

## After-School Programs May Foster Academic Achievement

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After school programs (ASPs), such as those established with the Federal government's 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Community Learning Centers' (21CCLCs) funds, are located in low performing schools in disadvantaged areas and serve approximately 1.2 million children each year. In this study, we asked whether participation in after-school programs receiving 21CCLC funds can improve student motivation and academic performance over the course of a school year. We found that among the typical after-school care arrangements that poor children experience, ASPs appear somewhat unique in their ability to promote academic-related success. The ASP group showed higher reading achievement at the end of the school year compared to children in *all* other patterns of after-school care.

This study used data on 599, ethnically diverse, school-aged children (ages 6-10) enrolled in three public schools in a disadvantaged Northeast city. Sixty percent of the children in the study were living in poverty. The researchers identified four common patterns of after-school care: after-school program participation in 21CCLC centers, parent care, some parent care combined with some time alone, and some care from relatives/babysitters and some time alone.

The ASP children were also rated by their teachers as having higher expectations for their own success compared to children whose pattern of care consisted of relatives/babysitters and some time alone. However, only those children who ASP staff rated as being highly engaged in the program had higher levels of motivation for school work. This is among the first studies to examine children's levels of engagement in ASPs and helps to explain which programs are beneficial and why. We concluded that simply attending the program may increase children's expectations for success on schoolwork and reading achievement. However, to increase student motivation, the program must engage students by being interesting, challenging and enjoyable.

School age children growing up in disadvantaged communities are less prepared to begin school, have lower school achievement during childhood and are at continued risk for academic failure during adolescence compared to more affluent peers. Current findings offer insight into how to decrease this gap in academic achievement. Such insight comes at a time of increasing interest from researchers and policymakers in the role of after school programs in improving the academic performance of socio-economically disadvantaged children. Children enrolled in before- and after-school programs increased from 1.7 to 6.7 million between 1991 and 1997. Also, the Federal government currently targets \$1B to 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Community Learning Centers.