



The State of Afterschool Programming in Wyoming: An Assessment of Needs and Perceptions

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, the Wyoming Afterschool Alliance, a C.S. Mott Foundation Statewide Afterschool Network and an initiative of the Wyoming Community Foundation, launched a research project to survey the capacity of public and private afterschool systems and to assess their effectiveness across Wyoming. The Wyoming Department of Education (through federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers, CFDA#84.287C), the Wyoming Department of Family Services, and the John P. Ellbogen Foundation provided matching funds to support the project. In partnership with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and Third Mile Group (TMG), the Wyoming Afterschool Alliance designed a statewide evaluation and assessment to expand data collection and generate a more comprehensive picture of program needs, quality and student outcomes in the state. This strategy will ensure sustainability, build capacity and reinforce consistency across Wyoming.

This report is presented in two parts. NIOST was asked to assess afterschool programs in the areas of improvement, training and quality. Part I presents NIOST's findings and recommendations. TMG was contracted for a different scope of work: a survey of a wide variety of stakeholders across Wyoming about their knowledge, perceptions and support of afterschool programming. TMG's findings and recommendations are presented in Part II. While the results, conclusions and recommendations that follow are written as distinctive sections, they are in point of fact integrally connected and should be considered as a sum of all parts for systems building. (NIOST and TMG full reports are available on the Wyoming Afterschool Alliance website at: <http://www.wyafterschoolalliance.org>)

PART I: ASSESSMENT OF AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS IN WYOMING

National Institute on Out-of-School Time at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College

Background

The Wyoming Afterschool Alliance (WYAA) retained the services of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time in spring 2011 to garner an overview of the capacity and effectiveness of out-of-school time programs across the state of Wyoming. To accomplish this portrait, NIOST utilized two

vehicles: a statewide survey distributed to out-of-school time (OST) programs supplemented with observation of select afterschool programs. NIOST collected information directly from youth-serving agencies on their youth participants, funding, offerings, and challenges and then separately compiled a “snapshot” of the quality of a cross-section of programs using the Afterschool Program Practices Tool (APT-O).

The following is a summary of the findings based on the research questions:

How do OST programs in Wyoming describe their:

1. Program characteristics and children/youth served
2. Capacity and access to funding, facilities and transportation
3. Program offerings including school, community and family connections
4. Workforce conditions and professional development of staff in support of youth.

These areas are related to quality of afterschool experiences; the ultimate goal of the survey is to identify areas that may need specific statewide policy support to build and enhance quality and stability across Wyoming.

Findings

Most of the programs surveyed serve elementary (80%) and/or kindergarten (73%) grade subgroups with high school youth being the least served (24%). Thirty six percent of the programs surveyed serve pre-K, in addition to other grades. More than half of all programs surveyed are located in either a public school (34%) or childcare center (23%). About a third of programs are private or for profit, but the vast majority (62%) are non-profit (39%) and public (23%).

Nearly half of the programs surveyed are partially funded through 21st Century Community Learning Centers (45%). An overwhelming number of responses featured funding concerns. Programs are funded through multiple sources such as public monies and corporate dollars in addition to parent fees. Blended streams of funding pose challenges regarding maintaining sufficient operational revenues.

The out-of-school time workforce in Wyoming for the most part is low-wage with few benefits, not unusual for the part-time nature of the work. In terms of credentials, one quarter of the programs have a minimum education level of a high school diploma while only 17% require staff to hold a bachelor’s degree. Staff retention and staff development are concerns for management staff. A low percentage of staff receive health insurance benefits, paid vacation or paid sick time. While the most oft cited reason for staff departures is personal reasons (22%), the next highest proportion, 20%, depart for a full-time position with benefits.

Management pointed out a discrepancy between training desired for the overall benefit of the program versus training desired for staff development. The top four categories of training topics deemed most beneficial for staff include: Behavior Management (32%), Lesson Plan Development (15%), Project Based Learning (13%), and Professional Development (8%). Comparatively, the top three categories of training topics that would be most beneficial for an overall program include:

family involvement (30%), program assessment (29%), and connections to schools (17%). This discrepancy points to the need for broad-ranging training across all levels of program staff from executives to front-line staff.

Family involvement for many programs revolved around volunteering time (40%) and donating money, goods, and services (40%). Many programs offered a parent newsletter to families (49%) and some referred families to social services as needed (32%). Family involvement is an area that can be strengthened, particularly as related to academic, social-emotional, or other outcomes desired for youth.

