
Strengthening Programs That Serve Older Youth

"After school programs should be as common as McDonald's... one on every corner," (Teen Empowerment 2001).

After school program access is urgent and the need is compounded for youth ages 11-18. Traditionally, after school programs target elementary school children and much of the existing out-of-school time field is structured with a younger focus. For example, the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) provides financial assistance for low-income families to support afterschool program costs, but nationally a child's eligibility ends after age 12 (age 14 for youth with disabilities). Contrary to the popular belief that sports, jobs, and other activities replace after school needs for older youth, they often spend their afternoons in unstructured, unsupervised and unsafe settings. This often results in exposure to higher-risk behaviors, decreased engagement in school, higher incidence of substance use and early sexual activity, among others. Likewise, we cannot ignore the well-documented spike in juvenile victimization and crime that occurs during the afterschool hours of 2-6pm.

"Older youth experience an increase in the diversity of programmatic options, but actual out-of-school time opportunities often shrink in number," (NIOST 2003).

The Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet) is a leader in networking, training, and advocating for afterschool providers in Massachusetts. Only 20% of programs out of nearly 450 listed in the *BOSTnet 2006-07 Guide to Boston's Before and After School Programs* database serve ten or more high school aged youth, despite the large number of youth aged 14 and older in the city. Accordingly, fewer than 5000 youth aged 14-18 are involved in these afterschool programs, yet Boston Public School enrollment data indicates there are over 35,000 students attending local high schools. Furthermore, this does not reflect the numbers of un-enrolled out-of-school youth who could benefit from additional program supports.

The trend is similar for middle school aged youth. Only 24% of programs in BOSTnet's database report regularly serving ten or more middle school youth (ages 11-13). Only 29 programs overall (run by 16 organizations) indicated that they specifically serve only middle school students. A national survey found the need for afterschool to be especially high for youth in their middle school years: *"Just six percent of middle schoolers are in afterschool programs; another 34 percent of America's middle schoolers are unsupervised in the afternoons," (Afterschool Alliance, 2004).*

Why is it important to expand afterschool access now?

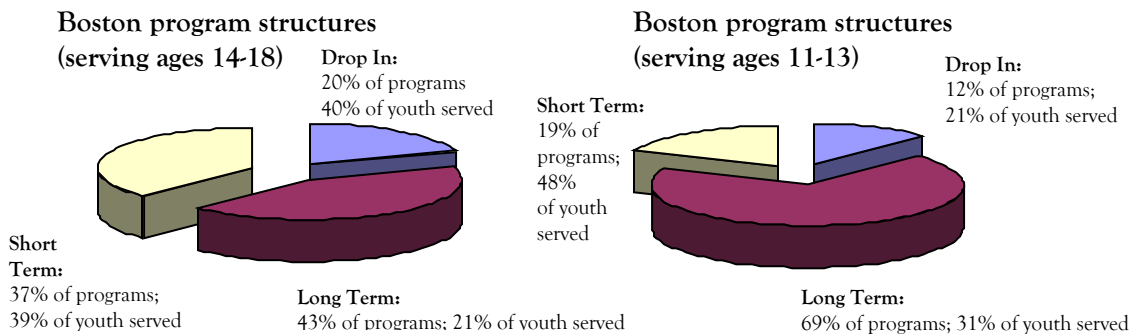
- ♦ The number of adolescents nationwide is steadily increasing; this is expected to continue through 2050 upwards to 53 million youth. The 10-19 year-old population also experience higher rates of familial poverty than older populations (PRB 2006).
- ♦ Participation in afterschool programming has been positively associated with increased motivation, higher educational aspirations and engagement in learning, lower drop-out rates, and stronger social and leadership skills which are likewise associated with improved school performance and adult success.

Can we just expand existing elementary programs to include older youth?

Research has shown that youth engagement is the strongest single predictor of positive youth outcomes. Youth engagement itself is linked to quality adult relationships, low staff:youth ratios in programs, and age-appropriate activities for older youth. Programs that have structures and activities specific

to the developmental issues of older youth tend to sustain higher involvement levels than those programs that simply incorporate older youth into pre-existing programs designed for their younger peers.

