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# The Organizational, Community and Programmatic Characteristics that Predict the Effective Implementation of After-School Programs

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## **ABSTRACT**

To identify characteristics predicting the effective implementation of after-school programs, in-depth interviews were conducted at five sites randomly selected from a subset of 16 ACE after-school sites serving high risk youth in a southwestern city. Qualitative data from structured in-depth interviews, follow-up telephone conversations with personnel as well as researcher observations during site visits were synthesized. Data identified three constellations of characteristics associated with effective implementation: staffing, community and programmatic. Staffing characteristics included limited staff turnover and sufficient training. Community characteristics included cultural sensitivity and community integration. Programmatic characteristics included clearly defined program goals and specific program content. Researcher observations found outcomes assessment would also facilitate program implementation.

**KEYWORDS.** Program implementation, school-based prevention, after-school programs

Changing employment patterns have impacted the ability of families to provide supervision for their children in the after-school hours. Today, approximately 28 million school children have parents that work at least part time (Charles Stewart Mott foundation, 1998). Among married mothers with school-aged children, 77 percent reported that they worked outside the home in 1996 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). In 69 percent of married couples with children ages 6-17, parents reported that both mother and father work outside the home. In single mother families with children ages 6-17, the mother works outside of the home in 71 percent of families. The father works outside the home in 85 percent of single parent families (Bureau of Labor Force Statistics, 1998).

These employment patterns have contributed to the approximately 7.5 million children left unsupervised in the United States when the school day ends (<http://wellesley.edu>). Increases in the number of single parent households and in the number of parents employed in full-time positions have led to a growing number of "latchkey" children. Today, about half of all children will reside in a single-parent home before they reach the age of 18, spending an average of six years in the single parent family (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1999). As summarized in a joint report by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice (2000), "Forty-four percent of third graders spend at least a portion of their out-of-school time unsupervised and about 35 percent of 12-year-olds are left by themselves regularly while their parents are at work" (p. 6).

Unfortunately, the after-school hours are a particularly problematic time to leave youth unsupervised. On school days, both juvenile crime and juvenile victimization rates were found to peak shortly after school was dismissed (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Specifically, rates of gang-related crimes, crimes involving firearms, and sexual assault all increase in the after-school hours, as do rates of victimization. For children, the risk of being a victim of a violent crime is greatest during the four hours after the end of the school day, from approximately 2 to 6 p.m. Additionally, the increasing amount of time youth spend unsupervised has been linked with a variety of negative outcomes including academic difficulties (Woods, 1972), emotional problems (Coleman, Robinson, Rowland, & Price, 1984; Galambos & Garbarino, 1983; Guerney, 1991; Long & Long, 1982), delinquency, and drug use (Dwyer, Ricardson, Danley, Hanson, Susman, Brannon,

Dent, Johnson, & Flay, 1990; Richardson, Radziszewska, Dent, & Flay, 1993).

A growing awareness of the problems associated with lack of youth supervision afterschool has contributed to increased support for after-school programs evidenced by data from a variety of polls. In a survey conducted by the YMCA, nearly 100% of respondents indicated they felt it was important to have after-school programs that provided a safe environment for children to develop academic and social skills (YMCA of the USA, 1998). Polls have indicated ninety-three percent of registered voters favor increasing the availability of after-school programs, 86 percent felt that after-school programs were a necessity (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1998). In a survey of elementary school principals, 84 percent of respondents indicated a need for supervision before and after school (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1988). Surveys have also demonstrated that support for after-school programs crosses political lines; 93 percent of Democrats, 93 percent of Independents and 89 percent of Republicans feel that some type of organized after-school program should exist (After-school Alliance, 1999).

Increased public conviction in the need for after-school programs has been paralleled by increases in government funding for such programs at both the state and federal levels. Federal increases are exemplified by changes in funding for the United States Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. Funds for this program increased from \$1 million in fiscal year 1997 to \$40 million in 1998, \$200 million in 1999, and \$450 million in 2000. As a result of this increased funding approximately 16,000 rural and inner-city public schools in 471 communities now participate in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program. The expansion of after-school programs has also been facilitated by significant investments in programs for school-aged children made by a number of states including California, Connecticut, Delaware, and Georgia (David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 1999).

