At-a-Glance

The Dallas Independent School District’s (Dallas ISD) Department of Summer Learning and Extended-Day Services partnered with several organizations to provide a variety of after-school programming across the district. Research into the efficacy of after-school programming has long shown that student participation in these programs has a positive impact on both students’ academic achievement and social skills (Fashola, 1998; Halpern, 2004). However, recent research has addressed the effect that program quality may have on these outcomes. The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) identified five components exhibited by quality programs (CRESST, 2009): 1) Goals should be clear and supported, 2) administrators should be experienced and well-educated, 3) the staff should be composed of veteran educators, 4) the curriculum should be aligned to that of the traditional school day, and 5) evaluation results are applied to improve the program. Many of these findings were echoed by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance’s (NCEE) 2009 report, as the researchers made five recommendations to help improve academic achievement: align the curriculum with that of the traditional school day, ensure regular attendance, utilize individual and small-group instruction, provide engaging learning opportunities, and continuously evaluate program effectiveness.

Guided by the NCEE and CRESST recommendations, the district evaluator conducted a multiple-case study of the after-school programs at four sites, managed by four different organizations, across the Dallas ISD. The evaluator collected available online artifacts pertaining to each of the following organizations: Dallas After-School Achievers, City of Dallas Parks & Recreation Department, Wilkinson Center, and St. Simon’s Episcopal Church. The evaluator conducted observations and interviews with three program coordinators between May 13 and 30, 2012. The Wilkinson Center coordinator was unavailable for interview. In lieu of a coordinator interview, the evaluator conducted a brief focus group with program staff prior to beginning the observation.

Dallas After-School Achievers

The coordinator at Anne Frank Elementary for the Dallas After-School Achievers (DASA) has taught for over 30 years, 11 as a fourth-grade teacher with the Dallas ISD. She worked with two other teachers, one focusing exclusively on a stock market game, to provide free after-school services for approximately 100 elementary students throughout the school year. Due to budget concerns and in order to maximize the number of students served, fifty students are selected on a first-come, first-served basis during the first semester, and only attend that semester. Students not participating during the first semester are placed on a waiting list and selected to participate during the second semester.

The program serves students on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:15 to 5:00 in the school’s cafeteria. The program shares this space with a YMCA after-school program. The evaluator observed a significant level of noise and distraction in the shared space, something that is extremely common, according to the coordinator. Snacks are served at assigned seats until 3:45, during which students can complete homework. Participants then take part in a series of vendor-provided enrichment activities, approved through the Dallas ISD’s Extended-Day Services, which changes throughout the year. These activities included the stock market game; chess; tennis; and Mad Science, a demonstration of stimulating science experiments. As the coordinator explained, students are not required to stay the entire period: Parents can collect their children at any time. However, the coordinator interview and program observation showed that early pick-ups rarely occur.

DASA staff recounted no communication with classroom teachers, and that discipline problems were minimal because they had several years of experience as teachers and after-school staff at this location.

City of Dallas Parks & Recreation

The City of Dallas’ Parks & Recreation Department supported a free after-school program at Highland Meadows during the 2011-2012 school year. The program coordinator has been involved with the City of Dallas’ programs for over 20 years and is in her twelfth year as a site manager. She, along with two experienced staff members, served an estimated 57 students each day until 6:00, the earliest that parents were allowed to take them home.

The program targets low-performing children from households headed by a single female. The coordinator received suggestions and feedback from classroom teachers when enrolling approximately 75 children in September 2011. Goals for the program are
standardized, promoted across all after-school sites affiliated with the City of Dallas, and well-articulated by the Highland Meadows coordinator. The program aimed to provide safe after-school supervision, provide enrichment activities, provide academic tutoring, and encourage personal development. At the end of the year, surveys collected opinions about the program’s enrichment offerings and other components were sent to parents. The survey was the only significant communication between program staff and parents.

The program operates Monday through Friday from 3:05 to 6:00 in the school’s cafeteria. Students sit at assigned tables, eat snacks, and complete homework until 3:45. Participants then either take part in a series of vendor-provided enrichment activities or receive tutoring from classroom teachers until approximately 5:30, when the students clean up the cafeteria. The coordinator reported enrichment activities ranging from a variety of sports to cultural productions and crafts. Such productions included a Thanksgiving performance, original skits about Martin Luther King and African American history, and a Cinco de Mayo celebration. Each day, the coordinator posted lesson plans and goals for all students to see, and discipline was not reported to be a problem because the staff had several years of experience as after-school teachers at this location.

Wilkinson Center

The Wilkinson Center supported an after-school program at Lipscomb Elementary for pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students from 3:00 to 6:00, Monday through Thursday during the school year. The program’s staff consisted of one coordinator, two Dallas ISD employees at Lipscomb Elementary (the office manager and a teaching assistant), and three AmeriCorps volunteers working with over 75 students, some participating for free and others paying a small fee. Staff reported that the program was originally designed to accommodate only 50 students. The program’s goals were to provide homework assistance, opportunities for physical fitness, exploration in the creative arts, and special family-focused events. The staff, when prompted, stated the only salient goal was to increase academic achievement through homework completion. Homework completion was reinforced daily through homework checks, and every six weeks as the coordinator received participating students’ report cards from the school’s front office personnel.

Each day began with participating students entering the school’s cafeteria and lining up for snacks at 3:15. At approximately 3:30 they began their homework and took restroom breaks by group. The remainder of each day’s session was filled by staff reading books to grade-level groups, crafts, and games. Older students were allowed to play outside, weather permitting. Parents arrived to take children home anytime throughout the session. The evaluator observed two mothers collecting students at 3:20, not even allowing enough time for the students to finish their snacks.

