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# **Highlights From the Latest Update to Harvard Family Research Project's Out-of-School Time Database**

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## **Research Update 1**

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## Introduction

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Out-of-school time (OST) research is poised at a crossroads. The field has repeatedly confirmed that youth participation in high quality OST programs and activities can prove beneficial to youth's academic trajectories, developmental needs, and family lives. And while establishing OST's ability to move the needle on youth outcomes will continue to be critical in assisting programs in acquiring public and private funding, the field is increasingly turning to new and equally important questions: What are the best ways to achieve quality in OST programming? To recruit, retain, and develop a high-quality workforce? To achieve sustainability and bring successful initiatives to scale? By addressing these and other pressing questions, research and evaluation are helping to drive improvements in the OST field.

For years, Harvard Family Research Project's (HFRP) OST Program Research and Evaluation Database has provided accessible and timely information about research and evaluations involving OST programs and initiatives. The searchable database includes narrative profiles of OST evaluations and research studies and is designed to help researchers, evaluators, practitioners, and policymakers learn about and improve OST research and evaluation.

HFRP's new series of *Research Updates* builds on this resource by providing key insights from each update to the database. These *Research Updates* will highlight new and innovative methods and findings in the increasingly sophisticated, growing field of OST research and evaluation. This first *Research Update* synthesizes findings from the profiles of 15 research and evaluation reports added to the database in December 2006. It highlights strategies for assessing program processes as well as key outcomes and features of programs that promote positive outcomes. (For more information about these 15 research and evaluation reports, see Appendix I.)

## New Profiles, New Features: The Out-of-School Time Database

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As of December 2006, HFRP now includes research studies in its OST database in addition to program evaluations. These studies—which gather information about out-of-school time but do not evaluate specific programs—provide valuable insights into such topics as the elements of quality programs, benefits for youth, and barriers to participation. Database users can now access condensed profiles of major research studies about OST programs and initiatives, including the Massachusetts After-School Research Study, the Yale Study of Children's After-School Time, a Meta-Analysis of the Effects of OST Programs for At-Risk Students, the Study of Promising After-School Programs, and the study of Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs.

### What's the difference between an evaluation and a research study?

Typically, an evaluation examines the performance of a particular OST program to assess that program's implementation or effectiveness, while a research study does not evaluate the performance of a specific program but instead examines a broader research question. Research questions include "Do after school programs positively benefit at-risk youth?" and "What constitutes a high quality set of after school experiences for youth?"

The following example highlights the difference: In the database, you can find profiles of the multiyear evaluation of The After-School Corporation (TASC) program in New York. You can also find a profile of a research study that uses both data from the

TASC evaluations and newly collected data to identify the shared features of high-performing after school programs. The evaluation assesses the implementation and effectiveness of the TASC program overall, while the research study uses TASC program data to examine the broader question of which program features are common to programs associated with improved youth outcomes.

## How to Use the Database

The database is located in the OST section of the HFRP website at [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html). By using the search mechanism on the website, you can refine your scan of the profiles to specific program, study, evaluation characteristics, and findings information.

## Conducting OST Research and Evaluation: Innovations and Developments

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Increasingly, the OST field is turning toward questions of how and when OST programs contribute to positive youth outcomes. Finding effective methodologies to characterize the different facets of programming is critical to building a usable knowledge base for the OST field. This *Research Update* provides insight into some of the methodologies used by researcher and evaluators in the 15 reports added to the database in December 2006.

The evaluations and research studies described in these reports use a variety of methods to study the features and processes of OST programs and to look at how they contribute to positive outcomes for youth. Notable approaches include (a) measuring youth engagement, (b) measuring program quality, (c) assessing common program features associated with youth outcomes, and (d) collecting data from participant logs.

- ***Measuring youth engagement.*** In the Yale Study of Children’s After-School Time, Joseph Mahoney and his colleagues point to the importance of collecting data on youth’s engagement—defined as a combination of enjoyment, interest, and effort—in their after school activities. Youth are more likely to reap the benefits of participation when they are fully engaged in their OST programming. To measure youth engagement in the Yale Study, after school program staff rated each child on a number of items related to the child’s level of engagement in five academic and five nonacademic program activities. Using this data, Mahoney and colleagues found that children’s after school engagement was, in turn, related to other academic and developmental outcomes.
- ***Measuring program quality.*** Researchers featured in this database update have made sophisticated attempts to measure program quality. For example, in their study of Promising After-School Programs, Deborah Vandell, Elizabeth Reisner, and their colleagues conducted a review of published materials, recommendations from after school experts, and interviews with after school program directors to identify potentially promising study sites. They then spent time observing programs and using the *Promising Practices Rating System* (PPRS, Vendell et al., 2004) to quantify seven program processes related to quality.

