking, and

²⁷ After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 5 (2008).

²⁸ *Id.* at 9.

²⁹ *Id.* at 2.

³⁰ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 22 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

³¹ After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 4 (2008).

³² Peggy Patten & Anne Robertson, Focus on After-School Time for Violence Prevention, EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE INFORMATION CENTER, U.S. Department of Education.

³³ *Id.*

participate in structured recreational activities.³⁴ Better health can lead to less missed school days and better focus while in school.

While most studies show improvement in academic outcomes for children involved in high quality programs, they do not show great improvement as measured by standardized test scores.³⁵ The Bush administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) created a demand for programs that improve standardized test scores among students in failing schools. Consequently, NCLB created a shift in program evaluation away from overall academic success to actual improvements in standardized test scores. Unfortunately, evaluations from this perspective are unlikely to find many "successful" after-school programs.

It is important to recognize that low-income children gain significant benefits from high quality after-school programs, benefits not demonstrated in common standardized tests. Rather, the programs support positive learning outcomes and can lead to long-term academic success.³⁶ Participation in high quality after-school programs can lead to improved work habits and task persistence, positive attitudes and behaviors, and increased social and emotional skills.³⁷ Participation has a positive effect on school attendance, suspension rates, and high school dropout rates.³⁸ Moreover, programs offer time for social, emotional, and physical skill development that disadvantaged youth might not otherwise receive in an academic setting or outside the program walls.³⁹

From an emotional perspective, when children and adolescents experience academic failure or are not receiving the supports they need to succeed academically, they can get frustrated and lose self-confidence. Low self-esteem and accomplishment can lead to depression, further academic failure, and other negative outcomes. For these youth, high quality after-school programs can provide exposure to a variety of environments, ideas, and activities that the youth may not have otherwise discovered. Exposure to new ideas and environments can help youth uncover interests and talents outside the classroom. Providing an avenue for youth to challenge and discover themselves can lead to innumerable gains including higher self-esteem and a sense of belonging, all which contribute to an enriched life.⁴⁰

³⁴ After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 5 (2008).

³⁵ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 18 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

³⁶ After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 3 (2008).

³⁷ LB Blume & MJ Zembar, *After-School Programs Promote Children's Development*, EDUCATION.COM, available at <http://www.education.com/reference/article/after-school-programs-development/>.

³⁸ Linda Lumsen, *After School Programs*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/3400/digest171.pdf?sequence=1>.

³⁹ LB Blume & MJ Zembar, *After-School Programs Promote Children's Development*, EDUCATION.COM, available at <http://www.education.com/reference/article/after-school-programs-development/>.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

B. Sustained Participation and Program Engagement

Benefits gained from high quality after-school programs cannot be realized from one time or minimal participation. In general, greater participation results in greater results, especially for low-income children.⁴¹ Recent studies show adolescents who attend after-school programs more often (intensity) have higher grades, graduation rates, and better social skills than those who attend less frequently.⁴² Since continued participation is important to maximize results, it is more important than ever that we fund high quality programs for youth regardless of their age.

III. FUNDING HIGH QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

After-school programs are funded primarily through federal, state and local programs. When government assistance does not cover program expenses, programs seek in-kind contributions; when that is not enough, as is often the case, programs charge participation fees. An overview of government programs that can assist with after-school program expenses is provided below.

A. Federal Funds

The government spends roughly 1.1 billion dollars per year on after-school programming.⁴³ Most federal funds come from (1) the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF); (2) the 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC); (3) the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit; and (4) various federal entitlement and block grant programs.

Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)

CCDF is the primary federal program dedicated to childcare and after-school programming.⁴⁴ The program provides vouchers or subsidies for childcare costs for children aged five to twelve and can be used for preschool, before-school

⁴¹ After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 3 (2008).

⁴² Sheldon, Jessica, et. al. *Investing in Success: Key Strategies for Building Quality in After-School Programs*, AM J COMMUNITY PSYCHOL (2010), (results differ from less quality-oriented programs) see also Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 21 (2009).

