NYSAN Policy Brief

Expanding the Role of Afterschool Programs in Promoting Health and Wellness

"As the obesity epidemic continues to plague our youth and less time is available for physical education during the traditional school day, a natural solution is the inclusion of health and wellness activities in afterschool programs. Play time and organized sports after school may be the only time that some youth are active and eat nutritious snacks. Afterschool programs also benefit children by reducing their exposure to harmful activities such as substance abuse and tobacco use. Afterschool programs provide an ideal opportunity to make a real difference in improving public health and the lives of our youth."

- Kyle Stewart, Executive Director, YMCAs of New York State

he health of children and youth in New York has drastically declined over the last ten years. In 2003, 15.3% of children in New York were overweight or obese. By 2007, this number had jumped to 32.9%. Fewer schools offer physical education, while young people's screen time (time spent watching television and using computers, phones, mp3 players, and other handheld devices) has dramatically increased. Children living in low-income homes and Black and Latino children have higher rates of obesity and lower access to nutritious foods.

Research shows that poor health has a wide range of consequences, including higher risk of illness and higher incidents of risk-taking and negative behaviors.⁵ Moreover, various studies show that academic success is linked with good health because physical activity and fitness levels contribute to higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety and stress, two factors that have an impact on learning. Evidence shows that access to fitness and nutrition resources encourages healthy behavior, thereby contributing to the positive development of children and youth.

Physical health and wellness are among the core developmental needs critical to child well-being, and afterschool programs are venues that can support good health by providing nutritious food, creating opportunities for physical activity, and offering health education. This policy brief will focus on the issues related to child and youth health, the resources afterschool programs provide, and how to expand the role of afterschool programs to better promote healthy physical development.

The State of Youth Health and Wellness

Both at the state and national level, health and wellness issues are getting a great deal of overdue attention. First Lady Michelle Obama launched the Let's Move campaign to shed light on our country's staggering health concerns and to bring resources into schools and other youth environments.⁶ Efforts like these provide great opportunities to raise awareness about the barriers to healthy physical development among youth.

Childhood Obesity: Childhood obesity is a major concern for many families and communities; data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (1976–1980 and 2003–2006) show that obesity has increased for children 6–11 years old from 6.5% to 17%, and from 5% to 17.6% for youth 12–19 years old. Severely overweight and obese children often face physical challenges, such as increased illness and difficulty participating in activities. They also often deal with a wide range of social and emotional challenges, including being bullied and teased and

grappling with low self-esteem. The Centers for Disease Control report that obese children and adolescents are at risk for health problems not only during their youth, but also as adults.⁸

Lack of Physical Education: The decrease of school-based physical education opportunities has had a significant impact on youth health. In a 2003 snapshot of the country, just 6 to 8% of schools provided sufficient physical education classes for all students.⁹ While some children and youth may engage in physical activity at home, many communities do not provide safe playgrounds, walking routes, or bike paths for children to use. According to the National Association of Sport and Physical Education, "Physical education improves students' health, which improves their ability to learn." ¹⁰ If children do not have access to physical education in school and do not have safe alternatives at home, they are much less likely to find a way to stay fit. This phenomenon is particularly true in under-resourced communities.

Hunger and Malnutrition: In New York, 14.8% of children under the age of 18 experience food insecurity, defined as the lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times because of insufficient financial resources. Many young people rely primarily on the meals they get at school and in afterschool programs to meet their food needs. In addition to food insecurity, many youth are not in environments with access to fresh, healthy foods. Fast food is often less expensive than healthy groceries. New York's low-income urban and rural communities, in particular, lack access to supermarkets with fresh produce and other healthy foods. This can lead youth to eat unhealthy, pre-packaged, and highly processed food. For many lowincome households, hunger and obesity are linked; families rely on cheaper, calorie-dense foods to curb hunger. This hunger-obesity paradox often comes from a cycle of food deprivation and overeating in individuals.12

Lack of Information About Health Risks: Risky behaviors, including smoking, substance abuse, and unprotected sex, can often be delayed or prevented with access to information. Unfortunately, many young people do not have opportunities to learn about managing health risks from knowledgeable adults. Many schools have reduced or eliminated health education classes due to limited funding, which often provide children with their only opportunity to learn about proper nutrition, sexual health, and the dangers of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.

