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 free after-school programming across the district. After-school participation in these types of programs has a positive impact on both students’ academic achievement and social skills (Fashola, 1998; Halpern, 2004). More recent research has addressed the effect that program quality has on these outcomes. The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) identified five components demonstrated by quality programs (CRESST, 2009): 1) Goals are clear and supported, 2) administrators are experienced and well-educated, 3) the staff is composed of veteran educators, 4) the curriculum is aligned to that of the traditional school day, and 5) evaluation results are applied to improve the program. The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance’s (NCEE) 2009 report mirrored the CRESST findings in many ways: 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 observations of randomly selected, no-cost after-school programs provided by five different organizations across the Dallas ISD: Dallas After-School Achievers, City of Dallas Parks & Recreation Department, Wilkinson Center, St. Simon’s Episcopal Church, and Thriving Minds. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Dallas provided after-school programming at one elementary and one high school campus, but they were not included in the evaluation. Three fee-based programs were also not included in the evaluation: Youth Conversion, Young Men’s Christian Association, and Champions. These programs operated at 14 sites altogether. The evaluator also collected available online artifacts pertaining to each of the organizations. Prior to each observation, the evaluator spoke with the program’s site manager about program operations and goals.

The evaluator typed the observation fieldnotes and interview records into a word processing document, then uploaded these documents – along with interview records and other program artifacts – to NVIVO qualitative analysis software where the data were coded and analyzed for predetermined categories based on the NCEE and CRESST reports, and other common themes that emerged during analysis. The evaluator was unable to complete planned quantitative analyses of student attendance and achievement as only one program, Thriving Minds, collected and were willing to provide student information in a useable electronic format.

Dallas After-School Achievers

The Dallas ISD’s Department of Summer Learning and Extended-Day Services directly oversaw the Dallas After-School Achievers (DASA) after-school program across 17 elementary campuses. The evaluator observed the program at two sites, one in south Dallas which enrolled predominantly African American students, and another in far-east Dallas which enrolled predominantly Hispanic students.

Each campus had a site manager and two assistants who served students Monday through Friday from 3:15 to 6:00. Across the two sites, the staff’s years of experience with the DASA program ranged from 1 to 5 years, with 3 of the 4 assistants in their first year. The structure of the programs at the two DASA sites was remarkably similar. Exactly 30 students at one campus and 35 students at the other began entering the cafeteria at 3:15 to check in with after-school staff on paper sign-in sheets, then eat snacks until approximately 3:45. At this time, many of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students left with their regular classroom teachers for tutoring in specific subjects. This, according to the site manager, was common leading up to the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam. The remaining students were divided into groups by grade (PK-1, 2-3, 4-5) and completed their assigned homework for the day. Students were on the honor system for admitting that they had homework, and staff prodded some students before the students began any work. Students without homework were provided books to read silently.

After homework, students took part in a series of rotating, vendor-provided enrichment activities which were approved through the Dallas ISD’s Department of Summer Learning and Extended-Day Services. These activities, led by staff from outside organizations, included art, writing, and demonstrations of science experiments.

At both sites, the official policy was that parents were not to pick up children until after 5:00. The evaluator
observed parents picking up students as early as 4:00 at both sites. Staff recounted that some parents regularly did not pick up their children until nearly 7:00. Staff did not communicate with classroom teachers about after-school students, and discipline problems were minimal because they had several years of experience as teachers during the regular school day.

City of Dallas Parks & Recreation

The City of Dallas’ Parks & Recreation Department supported free after-school programming at 19 elementary campuses during the 2013-2014 school year. The evaluator observed two City of Dallas programs in east Dallas, both with large Hispanic enrollment. Program coordinators at these sites had been involved with the City of Dallas’ programs for several years, one in her twelfth year as a site manager. Along with two staff members at each site, site managers estimated that they served between 30 and 60 students each day. During the observation period, one site had 31 students participating, and the other site had 55 students.

The program targeted low-performing children from households headed by a single female. The site managers received suggestions and feedback from classroom teachers at the beginning of the school year when enrolling students for the program. Goals for the program were standardized, promoted across all after-school sites affiliated with the City of Dallas, and well-articulated by the site managers. 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 collecting opinions about the program’s enrichment offerings and other components were sent to parents. The staff at both sites reported no other significant communication with parents.