Studies discussing the major functions after-school programs serve have identified a number of different goals for these programs (see Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001; Kahne, Nagaoka, Brown, O'Brien, Quinn, & Thiede, 2001; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; U.S. Department of Education

and U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Goals typically include providing a safe environment with adult supervision, improving academic achievement, and facilitating the development of youth. Some programs also target problem behaviors; however, these programs are often less successful in achieving their state goals than those that emphasize opportunities for growth and the presence of caring, stable adults.

The goals of after-school programs need to be informed by the structural realities inherent in these programs. Typically, participation in after-school programs is on a voluntary basis. It can be difficult to engage volunteers in interventions that target problem behaviors when these programs are competing with other after-school activities such as athletics, academic clubs, and social interests. It is particularly difficult for programs located within teen drop-in centers to have a meaningful impact on the development of social skills of youth because of inconsistent participation rates. While lasting and meaningful change can be brought about as the result of consistent and substantial exposure to validated program content, children participating in after-school programs often do so on such an inconsistent basis such that the possibility of sufficient exposure is nearly precluded. Programs operating in an environment where irregular program participation with high rates of turnover exists should set and maintain goals consistent with this structural reality.

While evaluations of after-school programs are limited in number and methodological rigor, studies have indicated after-school programs can have a variety of positive impacts. Positive outcomes attributed to after-school programs include decreases in juvenile delinquency and victimization, decreases in drug and alcohol use, decreases in aggressive behavior, enhanced academic achievement and improved social skills (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Unfortunately, these conclusions are largely based on expert opinion and studies with extremely weak research designs. At best, these studies indicate an association between participation in after-school programming and positive outcomes but do not demonstrate that the programs actually cause the positive outcomes.

An exception to this general rule lies in the area of academic performance. There is relatively strong empirical evidence indicating after-school programs focused on increasing academic performance can result in positive academic outcomes (Cosden et al.,

2001; Morris, Shaw, & Perney, 1990). These studies indicated such programs may be particularly effective at increasing the reading skills of children for whom English is a second language, suggesting positive outcomes for after-school programs may vary by ethnic group.

Studies that have evaluated after-school programs have examined the relationship between program characteristics, the experiences of children while in the program, and the behavior of the child while outside of the program. Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) found program characteristics such as child to staff ratio and the number of activities offered by a program were related to children's rating of their experiences while in the program. Pierce, Hamm and Vandell (1999) found program experiences were related to children's adjustment in first-grade classrooms. While this evidence is limited in quantity and based on correlational research designs, it does suggest that certain program characteristics are important predictors of desirable outcomes.

Despite a demonstrable public interest and considerable government funding for after-school programs, knowledge regarding these programs remains limited. The research that does exist has focused on evaluating specific program content and identifying program characteristics associated with outcomes of interest. Researchers have not addressed the processes that lead to the effective implementation of after-school prevention programs. This lack of attention seems problematic in light of evidence linking program implementation to program outcomes in delinquency prevention programs. In a meta-analysis of 443 juvenile delinquency prevention programs, Lipsey (1992) found that in addition to program features, the "dosage" of treatment was significantly related to the effectiveness of prevention programs. Dosage, as used by Lipsey (1992), parallels the strength of implementation. Programs with higher levels of dosage are those that are more effectively implemented. Therefore one would anticipate that increases in the effective implementation of programs will lead to an increase in the effectiveness of prevention programs.

Gottfredson et al. (1997) reviewed the predictors of the effective implementation of school-based prevention programs. Predictors of effective implementation fell into several domains including characteristics of the innovation, characteristics of the organization or

school, and the characteristics of the community in which the school is located.

