After-School Programs for Low-Income Children: Promise and Challenges

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Abstract

Children's out-of-school time, long a low-level source of public concern, has recently emerged as a major social issue. This, in turn, has heightened interest in the heterogeneous field of after-school programs. This article provides a profile of after-school programs for low-income children, focusing on supply and demand, program emphases, and program sponsors and support organizations. It also discusses the major challenges facing the field in the areas of facilities, staffing, and financing. Details and examples are drawn from the ongoing evaluation of a specific after-school program initiative called MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time), which seeks to strengthen after-school programs in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle. Looking ahead, the article highlights the pros and cons of options for increasing coverage to reach more low-income children, strengthening programs, expanding funding, and articulating an appropriate role for after-school programs to fill in the lives of low-income children.

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Interest in after-school programs for low- and moderate-income children has been building throughout the 1990s. There are numerous federal proposals for new or expanded after-school program funding, new foundation grants programs, new state- and city-level initiatives, and efforts by scores of community groups around the country to create more after-school programs in their communities. Four principal factors are driving this growing interest: (1) a belief that public spaces such as streets and playgrounds are no longer safe for children's out-of-school time, (2) a sense that it is stressful and unproductive for children to be left on their own after school, (3) a concern that many children need more time and individual attention than schools can provide to master basic academic skills, and (4) a conviction that low-income children deserve the same opportunity as their more advantaged peers to explore expressive arts, sports, and other developmentally enriching activities.

In the face of growing interest in after-school programs stands a field that is a mix of contrasting elements. After-school programs are identifiable,

yet extraordinarily heterogeneous; vibrant, yet fragile. They offer children a protected space for play and exploration, yet are increasingly burdened with the task of compensating for the limitations of other social institutions. Staff-child relationships in after-school programs are usually warm and supportive, but most staff members have little formal preparation for work with children, and turnover in staff positions is high. In spite of numerous funding streams, after-school programs for low-income children are inadequately and insecurely funded. While the field is beginning to attract significant new funding, much of that funding is going to a narrow band of institutions.

There are, in other words, forces pulling after-school programs in different directions, and a certain amount of tension exists between the new policy interest in after-school programs and the marginal conditions under which many programs operate. Given this tension, what are appropriate, realistic goals and expectations of after-school programs? Where do they fit in relation to school and family? How should after-school programs be funded and the field, as a whole, organized? What supports are needed by programs and individual providers to make the work of after-school programs viable? This article describes the current status of the after-school field in terms of demand and supply, program activities, sponsoring and supporting organizations, and funding—and then discusses issues and challenges facing the field as it struggles to move toward more solid ground.

After-School Programming: Examples from Three Cities

To describe the current parameters of after-school programs serving low-income children, this article draws heavily on data from the ongoing evaluation of a specific after-school program initiative called MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time). In Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, this foundation-funded effort is working to improve the supply, accessibility, affordability, and quality of after-school programs, especially for low-income children. It is also working to strengthen the overall coherence of the system of after-school programs. (See the description of the MOST Initiative in Box 1.)[1] In all three cities, but particularly in Boston and Chicago, the school-age population is predominantly low to moderate income. Though the observations reported here are preliminary, this evaluation is the first large-scale, systematic look at programs for school-age children to be undertaken since the National Study of Before- and After-School Programs surveyed a national sample of programs in 1991, not focusing on low-income children.[2]

Need, Demand, and Supply

There are some 10 million children ages 6 through 13 in the United States living in families with incomes less than 150% of the federal poverty threshold. Estimates of the percentage of these children who need after-school programs depend on one's reasons for promoting them. A majority of low-income children need after-school programs for a practical reason—child care. In 1998, some 5.3 million low-income children between ages 6 and 12 had both parents or a single parent working after school.[3] One can argue further that after-school programs should be viewed as a normative developmental support, available to any low-income child who is interested. Many low-income children today are too much on their own, both physically and psychologically, and could benefit from safe, protected spaces to play, an extra measure of adult attention, additional help with homework, and greater opportunity to participate in art and sports activities. By that logic, virtually all low-income children need access to programs.

At the same time, the actual demand for places in after-school programs reflects a

Box 1

The MOST Initiative: Making the Most of Out-of-School Time

Because 44% of children with working parents have no adult care after school—with low-income children more likely than their more affluent peers to be left alone for long periods—the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund is supporting the creation of model school-age child care systems in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle through its MOST Initiative. Designed to help communities improve the quality and quantity of before- and after-school programs for children in elementary and middle schools, MOST also helps increase access to these programs for low-income families and improve the skills of adults who work in these settings.

The initiative, managed by the Wellesley College National Institute on Out-of-School Time, is also helping to develop a national accreditation system for school-age child care programs. The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago is evaluating the initiative that focuses on MOST's accomplishments as well as the challenges related to building, strengthening, and maintaining school-age child care providers, and community leaders in all three cities; observations of school-age child care programs; analysis of program records; and documentation of program costs.