The program operated Monday through Friday from 3:15 to 6:00 in the schools’ cafeterias. After signing-in on a sheet of paper, students sat at assigned tables, ate snacks, and completed homework until nearly 3:45. During one observation, the cafeteria was occupied by a teacher meeting, so the after-school program convened in the auditorium where students wrestled with books in the seats, trying to complete their homework. The staff provided reading books to students with no homework. Students then either took part in a series of vendor-provided enrichment activities or received tutoring from classroom teachers until approximately 5:30, when the students cleaned up. The managers reported enrichment activities ranging from a variety of sports to cultural productions and crafts. The topical cultural studies were comprised of a Thanksgiving performance, original skits about Martin Luther King and African American history, and a Cinco de Mayo celebration. At one campus, the tables were covered in butcher paper and stocked with painting supplies so that students could make Mother’s Day cards. Despite their interest in the activity, the project’s start was delayed nearly 20 minutes because groups of students were either not paying attention to instructions or actively disrupting the site manager. Still, staff generally reported that discipline was not a problem because they had several years of experience as after-school teachers at this location.

Wilkinson Center

The Wilkinson Center supported an after-school program at five elementary campuses for pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students from 3:15 to 6:00, Monday through Thursday during the school year. The Wilkinson Center’s sites were all located in east and southeast Dallas. The evaluator observed one Wilkinson Center site where the majority of students were Hispanic (57%), but also had a large proportion of African American students enrolled (41%).

The Wilkinson Center program follows the Changing Lives, Improving Minds and Bodies (CLIMB) curriculum. The primary objective was to provide students with a safe place after school while supporting them with creative and fun activities that nurture growth in academic subjects, technology, and physical and emotional well-being.

One site manager and three assistants set up the cafeteria with CLIMB posters displaying rules and goals before students began arriving at approximately 3:10. Students grouped themselves by grade level and sat at assigned tables. While one assistant took attendance table by table, another delivered the day’s snacks: graham crackers and juice. The nearly 60 students were quiet, appearing very disciplined and well-behaved as they ate. Whenever a staff member made a request, students were always very quick to follow instructions.

At approximately 3:30 they began their homework and took restroom breaks by group. The remainder of a typical day’s session would have been filled by staff reading books to grade-level groups, crafts, and academic games. On this day, however, some students completed testing for the Dallas Afterschool Network, an organization formed to evaluate program quality and provide support for after-school programs throughout Dallas County. The younger students took part in a “Drill Day” activity. Staff asked students what a lockdown was and probed to find out, from students, all of the scenarios that might require a lockdown. Once through discussing, the students and staff formed a line and marched to their “secret spot,” where they were completely quiet for two minutes. After practicing the lockdown procedures, each grade moved to a more isolated table in the cafeteria where every student discussed, in turn, something positive that they did that day. Finally, the staff led the groups in various academic games.
Parents arrived to take children home 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.

**St. Simon’s**

The St. Simon’s after-school programs at 15 campuses operated between 3:15 and 5:00 in the school’s cafeteria, Monday through Thursday, and were free to participants. Generally speaking, most of St. Simon’s sites were on the west side of Dallas. The goals for the program were straightforward: provide children a safe place after school, provide a snack, and assist with homework. The evaluator observed after-school programming at one predominantly African American site in south Dallas with one site manager and two assistants. The staff were all teachers at the campus, a St. Simon’s requirement.

Parents applied for their children to attend the program in August and preference was given to returning students. Remaining slots were filled first by younger students before progressing upward through the grades. The only prerequisite that a parent must have met to enroll a child was that they were unable to pick their child up from school by 3:15. On the day of the observation, the evaluator counted 42 students in attendance.

Participating students began filtering into the school’s cafeteria just after 3:05, though no staff had arrived to supervise at that time. The students were not well-behaved during the 10 minutes it took for a staff member to arrive. Under the site manager’s strict guidance, the students quickly settled down and either began their homework or stood in line for snacks of graham crackers and juice. During this time, two staff members offered homework assistance to every student and checked that it had been completed. As the site manager related, any student needing more academic help could go to their classroom teacher, provided the teacher was available. Students without homework could choose a book to read. Just before 3:45, students in grades 3, 4, and 5 were led to a computer lab where they completed math activities on the computers. Other students chose to free-play outside. Parents arrived throughout the afternoon to pick up their children. The evaluator watched as the first group of parents arrived just after 3:20 to pick up their children.

The discipline problems prevalent while the students were unsupervised became nonexistent as the coordinator and staff arrived. Furthermore, they had many years of experience as classroom teachers and with this after-school program. While students reported that they did not have homework when it was actually assigned, the staff related that they had often informally received feedback from the students’ teachers during the regular school day that homework had been assigned and was not completed.