These processes include supportive relations with adults, supportive relations with peers, youth engagement, appropriate program structure, cognitive growth opportunities, mastery orientation (e.g., “activities involve a graded progression of

skills”), and autonomy opportunities. Using these and other measures, the researchers were then able to measure how participation in high-quality after school programs related to youth outcomes.

- ***Assessing common program features associated with youth outcomes.*** Researchers at Policy Studies Associates attempted to identify common features of “high-performing” after school programs—that is, programs with the largest gains on youth outcomes. Using data from the TASC evaluation, the researchers identified these programs and conducted interviews and structured observations in order to identify program elements common to high-performing programs. By using Policy Studies Associates’ *Out-of-School Time Observation Instrument* (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005), researchers rated the following activities: youth-directed relationship building, youth participation, staff-directed relationship building, staff strategies for skill building and mastery, and activity content and structure. They were then able to examine what features were common across high-performing programs.
- ***Collecting data from participant logs.*** The Ascend Summer Youth Program’s 2005 evaluation used an innovative approach to assess quality. In this evaluation, researchers collected “participant logs” each week. In these logs, participants wrote about various aspects of the summer program in response to prompts. Sample prompts include “What is your favorite part of the summer program so far?” or “Think about your favorite team leader or group leader. List 3 reasons why that person is your favorite.” These logs allowed the evaluators to assess how the program operated, to measure youth perceptions of the program, and to identify strategies that made the program more successful at engaging youth.

## **New Findings About OST Benefits to Youth: What Works**

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These 15 research studies and evaluations add to a growing knowledge base demonstrating that OST programs can impact key youth and family outcomes. While by no means exhaustive, this review highlights some of the outcomes identified by the 15 studies. These studies and evaluations contribute to our understanding of what works in OST programs and why. The evaluations and studies described here provide increasing evidence that participation in high-quality OST programs is beneficial for youth—particularly in the areas of academics, substance abuse, and obesity.

- ***Academics.*** In a major study of the BELL Summer Learning Program, evaluators from the Urban Institute found that BELL participants were more likely than a randomly assigned control group to experience gains in reading test scores. In addition, BELL participants’ parents were more likely to read to their children and to encourage their children’s reading. BELL is a summer program for low-income youth, in which children engage in focused academic skill development. The program provided individualized attention, enrichment, and fun; connected youth to community members and institutions; and promoted parent engagement in learning and development.

Similarly, in a separate meta-analysis of the effects of OST programs for at-risk students, researchers found that, across a set of 35 experimental and quasi-

experimental evaluations of OST programs for at-risk youth, participation was associated with positive reading and math outcomes.

- ***Substance abuse.*** The evaluation of Project Venture found that youth participation had benefits relating to substance abuse prevention. Compared to randomly assigned control group youth, Project Venture participants demonstrated significantly less growth in substance use (alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and combined substance use). This program—which was targeted at high-risk American Indian youth—provided in-school problem-solving games and initiatives; after school, weekend, and summer wilderness activities and community service-learning projects; and opportunities to become peer leaders or program staff.
- ***Obesity.*** The evaluation of the Medical College of Georgia’s FitKid Project—which provided elementary school youth with academic enrichment, homework help, healthy snacks, and physical fitness activities—found promising results for youth health. Compared to randomly assigned control youth, FitKid youth who participated in at least 40% of program sessions showed decreases in percent body fat and increases in bone mass density and cardiovascular fitness.

Similarly, youth in the Yale Study of Children’s After-School Time showed significantly lower levels of obesity and Body Mass Index (BMI) when they participated in after school programs, especially at high levels of frequency.

## **Program Quality: How to Define It, How to Achieve It**

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Another strand that emerged from the most recent update to the database was a focus on what constitutes program quality. Several evaluations and research studies provided important insights into how promising OST programs defined and achieved program quality. These evaluations and studies revealed key features of successful programs, as well as ways in which programs promoted them.

- ***Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs.*** This study found several common elements among programs that had large gains in participants’ academic performance. The programs offered a broad array of enrichment activities; opportunities for skill building and mastery; intentional relationship building; a strong, experienced leader/manager, supported by a trained and supervised staff; and the administrative, fiscal, and professional-development support of the sponsoring organization. The profile of this research study, available in the OST database, provides a wealth of additional detail on how the programs employed these elements associated with participants’ academic gains.
- ***Promising After-School Programs.*** This study of found a host of benefits for youth who participated in OST programs, as compared to youth who experienced unstructured self-care. The study identified a number of common elements among the promising programs that may explain why youth benefited from participation. These elements included experienced staff, who devoted considerable resources to enhancing staff skills; supportive relationships among participants and between youth and adults; varied learning- and mastery-oriented content delivery strategies that create positive environments for children and youth; varied participant activities; access to varied spaces for activities and adequate materials; attention to the needs

and interests of participants' families; partnerships with affiliated schools and community agencies; and funding from multiple sources, particularly local, state, and national funding agencies.