Source: DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Web site. Grantmaking programs. July 1998. For additional information, see http://www.dewittwallace.org/programs/allprograms.htm.

variety of factors—from transportation to children's preferences (especially as they get older); from parents' awareness of available options and success getting their children enrolled[4] to their willingness and ability to pay program fees. Low-income parents' interest appears to be high when programs are free or nearly so, dropping sharply the more they are asked to pay. Many believe that, if necessary, they can leave their older children unsupervised and their younger children in sibling care for a few hours. As a result, waiting lists for free or heavily subsidized programs might exist alongside empty spaces in programs that have less access to public funding.[5]

How many low-income children are currently being served by after-school programs? There are few reliable data on this question, although parent surveys conducted for other purposes suggest participation rates of somewhere between 10% and 30%.[6] The MOST evaluation included an effort to document the supply of after-school programs in the three participating cities where, as noted earlier, the school-age population is predominantly low to moderate income. The study integrated information on the supply of programs from regulatory agencies, funders, and providers, although the data were fragmented, incomplete, and difficult to aggregate, because they referred to different phenomena.[7] In the three cities, the data revealed slots or places enough to serve 10% to 20% of the population of school-age children in programs that run daily through the year; and spaces for another 10% to 15% of the population in programs that meet episodically each week, or during the year. As Table 1 shows, the study estimated that full-time slots were available in Boston for about 14% of the school-age population; in Chicago for about 9% of the children; and in Seattle for about 35% of the relevant age group. Altogether, the limited available data suggest a sizable gap between need and supply.

Providers and Support Organizations

The supply of after-school programs that currently exists is provided by a wider variety of institutions and agencies than almost any other type of service. The largest providers to low- and moderate-income children are schools and private nonprofit social service agencies. The latter category includes child care centers,[8] organizations like settlement houses and community centers, and national youth-serving organizations like the

Table 1

Estimated Need for and Supply of After-School Programs in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, 1998

	Number of Full-Time Spaces Available	Number of School-Age Children	Percentage of School-Age Population Covered
Boston	8,000	56,000	14%
Chicago	30,000	350,000	9%
Seattle	14,000	40,000	35%

Source: Computations by author based on data gathered for the MOST evaluation discussed in this article.

Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, and Police Athletic Leagues. (See the descriptions of youth-serving organizations in the article by Quinn in this journal issue.) In some cities, parks and recreation departments are major providers, and libraries play a small but growing role.[9] Catholic schools provide some after-school programming, as do churches, community associations, tutoring or mentoring organizations, and even a few public housing authorities.

About one-third of schools in low-income neighborhoods report offering some type of after-school program,[10] which sometimes is operated by the school and sometimes is run in school space by other agencies. (See the article by Dryfoos in this journal issue.) In Seattle, for instance, 16 middle schools provide space for programs funded by the Parks and Recreation Department, which operates some programs itself and contracts with community agencies to run others. The Seattle schools also serve as host sites for programs run by the YMCA. In Boston, few schools operate after-school programs themselves, but schools provide sites for more than 50 after-school programs run by other agencies.

Churches and community associations (particularly ethnic mutual assistance associations) are providing more and more after-school programs as a by-product of their responsiveness to community needs. Both tend to have small programs that are minimally funded and staffed, and that use as many volunteers as they can find. Though small, these programs help to fill the many "microgaps" in after-school program coverage, and some play a critical bridging role between immigrant families and mainstream institutions such as schools.

In addition to agencies that provide direct service or provide space for direct services, the after-school program field includes an array of supporting organizations. These organizations license many after-school program providers, help families to find programs, and offer training, education, technical assistance, or curricular resources to direct service providers. Most (but not all) after-school programs are subject to licensing by the state and city agencies that regulate child care. Licensing agencies monitor programs to assure that minimum standards are met in such areas as program size, staff-child ratio, amount of space per child, building safety, and sometimes provider qualifications and continuing education.[11] Child care resource and referral agencies provide information on all types of child care to parents, and some offer training for providers. Cultural institutions such as museums and dance or theater companies may offer on-site activities and workshops that enrich local programs, often at minimal cost. In some cities there are unique organizations that support after-school programs. One example is the School's Out Consortium in Seattle that, among other activities, develops ongoing training and technical assistance relationships with specific programs. In Chicago, the After-School Action Program in Uptown-Edgewater serves as a hub, support mechanism, and broker for a network of 30 small providers. Staff help the programs seek funding, organize training, develop innovative programming, and identify resources in the arts, science, and tutoring.[12]

Activities and Emphases

After-school programs look, feel, and work alike in some ways, and they differ in many others. Most share a common activity structure—a mix of homework help, snacks, free time, arts and crafts, table games, gym or playground time, a weekly activity in music or dance, cultural awareness activities, and field trips. These core activities increasingly are supplemented by tutoring, reading time, and special curricular elements such as science activities. Most programs divide children into two or more age-groupings, depending on program size. The structure of activities and physical environment for younger groups are similar to those found in early childhood programs, using rooms with thematic activity areas, plentiful books, games, and supplies. The activities and environment for older children are more like those found in youth programs, with a space resembling a drop-in room with comfortable furniture but fewer materials.

