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Policy & Action Center

Facts & Research

Press Room

Afterschool for All
Challenge

Lights On Afterschool

Afterschool for All
Campaign

Advocate Newsletter

Afterschool
Ambassadors

Publications

Links

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Fund and market
your program

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Afterschool: A High School Dropout Prevention Tool

Issue Brief No. 38

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The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the third in a series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing older youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. The four issue briefs address workforce and career development; recruitment and retention of older youth; dropout prevention and mentoring. They examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle and high school youth, families and communities.

Yes, afterschool helps youth develop academically but, more importantly, it helps them find their passion and better themselves long-term.
---U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan speaking at the Afterschool Alliance "Breakfast of Champions" on April 28, 2009

Over one million students who enter ninth grade each year fail to graduate with their peers four years later because they drop out of school. Seven thousand students drop out of school every day, and each year roughly 1.2 million students fail to graduate from high school. More than half of these students are from minority groups.^[i] Afterschool programs are a proven way to address the issues and risk factors that lead to dropout and provide a path to graduation and beyond.

High School Dropout Impacts Everyone

Youth who fail to graduate from school significantly diminish their chances to secure a good job and promising future. Not only do the youth themselves suffer, but they are responsible for substantial financial and social costs to their communities, states and the country. They are less likely to accumulate wealth, which impacts living conditions, educational opportunities and job opportunities. Dropouts earn less, pay fewer taxes, are more likely to collect welfare and more likely to engage in criminal behavior.^[ii] Further, individuals with lower income, less education and lower-status occupations and employment have poorer health and less means to obtain adequate health care.^[iii]

- Over the course of a lifetime, a high school dropout earns \$260,000 less than a high school graduate and \$1 million less than a college graduate.^[iv]
- Dropouts from the class of 2006 will cost the U.S. more than \$17 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured health care over the course of their lifetimes.^[v]
- High School dropouts are three and one-half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested, and more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison.^[vi]
- Sixty eight percent of state prison inmates across the country do not have a high school diploma.^[vii]

Dropping Out of School is a Process

It takes more than a day to drop out of school. Studies show that a single event rarely causes a youth to drop out; rather it is the result of a long process of disengagement that can begin before kindergarten. Patterns linked to high school dropout can be set by the third grade – and failing grades or discipline problems in elementary or middle schools serve as common markers. While dropping out may be a process, there are clear warning signs and risk factors along the path before dropout occurs.^[viii] One study^[ix] found significant risk factors in four domains: individual, family, school and community. While there is no single risk factor that can be used to accurately predict who is at risk of dropping out, the accuracy of dropout predictions increases when combinations of multiple risk factors are considered. Risk factors that are significantly related to high school dropout include:^[x]^[xi]

- Learning disabilities or emotional disturbances
- Adult responsibilities such as a high number of work hours or parenthood
- Belonging to a peer group engaged in high-risk behavior
- Low school achievement
- Retention or over-age for grade
- Poor school attendance
- Low educational expectations
- Low commitment to school
- No extra curricular participation

- Low socioeconomic status
- Low education level of parents
- Lack of family interest in school

Many of the above risk factors are a direct result of a school's environment, including available resources, student body performance and academic policies and practices. The onset of standards-based reforms and high-stakes testing combined with tightened budgets that strictly limit the availability of art, music, foreign language, science and PE, increases the likelihood that at-risk students will drop out of school.[xii] Students who might otherwise lose interest in school often remain engaged when they are presented with an enriched curriculum that provides them with experiential, hands-on learning in a wide range of subject areas such as art, music, foreign language, science and physical education. Students themselves report a lack of relevant curriculum as a main reason they drop out. A majority of dropouts surveyed felt that schools could improve the chances that students would stay in school if they provided opportunities for real-world learning, more engaging coursework and smaller classes with more individualized attention.[xiii]

Afterschool Programs Successfully Engage and Support Youth

Studies show that afterschool programs effectively address and help resolve many of the issues that lead to dropout.[xiv] These programs are especially crucial in reaching young people who are most at risk at turning points as they transition from middle school to high school and are searching for meaningful academic, vocational and recreational activities that keep them invested in their own success.[xv] While school districts across the country wrestle with shrinking funds and tightened budgets, afterschool programs provide an ideal platform for the broad variety of curricula and personalized instruction that keep students interested in learning and committed to staying in school. Youth who participate in afterschool programs improve in key areas that foster success in school, including social and emotional development, increased interest and engagement in school and avoidance of risky behaviors.[xv]