The Role of Afterschool Programs in Promoting Health and Wellness

Research has shown that afterschool programs improve youth health and wellness. For example, a 2005 study found that, in a sample taken from a primarily low-income community, children who became involved in afterschool programs were significantly less likely to be obese than non-participants, and were more accepted by their peers.¹³ Afterschool programs provide a variety of activities and supports that lead to improved health, as evidenced below.

Afterschool programs provide opportunities for physical activity.

Many afterschool programs include a variety of components, including academic support, enrichment activities, social events, and recreation. Programs often allow time for free play and organized sports, which may be the only time during the day that children are encouraged to be physically active. High-quality afterschool programs provide opportunities to be active for all youth, not just young people who participate in sports teams and clubs. These opportunities are especially important for children and youth with disabilities, as they may lead a more sedentary lifestyle than other youth and have fewer opportunities to be active in school and at home.¹⁴

Licensed afterschool programs in New York are required to "make a sufficient quantity and variety of materials and play equipment available," including materials and equipment for physical and recreational development.¹⁵ In addition, New York's afterschool quality framework and accredi-

tation requirements reflect this commitment to ensuring afterschool programs provide physical activities for youth by explicitly including them as an essential aspect of quality afterschool programming.¹⁶

Afterschool programs provide access to nutritious food.

Just as free and reduced-price meals are available during the school day, afterschool programs have access to subsidies to provide snacks and suppers to youth from low-income families. According to the Food Research Action Center (FRAC), "By the time children arrive at their afterschool program, lunch is a distant memory... they feel run down, their attention span shortens, their ability to learn diminishes, and they have difficulty fully participating in afterschool activities." Children and youth may not know how to access food, or they may feel uncomfortable visiting a food pantry. However, afterschool programs provide food in an easy-to-access, non-threatening environment.

Afterschool providers have access to a system of support for providing nutritious food. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) are federally-funded programs that provide support to afterschool providers offering snacks and suppers in programs. Summer programs can also access NSLP funds as well as additional federal funding through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), administered by the State Education Department.

CACFP is an uncapped entitlement program, administered by the Department of Health, from which afterschool providers can draw funds and was recently expanded to allow additional subsidies for youth aged 18 and under. CACFP funds for afterschool snacks and suppers may be used in areas where 50% of the local school population qualifies for free or reduced-price school meals and for meals that meet USDA and NYS CACFP nutritional standards. Afterschool programs can serve these meals anytime that school is out of session during the academic year. Reimbursement rates cover the cost of food, and currently stand at \$0.74 per snack and \$2.87 per supper.

Afterschool programs promote healthy behaviors and choices.

According to the Afterschool Alliance, afterschool programs provide positive alternatives to negative behaviors.¹⁸ Children and youth in afterschool programs have access to adults who often serve as role models and mentors. Research finds that youth in afterschool programs are more likely to refrain from risky behaviors.¹⁹ A national study conducted by YMCA of the USA found that teenagers who are unsupervised during the afterschool hours of 3:00 to 6:00p.m. are more likely to engage in risky behaviors than youth who are supervised by a parent or another adult or who are involved in structured activities during those hours.²⁰ These behaviors include substance use and abuse, sexual activity, and smoking, among others. In addition, youth who do not spend time in afterschool activities are 37% more likely to become teen parents than those who participate in afterschool programs.21

Programs and Initiatives that Promote Health and Wellness

There are hundreds of afterschool sites in New York that provide food, nutrition education, and / or physical activity. In addition, there are numerous sports and health organizations that offer stand-alone programs outside of school, including professional sports teams, national sports associations, and health clinics. The following list describes a few notable examples of afterschool and summer programs and initiatives that are making an impact on health and wellness among youth.

4-H Choose Health Initiatives:

Choose Health at 4-H Camp: Teens Promoting Healthy Changes is a program led by Cornell Cooperative Extension that combines youth community action with promoting healthy lifestyles in camp settings. Using a 5-day curriculum and camp environment survey tool, teen Counselors-in-Training (CITs) assess camp food and activity environment, conduct investigations, and recommend changes to make healthy eating and active play easier choices for campers to make. In 2008 and 2009, over 200 CITs participated at seven of New York's 4-H summer camps. Based on CITs' recommendations, outcomes included less availability of sweetened drinks and candy and increased availability of vegetables. Camps also added more active options, such as dance and yoga classes. Plans are underway to expand this initiative to non 4-H camps.

Due to the success of this program, Cornell Cooperative Extension is launching the Choose Health Ambassadors initiative for afterschool programs. This initiative will train 4-H educators to work with teenagers, who will learn how to teach younger children a newly developed interactive nutrition curriculum that includes food preparation and active games. Afterschool programs are also encouraged to use a Cornell-developed self-assessment tool to reflect upon their practices and generate ideas for how to create healthier food and activity environments.