⁴³ Phillips Smith, Emilie, et al., *Measuring Collective Efficacy Among Children in Community-based Afterschool Programs: Exploring Pathways toward Prevention and Positive Youth Development*, AM J COMMUNITY PSYCHOL (2013).

⁴⁴ Child Care and Development Fund, HHS.GOV/RECOVERY, (last visited May 2013), available at <http://www.hhs.gov/recovery/programs/acf/childcare.html>. In fiscal year (FY) 2012, CCDF received \$5.21 billion; in FY 2013 President Obama proposed an additional \$825 million be allocated to the Fund. See President Obama's Fiscal Year 2013 Budget Proposals, available at <http://www.afscme.org/issues/legislative-weekly-reports/body/Budget-Attachment-WR-2-17-12..pdf>.

and after-school programs, and summer care.⁴⁵ Families are responsible for part of the cost, determined by a sliding scale.⁴⁶ To be eligible, families must be working or in an education or training program.⁴⁷ States can use the federal dollars to provide funding directly to families in the form of vouchers or provide access to care through contracts with childcare centers.⁴⁸

21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC)

21st CCLC provides grants to school districts, cities, counties, and community organizations for after-school programs targeting at-risk populations.⁴⁹ The original goal of 21st CCLC was to meet the educational, health, social service, cultural, and recreational needs of inner-city kids.⁵⁰ Then, in response to No Child Left Behind, CCLC switched its focus to academics, to help students meet state and local achievement standards in math and reading.⁵¹

However, as described above, youth who participate in high quality programs can expect improvement in academic achievement generally, but should not expect significant improvements in standardized test scores.⁵² Even though these programs provide significant life skills, academic support, and opportunities for growth for children in low-income families, because of NCLB's focus on academics, CCLC funding ebbs and flows.

To illustrate, in order to justify initial and continued investment, funders increasingly require evidence of academic gains in the form of improved standardized test scores.⁵³ If test scores remain stagnant, high quality after-school programs, lose desperately needed funding. In Illinois for example, FY2012

⁴⁵ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 9 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁴⁶ Mark Greenberg, et al., *The Child Care and Development Fund: An Overview*, 6 (2000), available at <http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/14055.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 9 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁴⁸ Child Care and Development Fund, HHS.GOV/RECOVERY, (last visited May 2013), available at <http://www.hhs.gov/recovery/programs/acf/childcare.html>.

⁴⁹ 21st Century Community Centers, WWW.ED.GOV, available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html>.

⁵⁰ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 9 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 27 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁵³ *Id.* at 16.

funding only allowed for 46,107 students to participate in 21st CCLC programs; however, 758,491 students were eligible.⁵⁴

Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC)

CDCTC provides a credit to taxpayers for 20-35% of their childcare expenses (up to \$3,000), as long as childcare is necessary for the parents to work or go to school. However the credit is nonrefundable – that is, it can only be used to reduce a family’s income tax liability to zero; any additional credit is lost.⁵⁵ Since many low-income working families earn less than the threshold amount above which they are required to start paying taxes, they do not benefit from the credit.⁵⁶ Thus, the benefits are often lost on those who need them most. While President Obama has proposed an increase in the income threshold above which the credit rate starts to phase down—a good thing for middle-income families—low-income families still receive little to no benefit from this tax credit.⁵⁷

Federal Entitlements and Block Grants

Some entitlement and block grant programs have broad or flexible goals, which are flexible enough to encompass spending on after-school programs. For example, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) can be used directly to support after-school programs or up to 30% of the funds can be transferred to the CCDF pool.⁵⁸ Community Development Block Grants, which are directed at community revitalization, may be used to improve community facilities, including those used for childcare.⁵⁹ Other grant programs that may be a source of funding for after-school programs include the Social Services Block Grant, Community Services Block Grant, and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Title V) Block Grant.⁶⁰ While these programs may offer funding for certain improvements in after-school programs, each grant comes with strings attached. So while they may be broad enough to cover extra funding, they may be too inflexible to improve overall program quality or access.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Afterschool in Illinois, AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE, available at http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/states_docs/pdfs/2012/Illinois_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