**Thriving Minds**

The Thriving Minds After-School programs were provided through a partnership between the Dallas ISD, the City of Dallas, Big Thought, and numerous arts or cultural organizations throughout Dallas. With Big Thought as the managing provider, 21st Century Grant funds supported programs at 15 elementary campuses and 3 middle school campuses during the 2013-14 school year. The evaluator observed the after-school programming at two campuses, one in northeast Dallas and another in southeast Dallas, both with over 80 percent Hispanic students.

Each observed Thriving Minds site had one site manager and at least seven site guides, or assistants. Site managers stated that nearly half of the site guides worked as teachers’ assistants at the school during the regular school day. Other site guides, mostly education students at local colleges and universities, arrived at least two hours early to plan activities for the day. At one site, the staff was provided with a portable classroom in which to meet and prepare.

Students began arriving in the cafeterias of both sites just before 3:00. Within 15 minutes, over 100 students had set their backpacks on designated tables and sat down, chatting at tables assigned by grade. A bell rang and staff recorded attendance on sheets of paper. Later, at 4:00, the staff would record attendance once more. At the end of each day, the site manager entered all of the paper attendance records into a spreadsheet.

The students ate snacks – graham crackers and an assortment of juices on that day – until 3:30, when upper-grade students went outside to the playground. According to the site manager, the program offered various other activities to students starting at 4:00: computers, social skills, art, physical education, soccer, basketball, cheerleading, math, and science. The math and science activities at one site were recommended by campus administration because, at grades three and above, the percentages of students meeting the minimum standard on STAAR exams in those subjects were quite low compared to the rest of the Dallas ISD. Additionally, staff offered one-hour exercise classes for parents four days per week.

Parents began picking up students at 5:30, the earliest possible time according to the program’s policy. The site manager at one site lamented that, while the number of students attending daily was large, it could have been even larger. Because transportation was not provided, many students on the other side of a major roadway would not attend because crossing the roadway in the evening would have been too dangerous.
**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 evaluation principally focused on providing supervision for children after school hours, snacks, and homework monitoring. When site managers were questioned about the goals of the program, little was articulated beyond after-school supervision and homework completion. The City of Dallas Parks & Recreation Department’s and Wilkinson Center’s observed sites were the exception. In addition to the staff articulating the rules and goals well, they were posted on the walls of the cafeterias every day.

The St. Simon’s site allowed students to enter the cafeteria unsupervised, creating a hostile environment for many students. Because the St. Simon’s program exclusively utilizes campus teachers as after-school staff, they may not be able to arrive as early as students due to other commitments. These students should be supervised in another area of the building and not allowed to enter the after-school location until a staff member is available.

Nearly all programs and sites emphasized offering a variety of enrichment sessions; but, only two programs – the City of Dallas and Thriving Minds – strove to maximize student attendance by requiring that participants remain for the entire duration of the program each day. Other programs reported few students ever left early, but parents were still given the option to pick up children at any time. The evaluator observed some parents picking up children from the St. Simon’s and Wilkinson Center campuses at 3:20, just after the program began for the day. Students at the Dallas After-School Achievers sites were picked up as early as 4:00. Moreover, parental involvement across all sites and programs was reportedly minimal, most likely due to the nature of the programs providing services for children when parents cannot be there. Even so, only the City of Dallas’ parent survey solicited input from parents about the programs.

All programs allowed time for homework, asking if students had homework and checking that it was completed. All programs except Thriving Minds involved classroom teachers with tutoring as necessary. The Thriving Minds sites, however, had many more assistants available to monitor and help students. Only the staff at the St. Simon’s program site expressed that they had any meaningful conversations about after-school students with the students’ teachers during the regular school day. These conversations only took place because the after-school staff were also teachers at the site during the school day. Programs directed by site managers not with the Dallas ISD reported little to no communication with traditional-day staff. None of the programs communicated substantially with classroom teachers and were not directly aligned with the traditional school day’s curricula.

Lastly, only the Thriving Minds programs collected student attendance information electronically. In order to better and more efficiently evaluate the merits of the after-school programs across sites and program types, student attendance should be recorded in a spreadsheet and shared with the Department of Summer Learning and Extended-Day Services. As it stands, the effect that attendance in different programs might have on academic achievement, for example, cannot be investigated.

There are six recommendations because of these findings. Programs should:

1. Ensure that students enter the program area only when staff are present,
2. Make goals clear to all staff and verify that the staff continuously support those goals,
3. Require students to attend for the duration of the program each day,
4. Require after-school staff to communicate regularly with the participants’ classroom teachers and school staff on issues related to academic performance and behavior,
5. Align after-school enrichment activities with classroom curricula of the regular school day, and
6. Record student attendance and other information electronically.

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**References**


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