Staff reported a lack of direction from the Wilkinson Center, in particular noting consistent lack of supplies and curriculum. Initially, staff was informed that they would be provided with a user-friendly curriculum at the beginning of the school year. It was never provided. Each day they planned activities as a group prior to the arrival of students.

Discipline problems were pervasive throughout the program, especially among the younger students. Parents ignored any requests to meet and discuss problems regarding their children. Additionally, no parents signed up to participate in a Parents’ Night, one of the special events promoted by the program. These problems, combined with parents picking up children early, caused the staff to feel as if parents were using the program as a “babysitting service.”

St. Simon’s After-School

The St. Simon’s after-school program at Charles Rice Learning Center operates between 3:15 and 5:00 in the school’s cafeteria, Monday through Thursday, and is free to participants. The goals for the program are straightforward: provide children a safe place after school, provide a snack, and assist with homework. The coordinator, also the physical education teacher at Charles Rice, has been teaching since 1987 and soon after took over the after-school program which later evolved into the St. Simon’s program. Two other Charles Rice teachers assisted in the afternoons, a St. Simon’s requirement.

Students apply for the program in August and preference is given to returning students. Remaining slots are filled first by younger students before progressing upward through the grades. The program is promoted by word of mouth from teachers to parents or parents to other parents. The only prerequisite that a parent must meet to enroll a child is that they were unable to pick their child up from school by 3:15. Enrollment started at 75 students in September 2011 but had dwindled to approximately 50 students in May 2012.

Participating students arrived at the school’s cafeteria at 3:15, and either began their homework or stood in line for milk and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, made to order by the coordinator as students checked in. St. Simon’s provided the milk, peanut butter, and bread; students took turns providing the jelly. During this time, one staff member offers homework assistance to every student and checks that it has been completed. Any student with more specific questions can go to their classroom teacher and ask for help, provided the teacher is available. Students without homework can choose a book to read. At 4:00, students free-play outside, weather permitting, or play...
board games with one another. Younger students are often encouraged to accompany a staff member to a computer classroom where they can play games and do other activities on the computers. Parents arrive throughout the afternoon to pick up their children. This is the only interaction between parents and program staff.

Few obstacles stand in the way of this program meeting its admittedly meager goals. Discipline problems are nearly nonexistent as the coordinator and staff had many years of experience as classroom teachers and with the after-school program. Students were reported to intermittently state that they do not have homework when it was assigned; but, because the staff also worked as classroom teachers during the school day, they are often approached with the truth by the classroom teachers of the untruthful students.

Summary and Recommendations

Despite recent research from CRESST and NCEE suggesting that after-school programs, when properly structured, can increase academic and social benefits for participating students, the programs in this multiple-case study chiefly focused on providing supervision for children after school hours, snacks, and homework monitoring. When coordinators were questioned about the goals of the program, little was articulated beyond after-school supervision and homework completion, though DASA and the City of Dallas emphasized offering a variety of enrichment sessions. Only one program – the City of Dallas’ – strove to maximize student attendance by requiring participants remain for the entire duration of the program each day. Though DASA reported few students ever left early, parents were still given the option to pick up children anytime. Additionally, parental involvement at all sites and programs was minimal, most likely due to the nature of the program. Even so, the only considerable attempts to involve parents and gain feedback were the Wilkinson Center’s special family events, which went ignored, and the City of Dallas’ parent survey.

All programs allowed time for homework completion, but only the City of Dallas and – to some extent – the St. Simon’s program provided anything beyond simply checking that students completed the work. The City of Dallas’ program involved classroom teachers with tutoring as necessary; St. Simon’s program at Rice informally allowed students to work with their classroom teachers in the teachers’ classrooms, provided the teacher was available. One challenge, in particular, was related by all program coordinators and staff. Verifying that students claiming to have no homework actually had no homework. Often, coordinators reported that several students claimed to have no homework, only to learn anecdotally from classroom teachers that these students were not truthful. The revealing conversations only took place because the coordinator was also a teacher at the site during the school day. Programs managed by coordinators not with the Dallas ISD were, too often, left in the dark. Nevertheless, none of the programs communicated substantially with classroom teachers and were not aligned with the traditional schools’ curricula.

Dealing with discipline problems was reported to be difficult with the Wilkinson Center program as the staff had no experience working with children as teachers and very little experience otherwise. Contrarily, the two programs reporting few problems required that their after-school coordinators and staff also work as classroom teachers at that elementary school. The DASA program reported that many discipline problems stem from sharing the space with another after-school program.

St. Simon’s did not purport to offer enrichment activities for its students. However, the Wilkinson Center’s program strived for that, but did not provide a curriculum or organized set of enrichment opportunities for its staff. All activities were planned by the volunteer staff during the hour before students arrived. Both DASA and the City of Dallas’ programs successfully used approved vendors who provided a continuous, structured program of enrichment for participating students during portions of the after-school program.

In light of these findings, there are five recommendations. Programs should:

1. Make program goals clear to all staff and verify that the staff continuously support those goals,
2. Ensure that the goals are directly supported by the curriculum,
3. Require students to attend for the duration of the program each day,
4. Communicate regularly with the participants’ classroom teachers and school staff,
5. Align, as much as possible, after-school enrichment activities with classroom curricula of the regular school day, and
6. Employ experienced classroom teachers from each site or veteran educators as coordinators and staff.

For more information contact Program Evaluation at (972) 925-6457.

References