Programs for middle and high school aged youth must restructure their curriculum, programming options, and staff-focus if they are traditionally accustomed to working with younger children. To be effective, this work insists on rethinking fundamental programming strategies. For example, some programs have success reaching a wider range of 14-18 year old participants by establishing "drop in" hours where youth can show up without committing to a long-term schedule of participation. In the *BOSTnet 2006-07 Guide*, 19 programs structured this way are serving over 2000 youth, however, the frequency of teen participation in these programs is unclear. Comparatively, 41 programs work with teens as part of a long-term membership or participant basis. They reach fewer young people (a daily average attendance of 1041 youth, averaging 25 youth per program), but may have more actual contact hours with individuals.



There are similar structural challenges for middle school-aged youth programs. In the *BOSTnet 2006-07 Guide*, 21 of these programs (12%) have a drop-in structure and many more (119 programs) are built on a more traditional long-term structure and serve 1736 middle school youth. Out of 363 programs, 172 enroll ages 11-13, but half of these serve only a handful (less than ten) middle school youth in pre-existing licensed elementary school programs. Instead, 72% of these middle school participants are served by a fraction of organizations (less than a third of the total programs).

What are the facility needs for older youth?

The physical space where older youth programming occurs is essential to its content. Over the past nine years, the Facilities Initiative (of BOSTnet and the Children's Investment Fund) has learned key strategies by helping finance, design and develop high quality space for older youth programs. The programmatic space where older youth succeed differs from that of their younger peers. Just as the curriculum must meet appropriate developmental levels, so the space must accommodate these different activities. For example, the increasing autonomy of a fifteen year-old must be negotiated with adequate adult supervision. Recently, a BOSTnet survey found that only 17% of over 100 after school programs in Boston reported that they are fully satisfied that their space meets their programmatic needs. In fact, nearly 60% indicated that addressing facilities issues for their program was a "high" or "very high" priority.

Involving families in older youth programs:

Family engagement typically drops when youth reach middle school. Despite the need for greater family involvement, afterschool programs are usually less effective reaching the families of older youth. For example, in Boston only 21% of programs who indicate that family engagement is a priority exclusively serve youth ages 11 years and older. BOSTnet's 2006 Round Table Series and Middle School Network have also repeatedly highlight parent involvement as a key strategy for recruiting and retaining middle school youth, yet programs consistently indicate that they struggle with it.

What's happening in Boston and across the country?

While there are over 30,000 students grades 6-12 enrolled in Boston Public Schools, BOSTnet 2006-07 data indicates only a third of these youth are participating in afterschool programs. The neighborhood with the most programs serving ages 11-18 is also the neighborhood with the most residents in this age group: Dorchester, with 53 programs serving 1042 youth.

According to a national survey, three in four afterschool programs are operating at or above capacity, and 87% of providers say children in their communities who need afterschool programs don't have access to them. Simultaneously, voters of every demographic and political party support after school programming and support governmental funding to sustain and improve programs for youth. Despite this, a national study found that a critical challenge for cities, and specifically Boston, in establishing a strong base and network of older youth programs is related to inadequate investments to build and sustain capacity. *"Research emphasizes that high quality learning opportunities need to be early and sustained – that investments in young children are not enough to 'inoculate' young people to future developmental challenges. Yet many programs in Boston limit their services to ages 5-12. Attention should focus on expanding after school opportunities for older youth and expanding the capacity of current organizations serving younger children to 'extend their reach' by serving youth longer," (NIOST 2003, p55).*

Conclusion:

Increasing opportunities for older youth in afterschool programs is pivotal to maximizing youth gains, both inside and outside of school. Afterschool programs provide safety, enrichment, academic assistance, socio-emotional support, and links to other human services. Both nationally and in Boston, inadequate financial resources, space, program capacity, and developmentally appropriate content and structure are obstacles to meeting the afterschool needs of middle and high school-aged youth. In 2006, the Massachusetts legislature approved \$1 million for an afterschool grant program and, subsequently, received over five times that amount in funding requests from providers. The message is clear: afterschool programs need more financial supports. As this population continues to grow, their need for effective afterschool programming continues to emerge as a priority.

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Resources.

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