- Children in LA's BEST improve their regular school day attendance and report higher aspirations regarding finishing school and going to college than their peers who do not participate in the afterschool program. While LA's BEST is a program for elementary school students, they also engage older youth as volunteers and mentors. Further, dropout rates among LA's BEST students are 20 percent lower than the overall district dropout rate, highlighting the importance of early intervention.[xvii]
- Sixty-five percent of former Citizen Schools 8th Grade Academy participants enrolled in high-quality high schools compared to 26 percent of matched nonparticipants. The high school choice program takes advantage of Boston Public Schools' policy of elective high schools. 8th Grade Academy apprentices conduct research on high schools, including average test scores, dropout rates, and college matriculation rates, and analyze the data to select what they consider to be a high quality high school. Out of those who went on to enroll in an elective high school, ninety-two percent of participants were promoted on time to the tenth grade. This is critical, since earning promotion to tenth grade on time is a key predictor of high school graduation (i.e. preventing dropout).[xviii]
- Youth in the Quantum Opportunities afterschool program were half as likely to dropout of high school and two and one half times more likely to go on to further

education after high school than their peers. [xix]

Several areas have been identified as effective strategies for dropout prevention. These include: academic strategies such as mentoring and tutoring, service learning and alternative schooling; making the most of instruction through experiential learning and educational technology; making the most of the wider community through school-community collaborations and career and technical education; and ensuring that schools are safe places to learn.[xx] Many of these strategies are incorporated into high quality afterschool programs, making them effective tools in preventing high school dropout.

- The After-School Apprenticeship Program (ASAP) is a national adaptation of the successful Chicago teen apprenticeship program After School Matters, which allows high school students to explore a variety of career opportunities through training and paid work placements, helping them develop skills that translate to the workplace. The ASAP program offers high school students in New York City, Boston and Providence the opportunity to be trained through an apprenticeship in either the arts or sports. The students learn a craft alongside master practitioners, and then apply these skills during paid summer internships where they work with younger students. The After-School Corporation (TASC) piloted ASAP in 2008 at two sites in New York City with positive results. Student attendance rates averaged between 80 and 90 percent, and program staff reported that participants showed improvements in self-confidence, understanding of life skills and the ability to work as a team. Students reported gains in problem solving skills, leadership, patience and responsibility.

When high school students get authentic, hands-on leadership experiences and exposure to careers, as they do through the After-School Apprenticeship Program, then they have a reason to stay in school and aim for college. They've learned what it feels like to do work they love, do it well, and be respected and rewarded.
-- Lucy N. Friedman, president of The After-School Corporation (TASC)

College has been a life-long dream, and MESA is helping make it a reality. I would have never have thought that I could be going to college because I'm the only one in my immediate family that has tried to make an effort for further education. I am planning on going to veterinary school.

--Amanda Thomas
Graduate of the Alternative Center for Education, now attending Front

The Colorado MESA program in Denver, Colorado is a premier educational resource and experiential program serving students throughout high school. MESA's mission is to increase the number of economically disadvantaged and at risk students who graduate from high school fully prepared for post secondary education in engineering, math, science, computer science, business and other math and science-based fields. Hands-on activities, team building and mentoring help build social and literacy skills. Field trips to colleges, universities and industry sites, as well as engineering and science-related design challenges excite students, sharpen their skills and increase their awareness of career opportunities.

Range Community College

Afterschool programs that engage the interests and passions of students are more likely to attract and keep participants, allowing them to take full advantage of the program and earn the credits they need, so they have the opportunity to graduate with their peers.^[xxi]

- RiverzEdge Arts Project in Providence, Rhode Island is an art and leadership program where high school students work with artists in fine and commercial arts. They guide youth to create art, and run an arts enterprise in an environment that stresses hands-on learning, teamwork, mutual respect, responsibility and workplace discipline. Participants build self-awareness and work skills by creating and selling products and services in the competitive arts and business markets, developing their creative voice and preparing them for the job market. One hundred percent of participants go on to graduate high school in a city with a 34 percent dropout rate.

RiverzEdge gives me responsibility and leadership skills I wouldn't normally be provided and makes me more socially open minded.

--Elleen Ebiwa, 17,
Teen artist and
RiverzEdge Arts
Project participant

Effective dropout prevention programs take a comprehensive approach, not only addressing academic support, job training and school credits, but also addressing other social and personal factors that often prevent students from succeeding.^[xxii]

- The High School Credit Recovery Program in Wilmington, Delaware includes an afterschool dropout intervention module that targets students at risk for dropping out because they have fallen behind in academic credits. The program uses a multitude of interventions to reengage youth, including creating a learning environment that allows for different readiness levels and fostering communication and cooperation between community-based organizations and the school district. The students are provided with services that address non-academic issues such as substance abuse prevention and treatment, HIV/AIDS, violence prevention, assistance with life choices and decision making. The goal of the program is to graduate healthy, responsible youth.

Conclusion

Successfully confronting the dropout crisis in this country will take a multi-faceted approach that addresses the multiple risk factors common among high school dropouts. One obvious facet to any dropout prevention strategy is encouraging and supporting participation in afterschool programs. Participants in afterschool programs benefit from personal skill building, academic enrichment, family outreach, engaging extracurricular activities and, in some cases, opportunities to earn income, all within a safe environment and positive peer group. Afterschool programs can prevent students from falling through the cracks, ensuring that they receive the appropriate level of attention, instruction, engagement and support to graduate from high school prepared for college, the modern workforce and life.

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