Characteristics identified by Gottfredson et al. as predictive of the effective implementation of in-school prevention programs may also predict the level of implementation of after-school programs in a variety of settings. Such characteristics include user-friendly innovations, comprehensive staff training, highly skilled personnel, involvement of staff in program development, ample resources and effective leadership. Gottfredson et al. also found schools in disadvantaged communities did not tend to have the capacity to effectively implement prevention programs. Similarly, organizations in these communities may also lack the capacity to effectively implement after-school programs.

While this literature is informative, the predictors of implementation identified by Gottfredson et al. (1997) do not necessarily apply to after-school programs. The unique characteristics of after-school programs including their timing and voluntary nature suggest that the predictors of the effective implementation of after-school programs may vary somewhat from the predictors of implementation of in-school prevention programs. In order to specify the predictors of the effective implementation of after-school programs, we offer a process evaluation of after-school programs provided by the Parks, Recreation, and Libraries Department in a southwestern city. For the purposes of this evaluation, the program will be referred to as the ACE program.<sup>1</sup> This evaluation will focus on the process of implementation and will identify the programmatic, staff and community characteristics associated with the effective implementation of the ACE program.

## ***METHOD***

### ***Participants***

Researchers randomly selected five sites from 16 ACE sites identified as serving an “at-risk youth” population in an urban southwest city.<sup>2</sup> These 16 sites were defined by seven critical risk factors: juvenile crime statistics, incidence of domestic violence, percent of free or reduced lunch at schools, single parent households, teenage live birth rates, youth chronic probation, and juvenile crime rates between the hours of 3 and 7 p.m. The majority of the ACE sites were located in school settings; however, alternative sites such as community centers, libraries, and churches also housed the program. The

sites randomly selected into our sample operated at community and youth centers.

Once sites were selected using simple random sampling procedures, researchers made initial contact with site co-coordinators to explain the intent of the study and solicit site participation. All sites that were contacted agreed to participate in the study. A letter of support for the project was sent to each site coordinator from the Assistant Director of the Parks Department upon their agreement to participate. Researchers subsequently conducted site visits to interview the site coordinator and tour the program facilities.

## ***RESULTS***

### ***Description of ACE Program***

The ACE program provides youth with a supervised after-school program in community locations close to their home. Each site has its own distinct programming that attempts to incorporate the interests of the surrounding community in addition to providing basic ACE activities including: life skills, educational support, healthy living skills, social and peer interaction, physical activity, cultural awareness, and fine arts. Through these activities, the program seeks to meet a number of goals presented in Table 1.

To aid in accomplishing the goals listed in Table 1, ACE sites were provided with \$25,000 per year for their general operations budget. While the specific configuration varies between sites, on average, the funds provide partial support for a full-time site coordinator and three or four part-time staff members. Frequently, the buildings that house the ACE programs are donated or provided by an entitlement other than the ACE program. To further assist with their daily operations, many of the sites seek additional external funding through grants and donations in order to support various youth activities.

### ***Correlates of Effective Implementation***

The focus of this process evaluation was the identification of characteristics that lead to the effective implementation of after-school prevention programs. These characteristics were sought through the synthesis of qualitative data derived from in-



depth structured inter-views and follow-up telephone conversations with ACE site personnel as well as researcher observations during the site visits.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, site coordinators were asked to describe the characteristics and conditions that would be necessary for them to more effectively implement the ACE program or develop a new ACE site. We defined effective implementation as the regular delivery of program content

TABLE 1. Goals of the ACE Program

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|        |   |
|--------|---|
| Goal 1 | Provide safe, accessible and violence-free environments in which to learn and have fun  |
| Goal 2 | Support schools through direct involvement as partners, staff resources, and boosters of lifelong learning  |
| Goal 3 | Secure and provide community-wide services such as literacy, fitness, life skills, arts, health education, social services, dropout prevention, violence and drug-free awareness education, job training, mentoring, and family support |
| Goal 4 | Help ensure children and youths are school ready  |
| Goal 5 | Support education as a community-wide resource through publicity and promotion  |

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consistent with the goals of the ACE program to a group of youth each day after school. Through the data collection process, several constellations of characteristics that impacted program implementation emerged. We present these characteristics and describe the specific processes through which the successful implementation of these ACE sites emerged.