Most programs (74%) assess program quality and/or measure program success in some way but rely on measures that are typically used for school populations rather than child and youth outcomes related to afterschool program participation. Many programs use number of youth enrolled (52%) as an indicator of program quality and youth participation, while many others use average youth daily attendance (41%) as an indicator of quality. Nearly half of programs use parent satisfaction surveys (40%). To assess program benefits to youth, some programs look at changes in grades in school (31%) or other methods (27%) such as standardized assessment tools, youth behavioral changes, or participation in the program. Most programs do not use an external program evaluator (86%).

Recommendations

1. Funding

Lack of funding was repeatedly mentioned as a challenge to programs. Funding constraints inhibit every aspect of the overall goals of quality improvement and serving youth. Funding challenges will never disappear but measures can be initiated to strengthen the Wyoming OST workforce and help develop program sustainability. The WYAA should continue to draw attention to the need to support OST whether contributions are coming from public and/or private sources.

2. Training

It is imperative that monies be allocated for staff training and development. The afterschool workforce faces increasing demands that require linking afterschool activities to school learning. To successfully develop activities, themes, and curricula that are engaging, content-driven, and developmentally challenging, skilled and trained staff are required. In reality, staff enter their job “where they are,” say, with a high school diploma or some college courses. Ongoing training is needed to help staff build skills at all levels

3. Professional Development

High staff turnover, lack of benefits, low compensation, limited training and career advancement are consistent with national findings and will require a systems response by investing public and private resources toward strengthening the field. We recommend that WYAA disseminate and utilize the newly available national core competencies, research-based

guidelines for creating the framework for a broad-scale career development system that provide access to competency-based higher education, ensures compensation commensurate with educational achievement and experience, and allows professionals to achieve recognition in the field.

4. Quality Program Assessment and Child and Youth Outcomes

At the program level, OST programs should be involved in self-assessment practices using evaluation tools that are designed specifically for afterschool programs. WYAA has initiated this process with a pilot program to introduce the Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS). APAS includes several tools that are research-based, field-tested, and are used extensively by programs throughout the United States. These tools help programs examine their activities, administration, staff development, and other areas and offer specific recommendations and practices that programs can adopt to improve the quality of programs and outcomes for children and youth. Program assessment should also be promoted as a community-wide effort, whereby all stakeholders are included in the program improvement process (staff, parents, teachers, youth, etc.). This process is important to link quality improvement to school-day learning and building community connections. Effects of this effort will have broad-reaching benefits to staff development, family engagement, connections with schools, and community support.

PART II: SURVEY OF WYOMING STAKEHOLDERS ON AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

The Third Mile Group

Background

As part of the evaluation and assessment of afterschool programs in Wyoming, The Third Mile Group (TMG) conducted a survey in May 2011 to glean information about what a variety of individuals and role groups know generally about afterschool and out-of-school programs. Specific questions covered a variety of topics including, whether respondents thought there was a need (or more of a need) for such programs, how programs should be funded and whether policy levers could be used to support programs. A total of 409 responses to the 35-question survey were received from individuals from 29 role groups and organizations throughout the state of Wyoming, including teachers, principals, superintendents, program providers, policymakers, school boards, juvenile justice representatives, and community and civic agencies.

Findings

A majority of respondents were very positive about afterschool and out-of-school-time programs, indicating that they benefit students by fostering positive behavior and personal growth and by providing enrichment, academic assistance, social networks, and safety. Afterschool programs also benefit communities by promoting community values and citizenship, and they benefit families by providing structure, additional learning opportunities, socialization, and community engagement to participating students.

The following areas emerged as the key issues affecting afterschool and out-of-school-time programs in Wyoming, as identified by all role groups responding to the survey. Respondents were asked to discuss and identify the purpose, benefits, strengths, challenges of afterschool and out-of-school-time programs, and to assess policies, affordability and access.

Funding. The need for adequate funding was the number one challenge reported by survey respondents. In answer to what might improve the quality of programs, 65.3% of respondents indicated more resources for program enhancement. And 72.2% of respondents identified funding policies as a barrier to high-quality programs. Funding is needed not only to start up and establish programs, but also to provide adequate salaries, resources and materials, transportation, tuition and fees, program enhancement, and program sustainability. While a number of programs operate successfully in communities across Wyoming, they often do so on a bare-bones budget. Many afterschool and OST programs need additional dollars to reach more children in the community, to better serve current participants, and to maintain operations.

Communication/Information and Outreach. A second major survey finding, cited by nearly 45% of respondents, was the need for better communication about afterschool and OST programs. Respondents cited the lack of communication between providers and schools and/or parents as a barrier to the effectiveness of programs and to student participation. Often students and parents and even schools are simply unaware of the opportunities available in their communities. As part of this lack of information, only 37.4% of survey respondents were familiar with the WYAA, despite its statewide outreach and support.