After-school programs are characteristically safe places where children can be themselves and escape the pressures they may experience elsewhere. Staff are not authority figures in the traditional sense, and they usually have less of an agenda than parents or teachers. After-school programs generally are sensitive to community norms, parental preferences, and the staff's understanding of children's support needs. Their flexibility often permits them to fill in gaps in children's experiences and between the institutions in children's lives. For instance, programs for refugee and immigrant children often include some English language instruction and mediate between families and the school system.

Despite common elements and qualities, there is a good deal of variety among programs in this field. Some emphasize academics, others recreation and play, and still others arts or science. Some emphasize the goal of protecting children, others enriching their out-of-school hours, others preventing problems. A program director in one rough neighborhood in Boston noted that his main goal was "to keep kids off the street and alive." Another program in an equally rough neighborhood offered not just a safe haven but also a variety of art experiences taught by local artists, such as mask-making, dance, drumming, stilt-walking, puppetry, clay-making, theater, and silk screen techniques. Still another Boston program has a mission of building girls' interest in sports. And a principal notes that "We need to extend the school day. And how do you do that? This [the school's new after-school program] is a superlative opportunity."

Programs that operate from a recreation or social group work tradition tend to have more of a whole-group focus; those that operate from an early childhood / child care tradition have more of an individual-child focus and afford more individualized experiences. Youth-serving organizations and park districts have had an open enrollment philosophy; children become members for a nominal fee and then drop in whenever they wish during the year. The growing number of tutoring programs in the schools may serve a defined group of children two or three days a week. Programs that view their work primarily as child care tend to have a more explicit agreement or contract with parents to assume responsibility for a child every day during certain hours.

Most after-school programs share a common activity structure—a mix of homework help, snacks, free time, arts and crafts, table games, gym, cultural awareness activities, and field trips.

Differences in structure, content, and emphasis in after-school programs obviously lead to differences in children's experiences. Some degree of variability is appropriate, giving choices to children and parents. Yet it also raises the question of what low-income children's after-school time should be about. That question may prove increasingly contentious as schools and community-based organizations are pressed to work together in designing and running after-school programs. Schools, under enormous pressure to improve children's test scores, appear to believe they have no choice but to address that objective. Community-based organizations tend to believe that children need respite from school-related pressures, opportunity to

experience and explore other domains, and time to just be children. A director of a community-based program in Chicago noted that it shouldn't have to be the case, but "basically we have to be an antidote to school for kids."[13]

Common Challenges Facing After-School Programs

The growing role of after-school programs as a developmental support for low-income children, and the growing interest in them as a vehicle for addressing a variety of social concerns, heighten the need to consider the conditions under which programs operate and the nature of children's experiences in them. This section of the article examines what is known about the quality of after-school programs serving low-income children and discusses three particular factors that influence quality: facilities, staffing, and financing.

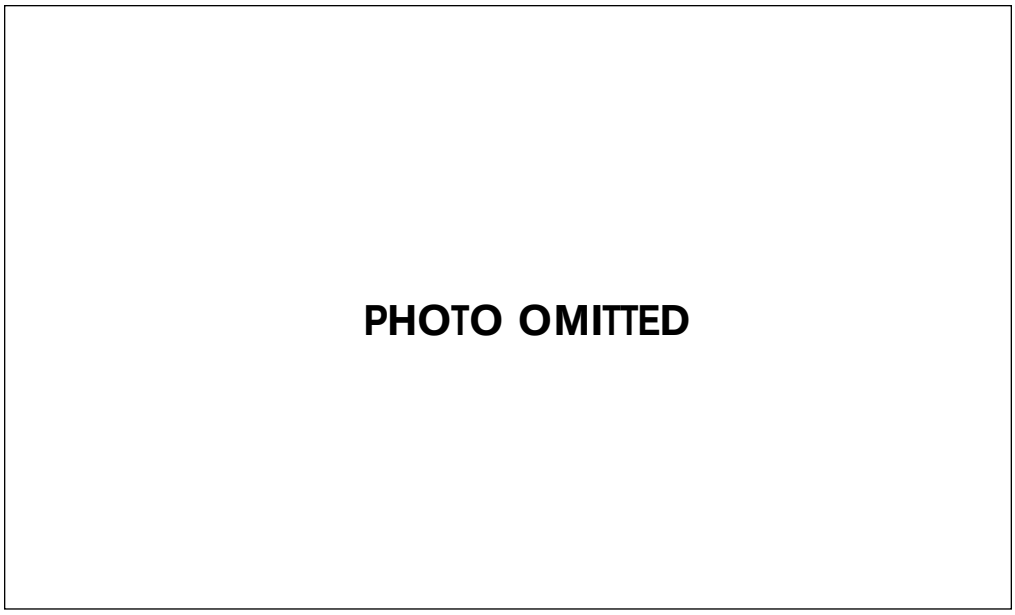
Although each program reflected a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, two-thirds rated fair to poor on the majority of program quality attributes.