⁵⁵ 2013 Policy Budget Tax Proposals, TAX POLICY CENTER, available at <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxtopics/2013-Expand-the-CDCTC.cfm>.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ Funding for Afterschool, FIND YOUTH INFO, available at <http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/youth-topics/afterschool-programs/funding-afterschool>.

⁵⁹ Overview Federal Funding for Afterschool, AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE, available at <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/fundingFederalAtAGlance.cfm>.

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ Grants as a Viable Strategy for Public Schools, GRANT PROFESSIONALS ASSOCIATION, available at <http://grantprofessionals.org/site-map/articles/77-gpa/307-grants-as-a-viable-strategy-for-public-schools>.

B. State Funds

Teen REACH is the only fully state-funded after-school program in Illinois.⁶² Of concern however, is that in FY 2012 Governor Quinn proposed a reduction in REACH funding from \$16 million to \$2 million.⁶³ The final budget provided \$8.6 million; however, a 50% reduction in state funds for after-school programming is substantial, the results of which will soon be apparent if funding is not increased to 2011 levels.

Another program in Illinois is the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). CCAP helps income eligible families pay for their childcare services while they work, go to school, or participate in work-related training.⁶⁴ The program covers kids aged six-weeks to thirteen (thirteen to nineteen for kids with special needs). Families must cost-share on a sliding scale based on family size, income, and number of children in care.⁶⁵

C. Local Funds

Local governments can set aside funds for after-school programs as well. LA's BEST, Chicago's After School Matters, and Baltimore's Safe and Sound Initiative are examples of locally funded after-school programs.⁶⁶ However, to the extent that local government revenue depends on property taxes, municipalities with a large percentage of lower-income communities would generate less revenue for after-school programs than that of higher-income communities.⁶⁷

IV. LOW PARTICIPATION BY DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

Research indicates that of all participants, children from low-income families benefit the most from after-school programs; research also shows that they have the least access to them.⁶⁸ In general, participation in high quality after-

⁶² Afterschool in Illinois, AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE, available at: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/policyStateFacts.cfm?state_abbr=IL

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ Child Care Assistance Program, ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES, www.DHS.state.il.us/, available at <http://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=30355>.

⁶⁵ Child Care Assistance Program, YMCA LAKE COUNTY ILLINOIS, available at http://www.ywcalakecounty.org/site/c.bjjULfNPJiLgH/b.8330597/k.13A4/Childcare_Assistance_Program_CCAP.htm; *see also* Child Care Assistance Program, ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES, www.DHS.state.il.us/, available at <http://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=30355>.

⁶⁶ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 10 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ Lee Shumow, *Academic Effects of After-School Programs*, EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE INFO CENTER, U.S. Department of Education, available at http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Academic_Effects/.

school programs is lowest among low-income children and teens.⁶⁹ Contrary to initial assumptions, participation in after-school *care* is higher among African American youth versus white youth.⁷⁰ African American youth are more likely to have parents working later shifts or longer hours, resulting in greater need for participation in after-school programs. However, these students are more likely to be in the care of family or neighbors, not necessarily in after-school programs.⁷¹

Of low-income youth enrolled in after-school programs, most are participating in some form of tutoring.⁷² As previously noted, programs that are solely academic, like tutoring sessions, do not carry the same benefits as experiential learning opportunities. Children from high-income and more educated families on the other hand, participate in after-school programs in greater frequency, in a greater number of activities, and for longer periods of time.⁷³ The bottom line is that disadvantaged youth participate in high quality after-school programs at a much lower rate than children from high-income families.

