

Boston's OST Landscape – Quality, Participation and Opportunities

This is a pivotal time for afterschool and out-of-school time (OST) programs in Boston and across Massachusetts. There is a growing recognition, substantiated by research, of the role OST plays in supporting the development of children and youth for success in education and in life. BOSTnet recently participated in the state's *After School and Out-of-School Time Commission*, which elevated many of the issues affecting the field, including inconsistent funding, workforce development, and access. There is an increasing emphasis on program quality, the needs of children with disabilities, mental health supports, and services for older youth. We are beginning to find common ground in a youth development framework that covers the continuum from early care to school age and older youth programs. Advances in neuroscience research are also revealing that the developing brain has an enormous capacity to learn when nurtured. Moreover, there is a growing awareness of the importance of coordinating services to more children through more efficient systems. The question is no longer whether OST programs are necessary; instead, the question has shifted to how do we best develop and support high-quality programs and maintain a diversity of opportunities that serve the needs and interests of all children, youth and families.

Yet, it is clear challenges exist beyond the current economic crisis. As a recent report from the Wallace Foundation notes, “defining what a well-functioning, coordinated OST ‘system’ consists of – and how to plan, operate and sustain it – remains very much an early work in progress.” Although there is strong research that tells us what elements are important for a quality program, developing an infrastructure of funding and professional development to build and support quality programming remains elusive. There is also continued debate on how best to evaluate programs. While youth outcomes remain the standard benchmark for state, federal and private funders, many researchers and advocates in the field are pushing for more quality-based indicators. These could include elements such as strong leadership, intentional learning, staff development, family involvement, and participation rates. All of these indicators are linked to program quality. The thought is that if we evaluate programs on their ability to deliver quality at the point-of-service, we can stop holding them accountable for outcomes that are beyond their control. By focusing on quality, we have greater influence over the levers of change, including leadership development, staff practices, program culture (risk and innovation) and professional development systems.

The question of how best to evaluate OST programs is complicated by a lack of consensus about appropriate expectations for OST. When parents view afterschool as childcare they often utilize it inconsistently in response to periodic need. Moreover, reducing the basic function of afterschool to childcare excludes the role these programs play in healthy youth development. Viewing afterschool as an extension of the school day also limits the potential of the field. Focusing on academic achievement and structuring content in a school-like way can dilute the unique characteristics of afterschool that make it a valuable informal learning environment. It is also clear that a core asset of OST learning—*fun*—is often a missing ingredient not readily apparent to program staff. Fun is the foundation of sustained learning and engagement from early childhood onward. Fun supports an environment that nurtures inclusive, pro-social behaviors among children. Fun learning matters!

Ultimately, our goal is universal access to quality opportunities that build developmental assets in youth, including confidence, social-competence, positive identity, positive values and a commitment to learning and community. Research shows that children and youth who have a high level of these assets at any given time make better decisions, are engaged in their communities, are more resilient, and achieve more academically. For over twenty years, BOSTnet has worked to fulfill its mission *to enhance the quality*

and increase the capacity of the out-of-school time field. However, we know that access to quality programs is not enough. As researchers are finding, positive youth outcomes are most directly related to **participation** in quality youth environments that are safe, supportive, interactive and engaging. Yet, we have very little data on participation rates or overall demand. Some research suggests that we really need to think of the long-term outcomes that are cumulative over time and linked to extended participation. As a recent study by Public/Private Ventures notes, short-term engagement has been shown to result in only short-term outcomes without any long-term impact on youth development. If quality and participation are the key drivers of outcomes, then we must address head-on the challenge of creating programming that appeals to children and youth of various ages with diverse interests.

OST in Boston—Surveying the Field

In 1989, BOSTnet published the first *Guide to Boston's Before and After-School Programs* so that the Boston Public School District could develop alternative bus routes to improve access. One of the elements that makes BOSTnet's *Guide* unique compared to other online or print resources is that it includes programs that provide consistent programming to children and youth ages 5-18 that is both learning and developmentally-driven. BOSTnet's data is also self-reported by programs. Ultimately they are responsible for both the currency and quality of their profiles. This creates engagement in the data collection process and allows us to gather data in a cost-effective manner, but also creates challenges when we analyze the information. Many programs, including both independent community-based organizations and programs of larger agencies, do not have the time, resources, or incentives necessary to be active participants in citywide surveys.

