

Older Youth and Afterschool Participation

This research is commissioned and funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its mission to support and share effective ideas and practices.

About the Project

Harvard Family Research Project and Public/Private Ventures are partnering on a Wallace Foundation-funded research study of youth participation in out-of-school time. This study will investigate innovative efforts to recruit and retain middle and high school youth in after school programs. The research, which is taking place in six cities that are building after school systems, will examine program-level strategies to engage older youth and city-level strategies to support and strengthen this work. Our goal is to identify effective strategies for engagement and the different factors that influence participation. Study sites include Chicago, Cincinnati, New York City, Providence, San Francisco, and Washington, DC.

After School and Older Youth

Decades of research confirm that after school programs have the potential to keep children and youth safe, support working families, improve academic achievement, and promote the civic and social development of young people. Yet these outcomes are only possible if young people have the opportunity to participate in after school programs and engage in them in meaningful ways. Participation in after school programs is a challenge for middle and high school youth because of the many competing demands on their time and their changing developmental needs.

In addition to finding innovative strategies to engage them in after school programs, this study will look at the ways that participation in after school programs changes for older youth. We will explore how program features and strategies for older youth differ by developmental stage, activity focus, and expected outcomes.

Why Participation Matters

Four factors make participation among older youth a critical topic for out-of-school time research:

- First, there are real *discrepancies in access to and participation in after school programs*. Significant differences exist in participation for subgroups of youth across a range of nonschool activities, including school-based and community-based after school programs, sports, and school clubs. In addition, youth have varying access to programs depending on the supply of high-quality programs in their neighborhoods, whether they can get transportation to programs, and other factors.
- Second, issues of participation are particularly important for middle and high school youth who must *make choices about a variety of productive and nonproductive after school options*, which go beyond school and structured programs to include employment, responsibilities at home, and hanging out with friends. More so

than their younger counterparts, older youth can vote with their feet; they can choose to participate or not based on their interests and on competing activities.

- Third, it is not participation in just any after school program that matters. Programs need to be *high-quality and engaging* for youth to want to be there and for youth to benefit from participation. Older youth want to be challenged, develop skills, have a voice in the programming, and have activities that are geared toward their age group. These are emerging as critical features of program quality, and programs need help developing them.
- Finally, we know that, once enrolled, *sustained* participation is a key factor in getting positive youth outcomes. To really benefit from out-of-school time programs, youth must develop connections to the people and activities in the programs over a period of time.

To address these issues of access, quality, and engagement for older youth, this study asks two questions:

1. What are effective program practices and strategies to improve participation in after school programs for middle and high school youth?
2. What are effective citywide strategies for supporting after school programs in these efforts and for overcoming systemic barriers to participation?

Methods and Data Sources

This mixed-methods research will take place in six cities that are building after school systems that have the capacity to collect data on participation and a special focus on middle and/or high school youth in after school. Using prior research on participation, as well as other bodies of research, this study will first develop a set of considerations for understanding participation and engagement. Then, using this information, we will examine each city's data system and interview key informants to identify programs in each city that have high participation rates or are working to achieve higher participation. We will survey these programs for organizational and programmatic features that might help explain high participation and choose a subset of these programs for further investigation through site visits, which will involve interviews with both program staff and system representatives.

A key feature of this study is the creation of a community of practice—an intentional, focused, voluntary group, whose members come together around a common interest or problem to share knowledge, find solutions, improve performance, and discuss innovations. Representatives from each of the six cities, as well as others in the after school field, will convene over the course of this study both to give feedback on this work and to use the findings from the research and the collaboration with colleagues to benefit their own systems and programs.

Impact of the Research

This study will contribute to city systems and the field on many fronts. The research will help practitioners, system leaders, and policymakers learn about effective strategies for engaging youth in meaningful ways and for increasing participation. The study will also offer stakeholders ways to spread innovations and work toward overcoming barriers to participation. Additionally, the study will build the knowledge base about the system- and policy-level factors involved in improving participation and engagement.

Project Team

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