There is substantial agreement about the attributes that together constitute "good enough" after-school programs. Important structural features include an adequate number of staff to assure individualized attention to children; an adequate level of staff literacy to help children with learning support needs; adequate facilities and equipment to allow a measure of variety and choice in activities; and nutritious snacks for the children. Important process attributes include warm and supportive staff, a flexible and relaxed schedule, a predictable environment, opportunity to explore ideas, feelings, and identities, avenues for self-expression, exposure to both one's own heritage and the larger culture, and time for unstructured play and simple fun.[14,15]

The available evidence suggests that, although programs for low-income children vary on these attributes, there is cause for concern about program quality. As part of the MOST evaluation, the author and colleagues made three observation visits each to a representative sample of nine programs in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle. Although each program reflected a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, two-thirds rated fair to poor on the majority of attributes noted above. Some programs observed were too thinly staffed to attend to individual children's support needs. Some were too schedule-bound, moving children from one segment of the afternoon to the next in rigid steps. Activities appeared to be unplanned. Staff frequently did not know how to gauge children's interests, or to plan and facilitate children's engagement in activities; and they usually relied on native wit in managing children. One of the author's colleagues described staff treatment of children in a particular program as "random episodes of discipline mixed in with general warmth and caring."

Other studies reinforce these findings of wide variability in quality.[16] (See the article by Vandell and Shumow in this journal issue.) For instance, an earlier study of eight inner-city programs in Chicago revealed that the staff lacked the time, and perhaps the skill and inclination, to adequately plan activities, work through issues, and develop relationships with children.[14] A not uncommon refrain of children in after-school programs is that they enjoy a program and like the staff, but there is sometimes not enough to do. This especially applies to older children; many programs provide a relatively richer, more thoughtful experience to younger participants, and older children sometimes report less emotional support from staff.

Although they could and should be improved, after-school programs do display numerous individually positive characteristics. Each hour spent in the care of an after-school program is an hour during which an inner-city child may not have to fend for himself or herself at home or in an unsafe neighborhood. Programs that present quality concerns may still provide children with opportunities to read or be read to, or to participate in dance or art activities, or just to complete their homework. One Chicago program director noted that many of her children's homes do not have the basic resources for homework, adding, "We have



encyclopedias here, dictionaries, rulers, everything you need to deal with your homework, plus a quiet place to do it." In the author and colleagues' observations, even when staff seemed a bit abrupt or did not appear to closely observe and listen to children, they were generally affectionate, and staff-child relationships were comfortable.

Yet even the more straightforward benefits of after-school programs depend to a certain extent on resources and program supports that too many programs in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to. The most pivotal problems faced by these programs revolve around resources and find expression in three areas: facilities, staff, and funding. All three areas must be addressed in a balanced way if the quality of after-school programs is to improve.

Facilities

The ownership, size, and structure of space of after-school programs shapes them in many ways. For instance, space determines program size and permits or prevents activities such as pottery or dance, or long-term projects such as murals. The physical space also tends to regulate and shape children's behavior. The national survey of programs that served more advantaged children, conducted in 1991, revealed that only 48% of before- and after-school programs had space dedicated to their programs. Half of the programs at that time relied on shared or borrowed space.[17] The same survey found that fewer than one quarter of the programs had regular access to a playground or park, while even fewer regularly used a library or special rooms for art, music, or games. Findings from the MOST evaluation indicate that the facilities (and facilities-related resources) available in low-income neighborhoods are probably even less satisfactory. Programs in youth-serving organizations tend to have dedicated space, but many other community-based programs have inadequate square footage, rely on insecure, short-term leases, or use shared or borrowed space. These arrangements constrict efforts to make improvements in facilities, because there is little incentive to invest in temporary or shared space, even if permission to do so can be secured. Moreover, programs with tenuous claims on their space usually cannot gain access to funds for facilities improvement, which are available in some states.

The challenges of renting and/or sharing space are apparent with the growing number of programs that operate in schools. School buildings offer attractive space for community-based agencies and minimize transportation problems. At the same time, community-based agencies working in the schools have found that principals are often reluctant to give up control of space (or at least want to reserve the right to reclaim it as enrollment grows), union rules require custodial staff to be paid substantial sums to stay around for an extra two or three hours to close the building, and security can be a challenge. In addition, real and imaginary

liability issues arise, equitable rental fees are hard to negotiate, school activities displace programs and disrupt their plans, and teachers are proprietary about their classrooms because they fear damage, theft, and misplaced materials.[18]

Staffing

Interviews with program directors and coordinators in the three MOST cities reveal the concern that program leaders have regarding their ability to recruit qualified staff, pay adequate salaries, and stem high rates of turnover. These staffing issues are clearly intertwined, so solutions must be devised to address them simultaneously.

Jobs in after-school programs are primarily part time and poorly paid. The 1991 national survey found that staff in after-school programs worked on average fewer than 20 hours per week.[19] Salaries in the after-school programs surveyed for the MOST evaluation range widely, but they hover around $5 to $9 per hour for front-line staff, and $8 to $15 per hour for coordinators and directors who more often work full time. Front-line staff seldom receive benefits. Staff employed by public agencies—schools, park districts, and libraries—tend to have higher hourly wages than those employed by private, nonprofit agencies. Given the pay scales noted above, it is not surprising that paid front-line staff in after-school programs in low-income neighborhoods seldom have more than a high school diploma or an associate's (AA) degree. Program coordinators and directors, many of whom started out in the early childhood field, are more likely than their staff to have college degrees.