On a regular and ongoing basis information needs to be made available to all stakeholders in the state – parents, schools, community leaders, policymakers and program providers – about the opportunities and effectiveness of available programs and students being served, as well as the need for additional programs or enhancements for student needs not being addressed. Schools, parents, programs providers, and policymakers can advocate for children’s programs when they have complete information about the quality and value of afterschool and OST programs in their communities.

Data. Survey respondents identified the collection and effective use of data about afterschool and OST programs as a need for improving programs, for securing funding, and for informing parents and communities about the value and outcomes of afterschool programs. Data collection and analysis on the activities, clients and outcomes of such programs is often infrequent and inexact. In addition to needing general information about programs (goals and activities, costs, location, hours, etc.) a number of survey respondents cited a need for more in-depth data such as the program design and evaluation plan; outcome measures and/or assessments that indicate the effectiveness of the program; and information on how the program is funded, how dollars are spent, and how many children benefit from those dollars. As school accountability measures increase, afterschool program providers need to be able to both access and share data to determine the outcomes of their programs. Importantly, district and state policies should support such access and sharing of data in order to foster effective decision-making, collaboration and allocation of dollars.

Recommendations

1. Communication and Marketing

TMG recommends a two-pronged approach to improving communication about afterschool programs in Wyoming. First, the WYAA should strengthen its outreach efforts throughout the state, with a particular emphasis on reaching schools and districts and community organizations and agencies. In addition to the information, resources and tools offered through its website, WYAA might consider production of a monthly or quarterly e-newsletter for schools, districts, community organizations, program providers and others that will strengthen its presence and keep stakeholders well informed about program and funding opportunities. The WYAA is the linchpin to connecting program providers, and should connect to providers' clients and collaborators as well. WYAA should ensure that it has a presence at state and regional education meetings and also community functions and meetings, and capitalize on opportunities to forge relationships with schools, districts and communities.

Second, WYAA should spearhead and support efforts to improve communication between and among program providers and schools, districts and communities. Schools and parents need to know about the programs offered in their area, and that information should come from providers as well as from WYAA. District and community leaders can work together and with program providers to ensure that information about afterschool programs is readily available, and also to determine where additional programming is needed. All stakeholders should be encouraged to communicate and share ideas and information.

2. Education Advocacy

As a key advocate for education the WYAA is perfectly situated to share its expertise and knowledge with program providers, parents, and community organizations to help them understand the value of afterschool and OST programs not only for individual students but also for families and communities. Through the website, newsletters, workshops, and participation at school and community meetings, the WYAA can help individuals and groups learn how to communicate the importance of education and specifically the value of and information about afterschool programs.

3. Policy on Education Data

State and district policies on student data should be examined and disseminated to ensure that all stakeholders – WYAA, program providers and schools/districts – are fully informed on what current rules require and allow on the collection and sharing of data for accountability and evaluative purposes. Policy barriers that impede data sharing by afterschool and OST programs can be identified for stakeholders to seek remedies.

4. Education and Engagement of State Policymakers

Outreach to and building relationships with Wyoming's policymakers is needed to educate them on both the need for and value of afterschool and OST programs in the state. The WYAA

and all afterschool programs in the state need the support and understanding of state policymakers to secure and maintain funding and to sponsor and support state policy that benefits afterschool programming. Through WYAA's efforts Wyoming's policymakers can become important advocates for children in the state and communicate the importance of high-quality afterschool programs to constituents and communities.

CONCLUSION

Since its creation in 2007, WYAA's efforts to connect with communities and organizations throughout the state have established a strong foundation for high-quality afterschool programming in Wyoming. Results from the TMG stakeholder survey indicate the need to continue to strengthen these efforts to ensure the continued existence of the statewide network, as well as to reinforce partnerships and foster knowledge and advocacy. While the various components of a statewide quality and professional development system for afterschool staff already exist at some level in the state, the findings of the NIOST survey and program observations will help to inform and strengthen plans underway by WYAA to professionalize the local field. Efforts already in motion, including identifying best OST practices around the U.S. and bringing them to Wyoming, will help direct and inform a push for systemic improvements in the quality, accessibility, and funding of OST programs for Wyoming's children, youth and families. In addition, WYAA's focus on program sustainability is key in the vast rural geography of Wyoming where many small programs serve youth of all ages. Working families depend on OST time, and as an overseer and driver of quality statewide, WYAA works to ensure that all youth who seek OST time have access to quality programs that not only expand student achievement but also increase positive youth development.



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