- ***The Yale Study of Children's After-School Time.*** This study showed that programs with greater levels of structure, supportive relationships with peers and adults, cognitive growth opportunities, and time spent on enrichment achieved greater youth engagement than other programs. Participation in more engaging programs was, in turn, associated with greater social competence and pleasure in solving difficult problems. Children with high after school program engagement also showed greater expectancy of success and reading achievement than youth in other care arrangements.
- ***Family Participation in After-School.*** In this study, researchers from the Institute for Responsive Education found that OST programs were better able to engage families when they created a welcoming environment and provided programming in which children had fun and were helped in making academic and social progress. Other promising strategies for promoting family involvement included scheduling special events at the end of the day, providing food, offering performances and exhibits of youth's work, and making services such as childcare, transportation, and translation available to family members. Programs that employed a staff member whose main task was to work with families also had more success at engaging families.

## Summing Up

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Researchers and evaluators are making important strides in discovering what program elements constitute quality programming for youth and how such participation leads to positive academic and developmental outcomes. Taken together, these 15 studies and evaluations shed light on the promises and potential of OST programming. From a methodological point of view, researchers and evaluators are progressing toward measuring the key program-level factors that may lead to positive outcomes for youth and identifying elements shared by high-performing programs.

As this update demonstrates, this research is beginning to uncover important program components for which practitioners and policymakers can strive—such as supportive relationships, enrichment, opportunities for cognitive growth, and strong partnerships with schools, communities, and families. In addition, research continues to demonstrate that quality OST programs can move the needle on key youth outcomes like academics, substance abuse, and obesity.

It should be noted that while this *Research Update* has synthesized some of the major findings emerging from this recent research and evaluation, it is by no means a comprehensive synthesis of all the findings emerging from recent research and evaluation. For a much fuller picture, visit our OST Program Research and Evaluation Database at [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html).

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**Appendix Table 1: Research and Evaluation Studies Included in this Review**

<b>Program/Study Description</b>	<b>Citations/Profile</b>
<p><b><i>Ascend Summer Youth Program</i></b></p> <p>This program for teens in Washington, DC, provides mentoring, workforce readiness awareness, and project-based learning experiences using information technology to address a variety of social, affective, cognitive, and academic outcomes necessary for postsecondary success.</p>	<p>Nielsen, N. (2005). <i>Evaluation of the Ascend Summer Youth Program 2005: Summative report</i>. Washington, DC: Ascend, Inc.</p>
<p><b><i>BELL Accelerated Learning Summer Program</i></b></p> <p>Founded in 1992, this program is a comprehensive academic camp that provides intensive academic instruction; hands-on educational, cultural, artistic, and recreational activities; guest speakers; community service projects; and field trips to Grade K–6 youth during the summer in Boston, New York City, Baltimore, and Washington, DC. The program’s goals are to help youth improve their academic performance, self-concept, and social skills.</p>	<p>Chaplin, D., &amp; Capizzano, J. (2006). <i>Impacts of a summer learning program: A random assignment study of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL)</i>. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.</p>
<p><b><i>Family Participation in After-School Study</i></b></p> <p>This study collected data in 2003–2004 on family involvement efforts in a group of sites that have received 21st Century Community Learning Centers funding in multiple years to provide expanded learning opportunities for youth in safe, drug-free, and supervised environments.</p>	<p>Weiss, A. R., &amp; Brigham, R. A. (2003). <i>The family participation in after-school study</i>. Boston, MA: Institute for Responsive Education.</p> <p>Strickland, C. S., with Jean, I. (2005, April). <i>Promising Practices that promote family participation in after school programs: Another link to positive educational outcomes</i>. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Institute for Responsive Education</p>
<p><b><i>Medical College of Georgia FitKid Project</i></b></p> <p>Operating from 2003–2006, this program in Augusta/Richmond County, Georgia, was designed to fill the afterschool hours of youth with low socioeconomic status with moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. The program emphasized enjoyment and improvement in games and sport activities.</p>	<p>Yin, Z., Gutin, B., Johnson, M., Hanes, J., Jr., Moore, J. B., Cavnar, M., Thornburg, J., Moore, D., &amp; Barbeau, P. (2005). An environmental approach to obesity prevention in children: Medical College of Georgia FitKid Project year 1 results. <i>Obesity Research, 13</i>, 2153–2161.</p> <p>Yin, Z., Hanes, J., Jr., Moore, J. B., Humbles, P., Barbeau, P., &amp; Gutin, B. (2005). An after-school physical activity program for obesity prevention in children: The Medical College of Georgia FitKid Project. <i>Evaluation &amp; the Health Professions, 28</i>(1), 67–89.</p> <p>Yin, Z., Moore J. B., Johnson, M. H., Barbeau, P., Cavnar, M., Thornburg, J., &amp; Gutin, B. (2005) The Medical College of Georgia FitKid Project: The relations between program</p>