### ***Practitioner Evaluations***

The characteristics that site coordinators believed were important for the development, implementation and sustainability of after-school programs such as the ACE program were centered on three main areas: staffing issues, community issues, and programmatic issues.

*Staffing Issues.* Interviews revealed that site coordinators felt staff turnover must be minimized in order to effectively implement after-school programs. The majority of site coordinators noted staffing was one of their greatest challenges in implementing and sustaining an ACE site. According to the site coordinators, the nature of the after-school program limits the number of hours available, thus, hiring and retaining qualified part time staff is a challenge.

Considering this challenge, a number of the site coordinators approached the issue with a variety of effective solutions. Effective programs utilized college students who were interested in interning or eventually working with the Parks, Recreation and Library Department for these part-time positions. Additionally, sites sought out employees who were interested in working with youth as a secondary position to their full-time job. These approaches allowed for the hiring of employees who were not interested in full-time work due to other commitments and therefore not reliant on numerous hours, yet were quality employees.

In addition to the hiring and retention issues, program coordinators felt that additional training would aid the implementation of the ACE program. Current program training was limited. For the part-time staff, training usually occurred on the job. Many of the staff members felt that ongoing training sessions and conferences with city-wide ACE personnel participation would allow the exchange of programming ideas, development of skills, and networking.

Sites attempted to compensate for limited training by incorporating part-time staff members' personal skills and talents into the site's programming. For example, one staff member who enjoyed jazz dancing started a dance program for the program's youth. At another site, the coordinator encouraged a staff member with extensive orienteering skills to organize camping trips and day hikes for youth. To compensate for limited inter-site communication, site coordinators within geographically similar locations met periodically on an informal level to share their experiences and ideas for garnering additional resources. Staff members felt these informal gatherings were extremely beneficial and suggested regular meetings for all ACE site coordinators.

*Community Issues.* The second constellation of characteristics related to

implementation was the community context of the ACE sites. Inter-views with site coordinators revealed that a program's cultural relevance and integration within the community were critical to successful implementation. The geographical location of the ACE sites in a southwestern state resulted in the recognition of unique elements by the program coordinators, such as its surrounding ethnically diverse community. To effectively implement the program, site coordinators felt it was important to have a strong cultural awareness and the ability to communicate in Spanish. Further, efforts by staff members to link their program to the people in the community through outreach projects with parents and area schools were also identified as critical to effective implementation.

Site coordinators indicated that communication with the surrounding community and other stakeholders in youth development, such as schools, also had an important impact on program implementation. Since a large number of ACE sites were located in buildings other than a school, it was important to enhance communication between the schools and the after-school program. Some sites found that an effective method of dealing with this communication barrier was to designate a school liaison who was willing to work with the ACE site, but was employed at the school. All announcements about ACE events were directed towards the liaison who then received approval from the school principal to disseminate the information to the youth at the school and their parents. While the skill set of the liaison was important, equally important was that the liaison was a trusted member of the community who could communicate with the parents oftentimes in Spanish. Site coordinators recalled numerous situations in which youth were only allowed to participate in a ACE social event because the parents were able to communicate with, and trusted the ACE liaison.

In addition to the importance of communicating with individuals that comprised the ACE site community, site coordinators noted that it was extremely important for the site to utilize community resources from a programmatic standpoint. Additional resources developed through community integration increased the activities that site coordinators were able to implement. To compensate for limited funding, site coordinators consistently attempted to offer programs that incorporated the neighborhood library or similar organizations. The physical proximity to the neighborhood library for some ACE sites was an unplanned benefit. Frequently, the site coordinators incorporated some type of

reading program that occurred at the library into their program as a primary component. Similarly, another site situated near a Boys and Girls Club took advantage of an occasional large-scale event hosted by the club.

