

Executive Summary

Community Efforts to Reach the Most Marginalized Youth through Out-of-School Time Opportunities: A Systematic Review

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Context. Out-of-school time (OST) programs are supervised programs that students attend outside of the traditional school day, including summer, before school, and after school. Multiple meta-analyses have established that OST programs can have a positive impact on a variety of student outcomes, including academic achievement¹ and social-emotional development². In particular, OST programs serving middle and high school (MS/HS) youth have the potential to engage youth at a pivotal time when they are developing identity and autonomy in regards to academics, career, relationships, and health behaviors.

However, over the past few decades, high-income families have been more active in OST activities, while participation rates of low-income families have plummeted³. This is not due to lack of demand; more parents than ever wish to enroll their children in OST programs. Unmet demand is highest among Black and Latinx families compared to white families, and among low-income compared to high-income families⁴. Not only has public funding for OST programs stagnated over the past decade, but research also confirms that vast inequities exist in accessibility, prevalence, and quality of OST programs³. It is imperative for research, practice and policy to unite in closing this OST opportunity gap.

Study Purpose. The purpose of this study is to synthesize the research on OST approaches that serve low-income MS/HS youth, youth who are traditionally underserved by OST programs, in order to identify promising practices.

Methods. A systematic review was conducted following best practices as set forth by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)⁵. The search was run on June 16th, 2022. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, and reports, published in English after December 31, 2011. The 10 most highly cited articles published between 2007 and 2011 that met inclusion criteria were later added. After screening, 129 articles met inclusion criteria and were included in this review.

¹ Lauer et al., 2006

² Durlak et al., 2010

³ Snellman et al., 2015

⁴ Afterschool Alliance, 2020

⁵ Page et al., 2021

Findings

Program activities. The programs included in this review provided opportunities for youth to participate in a wide variety of activities to promote academic learning, social-emotional and identity development, community engagement, physical and mental health, and career and college preparation.

Partnerships. OST programs serving low-income MS/HS youth rarely worked in silos and instead relied on various partnerships for funding, recruiting, space and materials, curriculum design, professional development, staffing, and program evaluation. Successful partnerships had clear roles, responsibilities, and ongoing communication among all involved. Importantly, OST programs provided a way for partners to not only meet their existing goals, but to create new goals together that expanded their reach or services in a way that benefited the community. Partnerships were especially crucial for reaching and serving hard-to-reach youth. For example, some organizations, such as foster care departments or refugee resettlement agencies, relied on existing databases and relationships to facilitate participant identification and recruitment, while other organizations offered staff training or designed curriculum that was relevant to the strengths and needs of the target population.

Staffing/Training. The programs in this review were not immune to staff turnover, which plagues many OST initiatives. One recommendation gleaned from these articles is to establish pathways for youth to become volunteers or staff within a program, thereby replenishing staff with people who know the program and community well. Another recommendation is to focus on establishing and supporting strong program leadership. Program leaders can increase staff retention through building strong relationships and remaining responsive to staff needs. Regarding training, staff professional development should not only teach required content knowledge but also facilitate learning soft skills like mentoring strategies and how to talk to parents. Finally, when staff shared lived experiences with participants, such as shared racial identity or growing up in the same community, staff were able to connect, mentor, guide, and advocate for participants in particularly effective ways.

Recruitment. Findings suggest that effective strategies for identifying and recruiting low-income MS/HS youth to OST programs include clearly communicating ways in which participation will increase capital, such as developing skills, building relationships, or earning money; relying on youth's existing relationships with friends, teachers, and counselors to generate interest and provide direct referrals; establishing partnerships with trusted organizations that serve the target population; and advertising participant products (e.g., a culminating art show or research conference) on websites or social media.

Engagement. In order to promote engagement, OST programs encouraged youth agency, offered opportunities that were relevant to their lives, nurtured the development of

competence, encouraged contribution to youths' communities through disrupting inequities, exposed youth to new experiences, fostered a sense of belonging, and ensured safety and wellness. Programs built youth's social capital and access to resources by connecting youth with community members and explicitly teaching concrete skills. Specific engagement approaches included culturally relevant and asset-based pedagogy, intentional attendance policies, project-based learning, and culminating events. Findings suggest that youth disengage from programs when they are not able to develop positive relationships, lack clear purpose or direction, or are unable to engage in activities that are meaningful or interesting to them. Youth who are the most marginalized, such as youth contending with multiple adverse childhood experiences, benefit from OST staff who understand their needs and are able to provide additional supports.

Conclusion. Across all findings, repeated themes were relationships, safety, and trust. Successful programs were dependable community assets. Program staff served as confidants, mentors, advocates, and peer conflict mediators, developing family-like relationships with youth. Through OST opportunities, communities came together to create safe spaces for youth to learn and grow. Studies showed that OST programs had positive effects on a variety of student outcomes, including social-emotional development, academic achievement, STEM interest/identity, college or graduate school aspiration/enrollment, professional development/career readiness, civic values/behaviors, school attendance, mental health, high school graduates rates, physical health, cognitive development, and fewer high-risk behaviors.

This review also reveals gaps in the literature and room for improvement. As previous literature has identified, more consistency in study design would improve interpretation of findings and comparison across studies⁶. Additionally, despite it being best practice to engage families in afterschool settings⁷, programs generally did not involve families outside of recruitment activities and inviting them to culminating events. OST programs should consider not only increasing family engagement opportunities, but also partnering with families and other community members in program development to ensure that the program remains grounded in the values and principles of the community. Additionally, of note was that few studies reported serving LGBTQ+, Indigenous, rural, homeless youth, or youth with disabilities or those in the foster care system. Considering that all programs in this review served low-income students, it is likely that programs served a substantial number of these youth, but that these demographic characteristics are rarely considered in the OST research literature. It is crucial for both research and practice to recognize youth's diverse experiences in order to thoughtfully align program goals and intended outcomes, and to ultimately design, implement, and scale up high-quality OST programs for low-income youth.

⁶ Lester et al., 2020

⁷ NIOST, 2006