Salaries in the after-school programs surveyed range widely, but they hover around $5 to $9 per hour for front-line staff, and $8 to $15 per hour for directors.

Few front-line staff have academic preparation for work in the after-school field, perceiving little financial gain to seeking out relevant courses, lacking time to do so, lacking interest (because they will be in the field for only a few years), and/or lacking confidence in their academic skills. Perceiving little demand, few community colleges and universities offer courses related to after-school programs, and almost none offers coherent course sequences or certificate programs in this field. That leaves those few interested students to find relevant courses in early childhood education, social work, or leisure and recreation departments. Most training and professional development activity in the field takes place in conferences or one-day workshops on particular topics.

As in the larger child care and youth-serving fields, turnover of front-line staff in after-school programs is both high—perhaps 40% or more each year—and quite variable from program to program.[20] Turnover can and does occur at any time during the year, often unexpectedly; and it is not uncommon for programs to have staff vacancies for long periods of time. This pattern spawns new problems. It multiplies the stress on remaining staff and occasionally throws programs into chaos; it may also force the hiring of people who would not ordinarily be selected. Staffing issues are ameliorated slightly by the growing use of work-study students and community service volunteers, some who receive a stipend and others who are not compensated. Tasks for volunteers include tutoring, homework help, reading with children, or escorting children safely to and from programs. Program directors appreciate the help of volunteers in assuring more individual attention to children in a field that is too thinly staffed, but they also worry about the misperception that after-school programs can be grown and strengthened simply through "volunteerism."

Financing

Most quality problems in after-school programs can be attributed in one way or another to inadequate financing. There is now growing evidence that the majority of early childhood child care in the United states is "poor to mediocre," due primarily (though not solely) to inadequate financing.[8] And however inadequately financed, child care is in a much stronger position than after-school programs. That is illustrated in another substudy conducted by the author and colleagues as part of the MOST

evaluation, which collected and analyzed information on costs, revenues, and expenditures from a sample of close to 60 programs in community-based agencies (including a handful of school-based, though not school-run, programs) serving low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle.[21]

In brief, the study found that the full cost of a year-round, five-day-a-week after-school program was typically about $80 a week (or $4,000 a year), including contributions of administrative and volunteer time and subsidized space. The cost fell to about $60 a week ($2,500 to $3,000 a year) when donated contributions were not included. Those costs are based on front-line worker salaries that average $7 per hour. When programs used specialists for arts or sports activities, costs increased accordingly. In contrast to costs, revenues in the programs sampled, though varying enormously from program to program, averaged about $30 to $40 a week per child (or $1,500 to $2,000 a year). In other words, revenues typically covered one-half to two-thirds of costs.

The number of revenue sources (see Table 2) and percentages of revenue deriving from different sources varied widely among programs. The majority of programs had three or four sources, some as many as eight or nine. Parent fees typically provided between 15% and 20% of revenue. This stands in stark contrast to after-school programs serving more advantaged children, where parent fees provided 70% to 80% of revenue.[22] Among the minority of programs that had revenue from public child care subsidies (either contracts or vouchers), those constituted anywhere from 10% to 90% of total revenue.[23] Other common public sources of funding included the Department of Justice, federal and state Department of Education, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. All told, public funding from different sources provided about 40% to 50% of total revenue for programs in this study.

How did some programs cover the gap between revenue from public subsidies, other public sources and parent fees, and the cost of providing services? United Way, foundation and corporate grants, and program fundraising closed the gap a bit.[24] There were scores of idiosyncratic funding sources, directed to specific categories of programs or even individual programs. Many programs were "subsidized," in some instances heavily, by in-kind contributions and the widespread practice of running a deficit. Programs rented space at below-market rates or used it for free; they paid less than their share of utilities; and they used volunteers or work study students. Church-run programs subsidized programs with financial and human resources from their congregations. In large, multiservice agencies, the costs of after-school programs were partly covered by the revenue from other programs that were relatively better funded. A few agencies (including YMCAs) supported services for low-income children using fees paid by more advantaged families. Many programs were flexible with parents who owed tuition, and refrained from sending their "accounts receivable" to a collection agency. Ironically, staff turnover also helped to alleviate budget and cash flow problems, although at the expense of the mental and physical health of remaining staff.

The full cost of a year-round, five-day-a-week after-school program was typically about $4,000 a year, including contributions of volunteer time and subsidized space.