*Program Issues.* Site coordinators indicated that the communication of clearly defined program goals and specific program content would facilitate the implementation of the ACE after-school program. When ACE personnel were asked to describe the ACE program, staff members frequently responded by stating that the program was a funding mechanism from the City's Parks, Recreation, and Library Department. Staff members were usually unable to articulate any of the stated program goals. While written materials on the development of the program and its prescribed content are available, many of the staff members operating the programs were unfamiliar with this material. Site coordinators indicated that a clear articulation of program goals and a specification of program content would help improve implementation.

Site coordinators also indicated additional funding would improve implementation. While funding provided to the site was sufficient to employ staff members, activities for youth were almost entirely grant and donation driven. Numerous site coordinators suggested a position should be developed within the Parks Department that would be responsible for writing and obtaining grants for the ACE sites or at minimum could assist site coordinators in searching for funding opportunities.

*Researcher Evaluations: Assessment of Program Components.* During interviews with the site coordinators researchers indicated that the implementation of the ACE program would be facilitated by the data driven assessment of the program. Staff members frequently mentioned a desire to know whether their programs were impacting the youth, or if they should focus their efforts on some other type of activity or program content. Formalized feedback mechanisms would help to inform these questions. The need for formalized feedback at ACE sites should be interpreted in the context of limitations on available resources. Inexpensive data gathering techniques such as participant surveys may provide an economical source of important information.

In conclusion, qualitative analysis of information gathered through interviews with site coordinators at ACE sites in the At Risk Youth Division demonstrated that there

were three constellations of characteristics that were associated with effective implementation of the ACE program. Findings within these three constellations including staffing, community and program characteristics are summarized in Table 2. With regard to staffing issues, site coordinators indicated effectively implemented programs were successful in limiting staff turnover and employed staff members who had sufficient training. These programs were also culturally sensitive and integrated into the community. Site coordinators also indicated that in order for an after-school program to be effectively implemented it needs clearly defined program goals and specific program content. Additionally, researchers observed that assessment or feedback at the program sites including formalized feedback from program participants would serve to facilitate the implementation of the ACE program. It should be noted that during the process evaluation, it became evident that a number of site coordinators had found solutions to substantial challenges. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the ACE program was the resourcefulness of some of the site coordinators. By engaging the community and developing additional resources they were able to offer a broad variety of services on a very limited budget.

## ***DISCUSSION***

While qualitative research represents an important starting point for an investigation into the predictors of the effective implementation of after-school programs, research using qualitative methods should be complemented by work using quantitative methods. As a product of our methods, our conclusions are subjective, potentially influenced by both our biases and beliefs and those of interview participants. Quantitative research in this area will allow for the specification of relationships, control for competing explanatory characteristics and an estimation of the magnitude of effects. Thus, methodological considerations limit the weight that should be given to the results presented herein.

TABLE 2. Predictors of the Effective Implementation of After-School Programs

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### Practitioner Evaluation Staffing

- Reduced staff turnover
- Adequate training

### Community

- Cultural relevance
- Integration with the community
- Utilization of community resources

### Programmatic

- Dissemination of clearly articulated program goals and program content
- Ample resources

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### Researcher Evaluation

- Data driven program assessment
-

Our sample also limits the weight that may be given to our findings. The programs included in the sample typically served communities that had a relatively high proportions of at-risk youth, and a high proportion of Spanish speaking residents. Our finding that programs were more effectively implemented when personnel could speak Spanish was most certainly a sample specific finding and not necessarily generalizable to after-school programs in other areas though it does underscore the importance of culturally sensitive programming throughout the country. Despite concerns regarding generalizability, the relative consistency of our findings with studies exploring the effective implementation of in-school prevention programs suggests that our findings do apply to after-school programs in other areas.