The 1989 *Guide* included approximately 50 OST programs in the city of Boston. By 1992 there were 70 listed, and for the first time the *Guide* included information on inclusion of children with disabilities, transportation and vouchers. With over 500 programs (afterschool, summer and resource), the current *Guide* can tell us much about trends in the field over the past 15 years. Significantly, in 1992, 47% of programs were listed as having a formal system to engage parents, while the most recent *Guide* reveals that 72% of afterschool programs surveyed engage families regularly. As we know from the MARS report and other research, family involvement is a key driver of quality. Data around inclusion are equally telling. In 1992 only 45% of programs reported serving youth with "special needs." Today, 67% identify themselves as afterschool programs that engage and include children and youth with physical or cognitive disabilities. Learning disabilities are cited most often (almost 60% of programs surveyed), followed by attention deficit disorder (48% of programs surveyed), physical disabilities (27% of programs surveyed), and mental health issues (25% of programs surveyed). Moreover, 64% of programs report being wheelchair accessible. It is important to note that actual percentages are likely to be higher because not all programs report or know the range of disabilities their children have. Interestingly, only 27 programs in all (about 7%) indicated a priority in serving children with specific disabilities.

There is a high level of consolidation of youth programs in the city of Boston that mirrors trends nationally. For example, only ten organizations run nearly 175 distinct programs at different sites throughout the city. The top two, YMCA of Greater Boston and Boston Centers for Youth and Families (BCYF), each operate over 30 program sites. The top 3 providers in the city, moreover, provide nearly 30% of the total afterschool capacity we documented in our *Guide*. Clearly, such structural realities result in certain economies of scale for these organizations, many of which operate in Boston Public Schools. Of the 143 public schools within the Boston Public School system, nearly 80% have some form of afterschool or extended learning service. There is an opportunity for broader impact through targeting these organizations for quality improvement efforts and replication of effective programming. Among the largest multi-site providers are: YMCA, BCYF, Strong Women/Strong Girls, CityKicks, MetroLacrosse, New England Scores, Citizen Schools, DotWell, Girl Scouts and the Boys & Girls Clubs. Current resource scarcity and recent funding trends favoring partnerships between schools and community-based organizations will likely continue the trend toward consolidated services for children and youth.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census there are nearly 110,000 youth ages 5-19 living in Boston, with an additional 32,000 under the age of 5. The 2005 American Community Survey statistics list over 108,000 youth 17 and under. Of these children, it is estimated that as many as 40,000 participate in some form of OST programming (including youth sports). Yet, there remains an unmet demand for affordable, high quality opportunities for low-income families. Currently, the Department of Early Education and Care provides financial assistance for 4,450 school age children in Boston to attend afterschool and OST activities. The waitlist for financial assistance in Boston alone is 1058. Beyond cost, many parents and youth cite safety, transportation, and quality as key barriers to OST enrollment.

By far the largest numbers of school-age youth (5-18) are located in Dorchester, followed by Roxbury and Roslindale. At over 35,000 school-age youth, Dorchester has more than twice the number as the next highest neighborhood, Roxbury. Ninety-two percent of afterschool programs surveyed for the *Guide* reported on capacity. Using those numbers, the greatest numbers of slots (4,217) are located in Dorchester, but this serves just 12 percent of the children and youth. With 2,323 slots listed, Roxbury has the next highest capacity that serves nearly 20 percent of the children and youth in the neighborhood. While they rank near the bottom of the list in school-age population, Charlestown and South Boston have enough capacity of the programs reporting to serve over 30 percent of all children and youth in those neighborhoods. Hyde Park, Roslindale and West Roxbury, respectively, have the lowest number of slots for their children, each with a capacity to serve less than 10 percent of the school-age population. Our 2007 survey, moreover, listed over 266 distinct summer programs in the city of Boston, with the neighborhoods of Downtown Boston, Dorchester, Roxbury, South Boston, and Allston/Brighton reporting the highest capacities, respectively. With 260 of these programs reporting (97%), summer program capacity was 17,286.

Geographic distribution and diversity are important indicators of strength for the field. On one level it helps provide choice for both parents and youth who are looking for programs that serve their distinct needs. Clearly, programs cannot have an impact on children if they do not engage them directly. But it also highlights an often-overlooked impact of community-based OST programs. CBOs play an important role in community development and quality of life. They can be drivers of economic change. Youth serving organizations provide opportunities for workforce development for an often young, inexperienced labor pool that is currently experiencing historic lows in employment rates. Hiring these young people, moreover, helps build cultural competence and can infuse programs with a rich community perspective. In setting priorities, policymakers and funders should consider the impact these programs have beyond youth outcomes, and invest in a broader vision of community and workforce development.

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