

Lessons Learned About Academics After School

By *Eric Schaps*

The powerful words of the YMCA's mission of "building spirit, mind, and body for all" serve to focus and inform everything the Y does. My organization, the Developmental Studies Center (DSC), has a similar mission: helping all children grow to their full potential intellectually, ethically, and socially.

Among the things we at DSC have learned during 25 years of working with schools and afterschool programs is that the right mission — in order to make a real difference — must be lived out daily in all the ways we treat each other. Most fundamentally, it is the caring, inclusive community that afterschool programs build for and with their children that enables them to grow in spirit, mind and body.

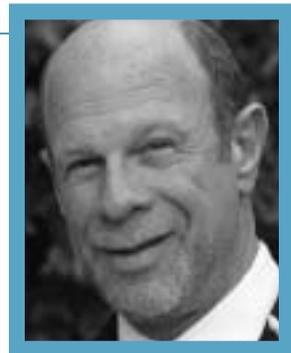
BUILD COMMUNITY

Four principles have emerged in DSC's work as central to building caring communities in afterschool as well as in-school settings. None of these principles will be new to the YMCA. First and foremost is cultivating supportive relationships between and among staff and children. These relationships satisfy children's fundamental human need for belonging and connection to others.

Second is providing frequent opportunities for children to collaborate and be of service to others. Helping them learn the skills of collaboration and experience the satisfaction of contributing to the welfare of others goes a long way to strengthening their confidence and sense of competence.



After school is a time for kids to relax, refresh, and appreciate who they are and what they can do.



Third is providing opportunities for "voice and choice" so that children can have a say in what happens to them after school. Letting them "vote with their feet" is one way to offer real choice, and thereby to build their sense of autonomy.

Fourth and finally, community is built by emphasizing and reflecting with children on core values, goals, and norms. The YMCA's core values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility offer a myriad of chances to involve children in thinking about what does matter — and should matter — to them and others.

CHILDREN THRIVE

Children thrive in caring communities. When a YMCA afterschool program effectively meets children's need for belonging, competence, and autonomy by strengthening their sense of community, it prompts them to become more committed to its core values and goals. The Y's values and goals become their own. Moreover, the children benefit in various other ways, including:

Social: Children exhibit more social competence and have more positive interpersonal behaviors. They are happier with themselves and relate better with others.

Ethical: Children develop pro-social motivation and exhibit authentic concern for others.

School-Related: Children demonstrate a greater liking for school and develop higher educational aspirations. They display greater academic motivation.

Prevention of Problems: Children demonstrate reduced aggressiveness, violence, and delinquency. They are less involved in use of alcohol and other drugs.

Don't make after school "more

ON SITE IN LONG BEACH



school.” After school is a time for kids to relax, refresh, and appreciate who they are and what they can do. It is important to create a space for them in which they feel safe to express themselves, to expand their thinking, and to enjoy what they are learning.

Afterschool time can connect with in-school time without being more of the same. Afterschool programs can offer enrichment activities that develop an interest in and an appreciation for the academic skills they work hard at during the school day. It is a time for application and expansion, not repetition.

ENRICHMENT WORKS

Afterschool programs can build community by offering academic enrichment activities that complement what is happening in school and that integrate character and community building. Academic and social learning are highly interdependent. Academic learning becomes more rigorous while children develop personal responsibility and respect for others. Academic and social learning are far more powerful when effectively combined than when they are undertaken separately.

“Provide opportunities for voice and choice so that children can have a say in what happens to them afterschool.”

An academic enrichment program that integrates social development with academic achievement empowers every student to participate. Each child has a voice and an opportunity to contribute. Academic enrichment is engaging for students because it responds to students’ interests; links with students’ personal backgrounds; promotes understanding as well as skills and knowledge; involves active participation; and is multi-dimensional (social, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic, as well as academic).

We at the Developmental Studies

We use *AfterSchool KidzLit* and *AfterSchool KidzMath* developed by the Developmental Studies Center at our site every week. Our site feels different and better because of them.

We have created a culture of reading since using *KidzLit*. The program has helped us define what it means to be a reader, to comprehend a story, to bring the book to life. We have learned how to dip into the child’s mind and create a new level of engagement.

Giovanni was a candidate for retention — not because he couldn’t read, but because he wouldn’t. He was reluctant to read, and it was blocking his progress. He is an avid reader today. He regularly initiates discussing his current book with the site director. Giovanni has gotten into enjoying books. He has even brought his family, especially his brothers, into reading. It is a treat to visit him and see the level of discussion about books at his house.

I appreciate how *KidzMath* has empowered our children to change the rules, and make the games their own. They make them harder. They adapt them for different math operations. They also display a new level of responsibility as they check in with each other to get agreement as they take ownership of the game and of the math.

I am amazed how they focus on the game itself, oblivious to the math that they are learning and practicing. Kids want to make the funniest bug possible when playing *Funny Bug*, and don’t realize the skills they are using and learning. I watched Cory be hesitant at first, afraid of the math. He just wanted to watch. But soon, he couldn’t resist, and couldn’t help himself. Suddenly he was participating, providing answers, thinking, “I can do this.”

It is a self-esteem builder. This way of learning reinforces our YMCA’s core values. Kids demonstrate respect for each other in the way they take turns. They become responsible about keeping the pieces together. They express caring in the exchange of help they give each other. It makes them feel good about themselves.

It makes us feel very proud of our site. We are now seen as a resource by both parents and in-school teachers. They have shown us new respect.

—Malka Borrego

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Center believe that social and academic learning flourish when they are integrated naturally, rather than pursued separately. Children come to recognize through their interactions that talking about books is a way to understand them. They listen to and discuss literature in pairs, and as a group.

When children play math games cooperatively instead of competitively, they are more likely to develop caring and respectful relationships, and create a safe environment conducive to sharing their thinking.

Children must become interpersonally sensitive and adept. They must become committed to values of justice and caring. A humane and productive democracy requires a citizenry that care deeply about the common good, is

thoughtful in word and deed, and is committed to living ethically.

All of this begs some questions you might ask about your own afterschool program site, such as:

What are you doing at your site to foster community? Do your students arrive excited about your program? Are children learning to value each other and work together? Are they respectful and kind to each other? Is your staff inspired by what you offer children? Does your program have a spirit of collaboration and fun? Have you developed the sense of community that you want and that your children need? **P**

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