A. Why Participation is Low among Disadvantaged Youth

It is often argued and widely accepted, that the supply of after-school programs exceeds the demand in low-income communities.⁷⁴ However, policy-makers and education activists must not confuse excess supply with equal access among low-income communities.⁷⁵ While seats may be open in after-school programs, cost, transportation, and family obligations may make participation difficult for this population.

While the supply of after-school programs may be greater than demand, there is little evidence that the supply of *high quality* after-school programs is greater than the demand in low-income communities. In fact, quite the opposite may be true. Low-income communities have few choices in after-school programs and what programs are available tend to focus on addressing risks rather than cultivating youth development.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 12 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ Phillips Smith, Emilie, et al., *Measuring Collective Efficacy Among Children in Community-based Afterschool Programs: Exploring Pathways toward Prevention and Positive Youth Development*, AM J COMMUNITY PSYCHOL (2013).

⁷² After School Programs in the 21st Century, HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 6 (2008).

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 13 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ Linda Lumsen, *After School Programs*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/3400/digest171.pdf?sequence=1>.

Participation Fees

If supply is not to blame for disproportionate access between low- and high-income youth, the question remains, what is? The most common and most significant reason for lack of participation in after-school programs among the low-income community—and the focus of this paper—is high participation fees. When funds from private and public sources are not enough to cover program costs, parents must pay the difference in participation fees.⁷⁷ Multiple studies indicate that parental decisions about whether or not to participate in after-school activities are very price sensitive.⁷⁸ Therefore, if program fees can be greatly reduced, or completely eliminated, more low-income youth may be able to participate.

Lower fees can help reduce overall costs to low-income families and may also eliminate some of the other common barriers to participation. For instance, another prominent barrier to access among low-income youth is their financial obligations. Youth may need to babysit their siblings in an effort for the family to save money; or teens may need to work to make money for clothes, food, or to help out at home. If fees are eliminated or significantly reduced, parents may be able to afford to enroll of their children in high quality after-school programs, eliminating the need for older children to babysit and decreasing the need for them to work. Moreover, if program fees are reduced, it may open up more choices in after-school programs, some of which may offer paid apprenticeships for older youth who would like work experience.

Other Barriers to Participation

While this paper focuses on increasing participation by changing policies related to funding, it is important to consider all barriers to access among low-income youth. As discussed above, another reason for low participation among at-risk youth is lack of interest. The more the program resembles glorified childcare, the less likely the young adult will want to participate. Youth would rather hang out with friends and prefer “freedom” to structured, supervised activities.⁷⁹ To help build interest in these programs, parents should enroll their children in programs at an early age. The earlier a child starts in after-school

⁷⁷ Lillian Coltin, *Enriching Children's Out-of-School Time*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/ecearchive/digests/1999/coltin99.pdf>.

⁷⁸ David M. Blau, *The Child Care Problem: An Economic Analysis*, 74 (2001).

⁷⁹ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 15 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

programming the more likely they are to continue in the program and the more likely they are to want to participate.⁸⁰

Similar to lack of interest among teens, a common deterrent to participation among five to nine year olds is parents' lack of interest in after-school programs.⁸¹ In a survey of low- to non-participants, 27% of parents preferred to have their children at home after school rather than in after-school programs.⁸² This may be in part because some parents may not understand the benefit of after-school programs, especially if they did not participate in after-school programs themselves.

Finally, lack of transportation is another commonly cited barrier to access for a lot of children. A 2008 study found among light and non-participants, 13-20% cited lack of transportation as the most important barrier to participation in after-school programs.⁸³ The high cost of transportation often prevents after-school programs from being able to provide transportation for their participants.⁸⁴ In urban communities particularly, families may not have access to a car and street crime might make it unsafe for youth to walk or take public transportation.⁸⁵

While there may be other barriers to participation, those discussed above are some of the most common and most significant. With a better understanding of what prevents low-income children from enrolling and participating in these programs, we are better equipped to breakdown the barriers and maximize youth participation.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE PARTICIPATION IN HIGH QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS AMONG LOW-INCOME YOUTH

A review of state legislative initiatives shows that state policy-makers are often primarily concerned with creating youth services and programs and are less concerned with ensuring program quality.⁸⁶ However, as the vast array of evidence demonstrates, policy-makers should be concentrated on the quality of programs, not quantity. To increase access to high quality after-school programs among low-income youth, we don't necessarily need to increase funding; we need to reconsider where the money is going and how it is getting there.