Issues for the Future

The after-school program field is at an important juncture. There is a large base of providers in thousands of low-income communities, some strong, some barely surviving from year to year. After-school program providers are organizing networks and professional associations through which they are beginning to act as a common enterprise. At the same time, as the field moves toward greater recognition and perhaps more solid ground, it will be challenged to reach more low-income children, strengthen programs and staffing, and ensure more adequate funding. More complex, but equally crucial, is the challenge of establishing a distinct, coherent, and yet flexible identity for a field that resides at the intersection of so many institutional systems. The next section of this

Table 2

Revenue Sources and Costs Included in After-School Program Budgets

Sources of Revenue	Typical Expenses
Parent fees (often on sliding scales) Government child care subsidy funding Grants from federal, state, and local governments Department of Education 21st Century Community Learning Centers Drug-Free Schools Title I Compensatory Education Department of Justice, Safe Futures Program Social Services Block Grant Community Development Block Grant Local school systems, park districts United Way agencies, philanthropy In-kind contributions (low rent, volunteers)	Staff salaries Fringe benefits Stipends for volunteers, tutors Hourly fees for specialists (art or dance teachers) Rent and utilities Liability insurance Transportation for children Food for snacks Supplies and equipment

Source: Information gathered by author for the evaluation of the MOST Initiative.

article examines these four challenges and identifies both options and tensions that may lie ahead.

Increasing Coverage

Given the current modest level of program coverage, one immediate priority for after-school programs is to expand capacity to serve low-income children. The question of how best to distribute new supply, in terms of location and type of institution, bears careful consideration. Most existing community-based programs have little room for growth, due to facility constraints, administrative limitations, and "natural" limits. After-school programs lose their intimate, family-like quality beyond a certain size. The bulk of expansion will therefore have to occur through new programs and sites, a more expensive proposition.

Increasingly, schools are being looked to as an important base for growth. Schools certainly offer a logical and cost-efficient means of reaching greater numbers of children. But historically it has proven difficult for many school personnel to grasp the nonacademic purposes and child-centered character of after-school programs. Moreover, a school-based growth strategy ignores the importance of a strong infrastructure of community-based supports in low-income neighborhoods, supports that are "close to home" physically, socially, and psychologically. In general, the principle shaping growth should be to acknowledge and support the current diversity of sponsors and program types, to assure children and families a measure of choice.

Strengthening Programs

The second critical task is to address problems of program quality. Like increasing coverage, this task is multifaceted and will also require support for diverse provider types, community conditions and priorities, and staffing arrangements. Some quality-improvement tools are more powerful than others. Licensing, currently the major tool for trying to influence program quality, is helpful for establishing minimum standards, but it has only modest influence on many factors that underlie program quality. Accreditation is a somewhat more powerful tool, especially when it is tied to financial incentives. The National School-Age Care Alliance has recently published a set of standards for quality after-school programming, intended to serve as a framework for accreditation in this field.[25] But the process of preparing for accreditation requires a level of program stability and resources that is often lacking in after-school programs. Most immediately useful for strengthening programs, in this author's view, would be an expanded network of three kinds of sup-

porting institutions—those that provide curricular resources, those that provide specialists for arts and sports activities, and most critically those that provide long-term training and technical assistance relationships with individual programs.

Strengthening programs also will mean stabilizing staffing and providing more ongoing, week-in, week-out support for front-line staff. It will be important to put aside the dream of professionalization and acknowledge that in the foreseeable future most staff will continue to be paraprofessionals, and many of those will be young adults not likely to stay long in one place. Training strategies will have to be practice-oriented, when possible site-based, and offer reimbursement as an incentive for participation. More broadly, there is a need in this field to clarify responsibility for professional development. To some extent, resolving this issue awaits further definition of the field itself, and the creation of a coherent knowledge base from the constituent elements of child development, child care, education, recreation, social group work, and expressive arts. In the interim, someone has to convene stakeholders in each city (for example, community colleges, child care resource and referral agencies, large and small providers) to discuss an appropriate allocation of responsibilities for training in the school-age field.

Expanding Funding

There is an obvious need for substantially more funding for after-school programs. Programs can neither increase their coverage nor strengthen their quality without additional funding. An aide to Boston's mayor, charged with developing a new after-school initiative, described the prevailing funding situation for most community-based programs as a "travesty. They have to beg and plead to survive; they have to go after these little pots of money from many, many different sources. And they have no sustainable funding base. . . ." But who should provide new funding and how should it be provided? As noted earlier, parents in low-income communities clearly cannot pay more than a modest share of the cost of after-school programs for their children. United Way, and foundation and corporate funding, also are capable of supporting only a modest percentage of the total cost.

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That implies a need for much greater public funding for after-school programs that could come from a shift of funds away from specialized treatment-oriented services or from a moderate expansion of existing lines of program funding. For instance, funds from the child care, social service, and community development block grants could be combined, and greater use could be made of flexible educational funding, such as Title I.

As much as possible, new funding should be structured to allow flexibility at the city, community, and program levels. That implies not restricting funds to particular types of agencies. (For instance, only schools can receive grants for 21st Century Community Learning Centers from the U.S. Department of Education.) Mechanisms also have to be created for pooling funds from different sources and for collaborative planning and priority setting. In a handful of cities, networks, collaboratives, or partnerships are emerging that seek to strengthen and bring more coherence to the disparate

organizations and activities that make up the after-school system. These do not strive to govern after-school programs in their respective cities as much as they seek to smooth the field out a bit. They periodically bring stakeholders together to share information, coordinate activities, forge new links, and do joint planning. They occasionally seek funds for a project or are asked to manage a special grant. Citywide collaboratives offer notable potential to advocate for greater funding and more sensible funding approaches for the after-school program field.

