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From Access to Equity: Making Out-of-School-Time Spaces Meaningful for Teens From Marginalized Communities

This brief summarizes findings from Wallace-commissioned research about key challenges and promising practices toward equity in out-of-school-time programs engaging historically marginalized youth populations. This report captures the ideas and recommendations gleaned from a literature review and interviews with OST policy influencers, program directors, youth workers, and scholars across the nation. The research was conducted by Bianca J. Baldrige of Harvard University, Daniela K. DiGiacomo of the University of Kentucky, Ben Kirshner of the University of Colorado Boulder, Sam Mejias of Parsons School of Design, and Deepa S. Vasudevan of Wellesley College. The brief was prepared by Daniel Browne.

Problems of Policy and Practice

Afterschool, summer and other out-of-school-time (OST) programs provide young people with a range of opportunities. Youth participants can build positive relationships with peers and adults, develop and hone academic and other skills, and engage in apprenticeships and other forms of intergenerational learning (Gutiérrez, 2008; Hirsch, 2006; McCombs, Whitaker, Yoo, 2017; McLaughlin, 2000; Nelson, 2016; Rogoff, Callanan, Gutiérrez, & Erickson, 2016; Vadeboncoeur, 2006; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007.) However, there is a persistent and widening gap between the OST opportunities available to young people from low-income households and those available to their more affluent peers (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). Barriers such as program fees and lack of transportation disproportionately affect low-income families and families of color (Snellman, Silva, Frederick, & Putman, 2015). Additionally, in many cases, cultural norms of programs and unexamined biases of program and leadership staff may deter the participation of young people from historically marginalized communities in these programs (Baldrige, 2019).

The research team members approached their study from anti-racist and social justice perspectives, paying attention to structural factors that work against access and inclusion, while also making visible program design features that foster equity and engagement for youth from historically marginalized communities.

1. Experts offered multiple approaches to increasing access to programs and fostering inclusion, dignity and belonging in OST programs, including providing opportunities for youth to actively address inequities in their communities, compensating young people for their participation in

programs, and shifting language to counter deficit-oriented language in favor of humanizing and affirming language, approaches, and pedagogies.

2. Youth workers (frontline staff)—many who come from historically marginalized communities themselves and therefore serve as important mentors to young people in OST programs—report experiencing racism in the workplace as well as a tendency for programs to assume that the participating young people need to be “fixed,” a deficit perspective rooted in racism and paternalism. They also report low wages and job instability. Better support is needed to both attract and retain youth workers, who are essential to quality OST programs.

Approach

To frame this study, the team conducted a review of the research on OST programs’ work with historically marginalized young people from the past 20 years. They interviewed 58 experts in OST research, policy, and practice. These included program leaders and staff from all regions of the country; scholars with backgrounds in education, social work, sociology, learning sciences, and urban planning; and policy influencers and professional development specialists connected to OST systems, networks, and state and local intermediary organizations. Additionally, the team conducted seven focus groups with an additional sample of 35 OST professionals devoted to specific topics and populations (e.g., programming for LGBTQIA+ youth or young people from immigrant backgrounds). The team’s research focused on examining how structural inequality has shaped OST programs, ideas for addressing inequities pertaining to race, social class, citizenship, gender, sexuality, and ability, and core features of high-quality programming for marginalized youth. The team also recruited and paid a team of youth researchers to design a separate study of youth perspectives on equity and access. Findings from that study are summarized in a companion brief, [*Youth Perspectives on Designing Equitable Out-of-School-Time Programs*](#).

Findings

Program Practices to Support Youth

Although many OST programs seek to address racism and other forms of inequity, they can simultaneously perpetuate deficit-oriented approaches to engaging racially minoritized youth. A deficit-oriented approach assumes that youth are “lacking” or “at-risk” upon entering a program and that program intervention is necessary to “save” or “fix” young people (Baldridge, 2014, 2018; Fusco, 2018; Harris & Outley, 2021; Kwon, 2013; Singh, 2020; Hobley, Obuna, et al., 2022). This approach to youth development is not uncommon, but it can harm young people’s sense of self and limit their learning and growth. At the same time, a growing body of research indicates the positive impact when programs cultivate strengths-based, humanizing, and dignity-based approaches to engaging youth (Espinoza, Vossoughi, Rose, & Poza, 2020; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright, 2010; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012) with practices that focus on attentiveness to relevant social issues, fostering relational equity between youth and adults (DiGiacomo & Gutiérrez, 2015) and active inclusion of LGBTQIA+ youth voices (Johnson, 2017). Such an approach is what all youth deserve.