⁸⁰ Phillips Smith, Emilie, et al., *Measuring Collective Efficacy Among Children in Community-based Afterschool Programs: Exploring Pathways toward Prevention and Positive Youth Development*, AM J COMMUNITY PSYCHOL (2013).

⁸¹ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 15 (2009).

⁸² *Id.*

⁸³ *Id.* at 14

⁸⁴ Linda Lumsen, *After School Programs*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/3400/digest171.pdf?sequence=1>.

⁸⁵ Can After School Help Level the Playing Field, THE CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, 14 (2009), available at http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf.

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 25.

A. Recommendations

Remove Work and Training Requirements for Parents Applying for After-School Program Assistance

Current funding programs provide benefits for working parents and parents who are in school or participating in some formal training.⁸⁷ Therefore, children living in one-parent households where the parent is unemployed and also not in school, and children living in two-parent households where both parents are unemployed and out of school, would not qualify for most, if not all, of the programs mentioned above. Those parents may be unemployed through no fault of their own and yet their children do not qualify for childcare assistance because of that unemployment.

To be eligible for CCAP, CDCTC, and CCDF, for example, a parent must be employed or in an education or training program. Arguably, children in families who do not qualify for childcare assistance based on a parent's unemployment are most in need of these programs. Thus, by qualifying assistance on employment, these programs miss a subset of low-income youth that may need access to high quality programs the most. Essentially, we are punishing the children for the trials and tribulations faced by their parents. Therefore, programs like CCAP, CDCTC, and CCDF should have all low-income families qualify regardless of their employment status. This would automatically increase the number of eligible families for these programs and could result in significant increases in after-school program enrollment.

Raise the Age at which Children Lose Eligibility for Childcare Assistance

Most childcare subsidy programs have an age cut-off of thirteen. For instance, CCDF provides subsidies for children six-weeks through thirteen years of age. However, youth in their teenage years are most at-risk of dropping out of school, engaging in risky behaviors such as sex, drug use, and violence, and are more likely to need positive relationships with an adult mentor than younger youth. An easy solution to help capture more teenaged youth in after-school programs may be to increase the cut-off age associated with after-school subsidy programs. Doing so would extend the length of time children qualify for childcare assistance. This could help those at the cut-off age remain in high-quality programs and encourage parents to enroll their older children in quality programs for the first time.

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 24.

Funding for After-School Programs Should Not be Contingent upon Improved Standardized Test Scores

As discussed in detail above, many funding streams are contingent on evidence of academic progress. Due in significant part to NCLB, after-school programs are commonly evaluated based on improvements in standardized test scores instead of overall academic progress. Thus, many quality programs that may provide participants with a variety of enriching activities are losing funding because participants are not showing significant increases in standardized test scores. While test scores are easy to track, NCLB has come under scrutiny and so too should the evaluation of after-school programs based on NCLB policies. While funding should be directed towards high quality after-school programs, significant increases in test scores are not likely, even in the highest quality programs; therefore program quality should not be evaluated based solely on test scores.

Instead, programs should be evaluated on a variety of success indicators. The Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (NWREL) has developed a guide to help after-school programs evaluate the success and progress of their program offerings.⁸⁸ NWREL suggests evaluating programs based on a variety of indicators, including school attendance, behavior, alignment with school objectives, participant engagement, parent involvement and feedback, and grades. While these qualities are more difficult to track, they provide a holistic view of what makes a program high quality and thus are more appropriate considerations for purposes of allocating funds.