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	attendance and changes in outcomes in year 1. <i>International Journal of Obesity</i> , 29, 40–45.
<p><b><i>Meta-Analysis of Effects of Out-of-School Time Programs for At-Risk Students</i></b></p> <p>This meta-analysis synthesized 35 OST program studies that employed control or comparison groups to estimate program effects for students at risk of failure in reading or math.</p>	<p>Lauer, P. A., Akiba, M., Wilkerson, S. B., Aporp, H. S., Snow, D., &amp; Martin-Glenn, M. L. (2006). Out-of-school time programs: A meta-analysis of effects for at-risk students. <i>Review of Educational Research</i>, 76, 275–313.</p>
<p><b><i>Museum Youth Initiative</i></b></p> <p>This research study examined lessons learned from the Museum Youth Initiative (MYI). MYI sought to strengthen California museums' abilities to educate youth during out-of-school hours by providing the museums with the financial and technical support they needed in order to implement creative strategies for after school programs.</p>	<p>The James Irvine Foundation. (2005). <i>Museums after school: How museums are reaching kids, partnering with schools, and making a difference</i>. San Francisco: Author.</p>
<p><b><i>The Promising After-School Programs Study</i></b></p> <p>Begun in 2002, this national study seeks to determine the short-term and long-term impacts of high-quality after school programs on the cognitive, academic, social, and emotional development of youth who are growing up in high-poverty communities.</p>	<p>Vandell, D. L., Reisner, E. R., Brown, B. B., Pierce, K., Dadisman, K., &amp; Pechman, E. M. (2004). <i>The study of promising after-school programs: Descriptive report of the promising programs</i>. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.</p> <p>Vandell, D. L., Reisner, E. R., Brown, B. B., Dadisman, K., Pierce, K. M., Lee, D., &amp; Pechman, E. M. (2005). <i>The study of promising after-school programs: Examination of intermediate outcomes in year 2</i>. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.</p> <p>Vandell, D. L., Reisner, E. R., Pierce, K. M., Brown, B. B., Lee, D., Bolt, D., &amp; Pechman, E. M. (2006). <i>The Study of promising after-school programs: Examination of longer term outcomes after two years of program experiences</i>. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.</p>
<p><b><i>Project Venture</i></b></p> <p>This experiential outdoor program targeted to high-risk American Indian youth began in New Mexico in 1990 and has been replicated nationally.</p>	<p>Carter, S. L., Straits, K. J. E., &amp; Hall, M. (2006). <i>Project Venture: Evaluation of a positive, culture-based approach to substance abuse prevention with American Indian youth</i>. Unpublished Manuscript.</p>
<p><b><i>Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs</i></b></p> <p>This study examined high-performing after school projects funded with grants from The After-School Corporation (TASC) to determine</p>	<p>Birmingham, J., Pechman, E. M., Russell, C. A., &amp; Mielke, M. (2005). <i>Shared features of high-performing after-school programs: A follow-up to the TASC evaluation</i>. Washington, DC: Policy Studies.</p>

<p>project characteristics that may have contributed to improvements in youth's academic achievement.</p>	
<p><b><i>The Yale Study of Children's After-School Time</i></b></p> <p>This study involves a 4-year longitudinal investigation of a representative sample of children in a Northeast city. The study's main goal is to understand how the variety of after school care arrangements these children experience relates to their overall development and well being over time.</p>	<p>Mahoney, J. L., Lord, H., &amp; Carryl, E. (2005). An ecological analysis of after-school program participation and the development of academic performance and motivational attributes for disadvantaged children. <i>Child Development, 76</i>(4), 811–825.</p> <p>Mahoney, J. L., Lord, H., &amp; Carryl, E. (2005). Afterschool program participation and the development of child obesity and peer acceptance. <i>Applied Developmental Science, 9</i>(4), 202–215.  <a href="http://www.leaonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s1532480xads0904_3">www.leaonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s1532480xads0904_3</a></p> <p>Mahoney, J. L., Parente, M. E., &amp; Lord H. (in press). Afterschool program engagement: Links to child competence and program quality and content. <i>The Elementary School Journal</i>.</p>