Interview and focus group participants shared practices to push against deficit framing and instead, foster a genuine sense of dignity and belonging for youth¹ in OST programs, including:

- Ensuring the hiring and retention of program leaders and staff who are more representative of the racial and cultural backgrounds of youth participants;
- Offering clear pathways for youth to assume leadership roles within programs;
- Engaging young people in programming to actively address inequities in their communities (while still recognizing adult responsibility for changing inequitable conditions);
- Preparing adults to understand their professional roles as mentors, coaches, and supportive partners, rather than top-down managers or hands-off chaperones;
- Establishing a community-wide network of mentors for program participants, based on young people's interests and needs;
- Emphasizing young people's holistic wellbeing by addressing basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, financial support) and helping them process and make meaning of traumas they may have experienced;
- Compensating young people for participation in programs, so they can pursue enrichment opportunities and still financially contribute to their families; and
- Shifting language and behavior to counter deficit-based and racist narratives about marginalized youth; instead, celebrating and drawing upon the unique assets of youth to support their learning and development.

¹ For the most part, the youth about whom the experts talked were adolescents (middle- and high-school age).

Policies and Practices to Support OST Staff

The research literature also speaks to the challenges faced by OST program staff, who may care deeply about young people but find it difficult to remain in their positions due to the difficulties of the working conditions of OST programs (Baldrige, 2019). Oftentimes, direct-service program staff share the same racial and cultural backgrounds as youth participants (Baldrige, 2018; Vasudevan, 2019; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). Aligned with this research, a number of study participants highlighted the challenges of not being a part of a professionalized, protected class of workers—including lack of job security or union protection, which leads to low wages and job instability.

Interview and focus group participants also reported personal experiences and those of their colleagues in which LGBTQIA+ staff and staff of color felt marginalized or tokenized (i.e., being hired or included only to give the appearance of diversity and equity) by White program leaders and predominantly White boards of directors. Participants shared practices for organizations and funders (both private and public) to consider making structural changes that could foster a more stable, equitable OST workforce, including:

- Paying a livable wage to OST program staff with full-time employment, related to regular and consistent work schedules;
- Offering clear pathways into leadership positions and professional development opportunities along the way (in partnership with community colleges and universities, particularly in rural settings);
- Recruiting former program participants to become staff members by creating career ladders to sustain a strong workforce; and
- Promoting staff well-being by offering professional coaching, peer networks, mental health supports, and a manageable workload.

Looking Ahead

Interview and focus group participants called for several next steps from funders and civic leaders to move the OST field toward more equitable conditions for both program staff and participants. These recommendations include:

- Increasing opportunities for multi-year core funding so programs can spend less time on grant-writing and compliance and more time on program design and staff development;
- Building collaborations between OST programs and among OST programs and school districts, research institutions, and governmental and civic institutions to systemically promote equitable youth development in and across particular geographic regions;
- Allocating funding for professional development opportunities to help OST programs make racial and social justice an explicit part of their work with young people; and
- Focusing future research on the following topics:
 - The experiences, attributes, and career trajectories of OST workers;
 - Demand for, and access to, programming in specific regions and neighborhoods;
 - How civic infrastructure (e.g., transportation, available space) affects program participation in these regions and neighborhoods; and
 - How participation in OST programs affects young people in the long term.

Note:

The researchers use the term *marginalized* as an umbrella term in addition to *racially minoritized* to acknowledge how systems of oppression impact children and youth from low-income households and high-poverty neighborhoods, youth who identify as LGBTQIA+, youth who experience housing instability and homelessness, systems-involved youth (e.g., foster care, incarcerated), and the intersections of these identities and lived experiences of youth populations.

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