B. Current Policies and Programs

Recently the hot-topic in education has been extended learning time. In a current project funded in large part by the Ford Foundation, starting this year, eleven districts across five states will extend their school time by at least 300 hours. The three-year pilot hopes to make American students more competitive in the global market. Participating schools are increasing hours in various ways; for example, some schools are adding recess, tutoring, and arts and science programs as opposed to longer class time.⁸⁹ Increasing access to high quality after-school programs aligns with the goal of the pilot and could help provide more opportunity for low-income communities participating in the project.

These recommendations also align with the Illinois Afterschool Youth Development Program Act, which was signed into law in July 2010.⁹⁰ The Act

⁸⁸ NORTHWEST REGION EDUCATION LABORATORY, *Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation: Tools for Action*, available at http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/148.

⁸⁹ *Id.*

⁹⁰ Afterschool in Illinois, AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE, available at: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/policyStateFacts.cfm?state_abbr=IL.

made access to afterschool programs a state priority⁹¹ and created the Illinois Youth Development Council and a three-year Afterschool Demonstration Project. As of fall 2011, the demonstration project had not been funded. However, the state priority still exists. By the nature of their purpose—to increase participation in high quality programs by at-risk youth—these recommendations fit within the goals of the Act.

VI. CONCLUSION

In Illinois, over half a million children in kindergarten through twelfth-grade are responsible for taking care of themselves after school.⁹² Since school-aged children spend up to 80% of their time outside of school⁹³, there lies a great opportunity for child development and enrichment during these after-school hours. High quality after-school programs can help disadvantaged youth improve academically, gain crucial life skills, and grow socially and emotionally.

Unfortunately, there exists a large gap in participation in these programs between children from low-income communities and children in mid- to high-income communities. While there are a lot of barriers to participation among low-income youth, what it boils down to, is that these youth simply do not have the same access to high quality after-school programs as youth from higher income communities.

Instead of focusing on creating new programs in low-income communities, policy-makers should focus on removing barriers that are preventing youth from accessing already established, high quality after-school programs. Based on a recent research high participation fees and opportunity costs appear to be the most common barriers to access among this population. Therefore, to help maximize participation in high quality after-school programs among at-risk youth, I recommend three changes to current childcare assistance programs.

First, eligibility should not be based on a parent's employment status. Currently, most federal and state funding programs require parents to be working or attending some formal education program to qualify for after-school program assistance. By conditioning assistance on employment or training, these programs prevent children with unemployed parents from participating in high quality after-school programs. Arguably, these children may need the benefits of after-school programming the most.

Second, I recommend the age cut-off of thirteen be raised to nineteen for all childcare assistance programs. Most childcare assistance programs cut-off assistance for youth once they turn thirteen. However, in some cases, teenagers

⁹¹ *Id.*

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ Lillian Coltin, *Enriching Children's Out-of-School Time*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER (U.S. Department of Education), available at <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/eearchive/digests/1999/coltin99.pdf>.

may be most in need of the services after-school programs can provide. Teenagers are more likely to dropout of school and participate in risky behavior than younger youth. Additionally, older youth may be in need of guidance and positive adult mentors to help stay on track for graduation and prepare for education after high school. Increasing the age at which childcare assistance eligibility ends could help provide continued growth for older youth in high quality programs.

Finally, I recommend qualifying after-school program funding on factors other than increased standardized test scores. Studies show that academic progress is likely when youth participate in high quality after-school programs, but not in the form of standardized test scores. Thus, when programs are evaluated based on test scores instead of overall academic improvement, programs that are otherwise “high quality” lose necessary funding, often forcing them to close the door to hundreds of at-risk youth.

It is my hope, that by removing barriers and increasing access to high quality after-school programs, we can take one small step towards closing the achievement gap and maximizing positive outcomes for today’s children.