An additional finding of the current work was the importance of adopting goals consistent with the structural reality of after-school programs. Some ACE sites implemented programmatic elements targeted at positive individual change. There is some reason to expect that after-school programs will not be able to affect a meaningful change in a youth's individual propensity towards problem behavior. In order to have a meaningful impact on problem behavior through individual change, after-school programs would need to recruit and retain "atrisk" kids. Unfortunately, the structural reality of the strong majority of after-school programs makes this unlikely. At the sites included in our sample, consistent attendance and the retention of youth in the program was rare. It seems reasonable to suggest that "at-risk" youth as a group would be unwilling to participate in voluntary after-school programs focused on a reduction in the individual propensity towards antisocial behavior, particularly when these programs compete with other after-school activities including those that are unsupervised. Therefore, a reduction in problem behavior through individual change may not be a reasonable goal for after-school programs.

Fortunately, even if after-school program sites are unable to affect sustainable change within individuals it is still possible that they will prevent acts of crime and delinquency. These programs may prevent crime by removing potential victims from exposure to criminogenic situations through their supervisory capacity of youth in the community. After-school programs supervise youth during the time of the day when the risk of youth victimization is at its greatest, the after-school hours. While each of the sites

visited in this analysis varied in their means to achieving these ends, all ACE programs sought to reduce victimization through the provision of a safe environment with fun and interesting programming. Given the increase in crime during the after-school hours this seems to be a realistic and attainable goal. According to routine activities theory, a leading theory of criminal behavior, a criminal event generally requires three elements in order to occur: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a guardian capable of protecting the target (Felson, 1998). After-school programs can prevent crime and delinquency by removing two of the necessary elements for crime through the provision of a safe environment with adult supervision during a time of day when juvenile delinquency peaks. When there is a reduction in the suitability of targets and an increase in capable guardians, we would expect to see a reduction in delinquency even without a change in the proportion of motivated offenders.

The widespread implementation of after-school programs makes research in this area critical. Given the paucity of quantitative studies on after-school programs, future research should address the predictors of effective program implementation while relating implementation to variation in outcomes. Research that employs treatment and control group designs in which potential group differences are controlled for and work that carefully quantifies programmatic, individual and community characteristics is particularly needed.

## **NOTES**

1. The name of the after-school program has been changed to protect the confidentiality of study participants.
2. A total population of 156 sites within six districts exists in the city; however, the programs in the At-Risk Youth Division exemplified the highest needs-based populations, and, consequently, we chose to focus our efforts in this Division which covered various areas of the city.
3. In-depth interviews followed a structured set of questions presented in Appendix A.



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## **APPENDIX A. Interview Questions**

1. How long have you been working in the field that you are in now?
2. How long have you been working for (the organization employing the subject)?
3. What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?
4. What other prior job experience has led you to your current position?
5. Would you describe your job as a “good” job?
6. How satisfied are you with your current position?
7. Are you involved in decisions about the way that things are done at work?

8. Have you been involved in the delivery of prevention programs before?
9. What is your role in the violence prevention program that your organization uses?
10. Were you involved in the planning of this program?
11. How many hours of training in this program did you receive?
12. What kinds of activities comprised this training?
13. Do you feel prepared to implement this program?
14. How straightforward is this program?
15. Would you describe the program as “user friendly”?
16. Do you have a clear understanding of the goals of this program?
17. How much time per day do you spend on violence prevention activities (direct or indirect)?
18. Do you have adequate support/resources to implement the program?
19. How important are violence prevention activities to you?
20. How important are violence prevention activities to your organization?

21. Do you feel that the program implemented by your organization is effective?
22. What sorts of resources would have helped your efforts?
23. How many employees are involved in the program activities, including support staff?
24. What are their different roles?
25. How much of their time is devoted to prevention activities?
26. Who is responsible for the planning and implementation of program activities?
27. What are the goals of the ACE program?
28. Who does the program target?
29. Are there program materials such as curricula?
30. How many people participate in the ACE program?
31. How do people come to participate in the program?
32. Is there any incentive for participation?
33. What procedures exist to make sure that the program is effectively implemented?
34. How are program records kept?