Articulating a Role for After-School Programs

Perhaps the most basic challenge facing the field of after-school programs for low-income children is that of articulating a reasonable purpose and role in children's lives.

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This will require balancing sensitivity to the common developmental needs of all children and the distinct needs resulting from the distinct circumstances of low-income children's lives. It will also require balancing what adults want children's daily lives to be about, and what children themselves want.

Currently, after-school programs serving low-income children face increasing pressure to play a role in helping those children acquire basic literacy skills and achieve school success. Yet low- and moderate-income children should have the same opportunities as their more advantaged peers: first, to feel and be safe; second, to have some social and physical space of their own in which to develop their own thoughts, explore feelings, learn friendship, and learn how to handle interpersonal conflict; and third, to explore interests, and to test and nurture special abilities in arts, sports, or other areas. Moreover, individual children vary—some need and thrive on a variety of activities; others need more time to relax, and respite from pressures elsewhere.

There are two lines of thought behind the pressure for after-school programs to play a greater "academic" role. One sees the issue as a need for more learning time; the other sees it as the need for new approaches to fostering learning. Some argue as well for greater continuity between children's school and nonschool hours, softened by a broader view of learning as a process going on all the time in a variety of ways. There is logic to considering children's days as a whole, asking how the pieces ought to complement each other. For example, in France, schools in a few municipalities are experimenting with a break for recreation and play for children during the early afternoon hours, with school resuming at 3:30 P.M. for two or three hours. The idea is to create a day that mixes formal learning, informal learning, and play in a way that more naturally follows children's biological rhythms.[26] But there is also substantial danger that any broader vision of learning or children's time use will be quickly forgotten by school-based program designers.

The debate implicit in different visions of the purpose and role of after-school programs has roots in the deep American ambivalence about unsupervised play and "wasted" time, which is compounded for low-income children by a variety of child-saving and compensatory instincts. This ambivalence can be seen in the fact that growing numbers of schools around the country are reducing or eliminating recess, in spite of evidence that children are more attentive in class when they have chances during the day to let off steam.[27] Far from being recognized for its role in development, time spent playing and hanging out with friends is described as aimless or idle.[28] A temporal perspective, and in particular the notion of time as a scarce commodity requiring careful husbanding, appears to this author to be a projection of adult wishes, concerns, and feelings about their own lives onto childhood.

Conclusion

One of the many pernicious effects of poverty in the United States is the pressure it places on each individual institution in children's lives to be and to do more than is reasonable. It also subtly turns those institutions against each other: Schools feel

that parents are not meeting their obligations; parents feel that schools are not meeting theirs. After-school program providers may also be feeling besieged. They too sometimes feel that they have become an institution of both first and last resort for too many children and that nobody cares about the children they serve but them.

The truth is that, for different reasons, none of the key institutions in poor children's lives has the wherewithal to compensate for the social neglect those children experience. Each institution is, to some extent, caught up in the web of that neglect. Yet it is also true that different children get what they need from different developmental resources. For some children, the qualities of after-school programs may indeed make them a critical developmental resource. The programs provide resources and relationships that are distinct from and complementary to those provided by both family and school. They are neither distant nor intimate; rather, they are in-between. And they typically integrate the values and priorities of the larger society with those of children's immediate community.

It is dangerous to argue that participation in after-school programs can or should nurture the basic skills, sense of worth, competence, and acceptance that family and school are primarily responsible for nurturing and that are so powerfully influenced as well by the "master settings" of class, race, and ethnicity. Their own natural task—to create spaces in which children are neither too little nor too much on their own—is difficult enough. The trick in after-school programs seems to be to deliberately design developmental settings that balance safety, a measure of supervision, and spaces that children, especially those eight or nine years of age and up, can feel that they own. It will be difficult for school-age programs to create the psychological space children need if there is too much pressure to serve instrumental purposes.

1. The author is principal investigator of the evaluation of MOST, undertaken by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Data from Boston, Chicago, and Seattle cited in this article were collected by the author, Julie Spielberger, and Sylvan Robb. See Halpern, R., Spielberger, J., and Robb, S. *Evaluation of MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) Initiative: Interim report*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children, August 1998.
2. Seppanen, P., deVries, D., and Seligson, M. *National study of before- and after-school programs*. Washington, DC: Office of Policy and Planning, U.S. Department of Education, 1993.
3. Long, S., and Clark, S. *The new child care block grant: State funding choices and their implications*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, December 1998.
4. Herr, T., and Halpern, R. *Kids match: Addressing the challenges of linking inner-city children to activities supporting healthy development*. Chicago: Project Match, Erikson Institute, 1993.
5. Seligson, M., and Marx, F. *When school is out in New York City*. New York: Community Service Society, 1989.
6. Survey findings from: Queralt, M., and Witte, A. Influences on neighborhood supply of child care in Massachusetts. *Social Service Review* (March 1998)72:16–45. See also, Partnership for Family Involvement in Education. *Family involvement in education: A snapshot of out-of-school time*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1997. See also, U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Poverty in the United States: 1990*. Current population reports. Consumer income series. P-60, No. 175. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991. See also, Brayfield, A., Deich, S., and Hofferth, S. *Caring for children in low-income families: Sub-study of the National Child Care Study*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 1990. See also, Hedlin, D., Hannes, K., Saito, R., et al. *Summary of the family's view of after-school time*. St. Paul: University of Minnesota Center for Youth Development and Research, 1986.
7. Programs differed in their activity structures and hours of service, and in how they counted children served. Some data referred to potential numbers served, some to actual numbers enrolled, some to attendance. Some institutions counted the same child two or three times, if the child enrolled for different sessions.
8. One study found that 18% of the slots in a fairly representative sample of child care programs were for school-age children. See Helburn, S., Culkin, M., Morris, J., et al. *Cost, quality, and child outcomes in child care centers*. Denver: University of Colorado at Denver, 1995, p. 8.

