

Preface

In October 2014, a group of practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and youth came together at Youth-Nex: The University of Virginia Center to Promote Effective Youth Development to talk about the current state of the after-school arena and chart a course for the field's future. The participants shared a Positive Youth Development (PYD; Lerner et al., 2015) frame for understanding youth's after-school time, focused on the inherent competencies that youth bring to the settings in which they engage and exploring the promise of after- and out-of-school programs for enhancing those competencies. Across two days, adults and youth shared experiences, challenges, best practices, and next steps, considering topics ranging from how to recruit and engage youth, to how to effectively evaluate program outcomes and activities, to what policies and practices would help expand and improve after-school opportunities for all youth.

At the same time the conference was occurring, the After-School Alliance released its report on youths' participation in and access to after-school activities nationwide (After School Alliance, 2014). The report highlighted the importance of the dialogue in which the conference participants were engaging. While participation rates in after-school programs are growing and fewer children are unsupervised during the after-school hours, there is still a great deal of unmet demand for high-quality after-school opportunities. Twenty percent of children are still unsupervised after-school, and nearly forty percent of parents say they would enroll their child in an after-school program if there were one available to them. Further, this unmet demand is not distributed equally; children whose families are lower on the socioeconomic ladder and children from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds participate in after-school programs at higher rates than their peers, but their families are also more likely to report unmet demand for after-school programs (After School Alliance, 2014). Further, there is broad support from parents for expanding resources for after-school programs, with 84% of parents surveyed reporting that they support public funding for after-school programs in under-resourced communities. The demand and public support for after-school programs exist. It is the responsibility of policy makers, practitioners, and researchers to come together to meet that demand through supporting effective

policies and practices to improve and expand after-school opportunities for all youth, but especially for those youth whose needs are the greatest.

This brief and its companion brief, *After-School Programs to Promote Positive Youth Development (Volume 2): Learning from Specific Models*, seek to identify promising next steps for doing just that. The chapters in these briefs are drawn from presentations made by practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and youth at the October 2014 Youth-Nex conference. Many of the chapters are collaboratively authored by practitioners and scholars and present a unique blend of lenses on after-school programs and practices. The chapters in this first brief present an over-arching frame for understanding the after-school field from both historical and positive youth development perspectives, discuss key components of effective programs, review methods of evaluation for after- and out-of- school programs, and synthesize the current state of the field, providing recommendations for policy makers and practitioners to begin to address some of the gaps in both our knowledge and our services.

In Chap. 1, Pittman provides a foundation for the volume by placing the current policy and practice environment in historical context. She highlights the importance of the PYD framework for the after-school field and identifies the need for a stronger PYD theory of change to guide both programs and policy efforts. In reviewing the state of the field, she also points out the opportunity that currently exists for both the after-school field and the PYD perspective to inform in- and out-of-school policy discussions, in part by expanding the breadth of outcomes considered important for effective youth development.

In Chap. 2, Dawes, Pollack, and Sada discuss three key components of effective programs: appropriate structure, support for efficacy and mattering, and supportive relationships. Drawing on the foundational work of the National Research Council's 2002 report on community-based youth development programs (Eccles and Gootman, 2002), they use case studies of two programs to illustrate specific programmatic practices that may foster each of these three key components. Further, they point out the importance of programs addressing individualized developmental needs based on factors such as age and gender.

In Chap. 3, Fredricks, Naftzger, Smith, and Riley build on the previous chapters by discussing the importance of youth engagement in programs, and reviewing methods of measuring youth engagement. They present a theory of change for after-school programs based around understanding how youth develop skills through engagement in programs and then transfer those skills to settings beyond the program. In addition, they respond to Pittman's call for broadening the outcomes considered important for youth development by reviewing how programs may influence social and emotional skills. Finally, they present a case study of Girls on the Run as an example of one program which has engaged in a program-researcher partnership to develop, implement, and expand an evaluation of its services for program improvement.

In Chap. 4, Deutsch, Blythe, Kelley, Tolan, and Lerner provide a synthesis and in-depth discussion of a number of themes raised across the volume. Beginning with a brief history of the PYD and after-school fields, and their intersection, we

then focus on understanding what after-school programs do (and what they *should* do), discuss how we study programs (and how we *should* study programs), and consider how we use (and how we *should* use) the resulting evidence. We highlight a model wherein research on after-school programs is not conducted merely to *prove* whether or not they work, but is undertaken to *improve* program practices and outcomes. Further, we emphasize that a social justice perspective is key, and that research, programming, and policy efforts should be undertaken to improve outcomes for those youth who are most in need. The Executive Summary draws from across the chapters in both briefs to provide specific policy and program recommendations for the field.

There is still great disparity in youth's opportunities in the after-school hours. This disparity amplifies the already present gaps in opportunity within educational and other social resources, thereby perpetuating the persistent gaps in educational attainment and achievement of youth from different social locations. The after-school arena, with its more common focus on youth potential and assets, holds great promise for helping even the playing field in terms of opportunities for youth. It is the role of practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to work together to meet that potential, reduce current inequities, and ensure that all youth, but especially those who need it most, have access to high quality, engaging, and developmentally promotive after-school environments.

Reference

Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

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