9. A survey of a representative sample of 24 (of 88) local libraries in Chicago, as part of the MOST evaluation, found that they each "served" an average of 60 children per day; a few actually had more than 100 children show up after school each day. Data from Seattle suggest that libraries there serve an average of 45 children a day, again with wide variation. See note no. 1, Halpern, Spielberger, and Robb, chapter 2.
10. National Center for Educational Statistics. *The condition of education, 1993*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 122.
11. Programs typically are exempt from child care licensing requirements if their declared purpose is educational or tutorial. In some states or cities, church-run programs are exempt from licensing, as are programs operated by public systems—schools, park districts, libraries—on the assumption that the sponsoring system will monitor quality. The mixed nature of today's after-school programs, often administered by collaborations between public and private agencies, is bound to make licensing issues more complicated in the future.
12. Barker, G. *A case study of the after-school action program in Chicago's Uptown-Edgewater Community*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children, 1998.
13. See Kirst, M., and Kelley, C. Collaboration to improve education and children's services. In *School-community connections*. L. Rigsby, M. Reynolds, and M. Wang, eds. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995, pp. 21–43. There is a long legacy of distrust of community-based institutions among school administrators and wariness toward schools within the after-school and youth-serving community. Issues of administrative control contribute to this legacy. Schools perceive a lack of reliability and fiscal accountability among community-based agencies; community agency staff believe that school system leaders are reluctant to share power and resources, or to sustain equitable relationships, with other child-serving institutions. If new forms of collaboration are to work, each side will have to acknowledge and leave room for the legitimacy of the other's mission and worldview.
14. Halpern, R. *The role of after-school programs in the lives of inner-city children*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children, 1990.
15. Pierce, K., Ham, J., and Vandell, D. Experiences in after-school programs and children's adjustment at school and at home. *Child Development* (1999) 70:756–67.
16. Vandell, D., Shumow, L., and Posner, J. Children's after-school programs: Promoting resiliency or vulnerability. In H. McCubbin, A. Thompson, J. Futrell, and L. McCubbin, eds. Promoting resiliency in families and children at risk: Interdisciplinary perspectives. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, in press.
17. See note no. 2, Seppanen, deVries, and Seligson, pp. 75–76.
18. Cahill, M., Perry, J., Wright, M., and Rice, A. *A documentation report on the New York City Beacons initiative*. New York: The Youth Development Institute, Fund for the City of New York, December 1993.
19. See note no. 2, Seppanen, deVries, and Seligson, p. 82.
20. *School-age care in California: Addressing the needs of children, families, and society*. Irvine, CA: Department of Education, University of California at Irvine, 1996, p. 1.
21. The study, part of the evaluation of the MOST initiative, is described in full in the forthcoming final evaluation report on the initiative.
22. See note no. 2, Seppanen, deVries, and Seligson, p. 52.
23. Data collected from the authorities who administer the child care subsidy system in Boston and Chicago suggest that perhaps 10% of all low-income children who participate in after-school programs receive subsidies. That percentage is consistent with data from New York City.
24. In Chicago, for instance, United Way funds covered slightly less than $1 million of a total $15 million spent by Chicago United Way member agencies for after-school programs in 1997. Personal communication with Doug Zapotosny and Alice Lee, United Way staff members. Calculations made at the request of the author.
25. National School-Age Care Alliance. *Standards for quality school-age care*. Boston: National School-Age Care Alliance, 1998.
26. Petrie, P. School-age care and the school: Recent European developments. In *Children, research, and policy*. B. Bernstein and J. Brannen, eds. London: Taylor and Francis, 1996, pp. 220–40.
27. Reasons for reducing recess include the perceived need for more learning time; fear of lawsuits; fear of "unsavory characters lurking at the edges of playgrounds"; state requirements for

safety and drug instruction, which compete with recess for discretionary time; and not least, a belief among minority parents and educators that today's children are "crying out for more structure, not less." Johnson, D. Many schools putting an end to child's play. *New York Times*. April 7, 1998, at A1, A16.

28. Miller, B., and Marx, F. *After-school arrangements in middle childhood: A review of the literature*. Wellesley, MA: School-Age Child Care Project, 1990. See also, Schwartz, W. After-school programs for urban youth. In *ERIC/CUE Digest no. 114*. New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, October 1996.