Building Healthy Communities (BHC):

Created in 2006 by The After-School Corporation (TASC), BHC is an afterschool service-learning initiative that empowers youth to understand the causes of childhood obesity and to create healthier lifestyles for themselves and their communities. Through BHC, participants learn about healthy eating and exercise, and examine health and obesity issues in their schools or neighborhoods. They then design and execute service projects to address the obesity epidemic. Participants keep food and exercise logs and encourage others in their schools and families to adopt healthy goals. Parents are invited to participate in service-learning projects, and receive caregivers' guides to healthy living. In the 2008-09 school year, 77% of participants demonstrated a change in behavior related to eating habits and physical activity, and 84% increased their civic engagement.

Go!Chefs and Go!Healthy Meals:

The Children's Aid Society (CAS) launched Go!Chefs, a hands-on cooking and nutrition education program for afterschool programs, in 2006. Go!Chefs introduces youth to the pleasures of preparing and enjoying nutritious food by providing basic cooking skills, teaching the importance of fruit and vegetable consumption, and developing conscious consumerism among participants. In 2008, CAS partnered with the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development to pilot a training and technical assistance project called Fun Food, Smart Food that brought the Go!Chefs curriculum into 12 Out-of-School time (OST) funded sites in New York City. CAS also operates Go!Healthy Meals, an early childhood and afterschool meal program that feeds 1,500 children each day. Recipes are made from scratch, use whole and fresh foods, and mirror the cultural diversity of the families CAS serves. The CAS food service staff attends regular trainings in nutrition and healthy cooking techniques.

These CAS programs are part of a community school model, an integrated and coordinated approach that provides healthy food, physical activity, health education, and health care, along with afterschool and family services.

New York State Action for Healthy Kids (NYS AFHK):

NYS AFHK is a statewide group that works collaboratively with the national Action for Healthy Kids to improve children's nutrition, physical education, and physical activity based on a best practice coordinated school health approach. The coordinated approach includes eight domains, including health education, physical education, health services, nutrition services, counseling and psychological services, healthy school environment development, health promotion among staff, and family and community involvement. NYS AFHK serves as a major resource for schools, districts, afterschool programs, and other community-based organizations to develop, implement, and assess effective wellness policies.

YMCAs of New York State:

The YMCAs have a rich history of providing health and wellness programs to youth in afterschool settings. YMCAs care for over 500,000 children and youth each year in over 120 facilities statewide. These programs include over 1,600 health and wellness programs, 800 sports leagues, and 800 aquatics programs. The YMCAs provide a strong physical and programmatic infrastructure throughout the state that promotes healthy living and physical activity among young people of all ages.

Policy Recommendations

Policymakers can have a tremendous impact on expanding the role of afterschool in promoting health and wellness. Not only will the policy recommendations below make an impact on children, youth, and families, but they are an investment in our economic future. A 2008 report from the NYS Office of the Comptroller asserts that we face fiscal fallout from allowing poor health to become the norm. According to the report, "...one in four New Yorkers under the age of 18... is obese. This childhood obesity crisis, in turn, is fueling a health care cost crisis, with an estimated annual \$242 million in medical costs attributed to these children." Preventive action can minimize this threat to New York's economy, paving the way for future generations to live healthier lives and saving the State significant resources.

Include nutrition and physical activity recommendations in afterschool regulations and public funding programs.

New York's main sources of public afterschool funds are the Advantage After School Program, administered by the Office of Children and Family Services, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers, administered by the State Education Department. If these funding streams offered nutrition and physical activity recommendations for the design of their funded programs, the State could encourage hundreds of afterschool sites serving thousands of children to offer physical activities and nutritious food, where applicable. Harvard Medical School compiled recommended program parameters, such as allotting 60 minutes of physical activity daily, serving reduced fat milk, and offering nutrition education. These kinds of existing, evidence-based recommendations can serve as the foundation for New York's regulatory and public funding framework.²³

Facilitate joint-use agreements.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recommends that public officials facilitate the creation of joint-use agreements between schools and communities to maximize use of existing resources. Effective joint-use agreements allow young people to use school grounds during non-school hours and expand the number of safe spaces available for physical activity in neighborhoods.²⁴ These agreements would allow afterschool programs to access additional space for sports and other recreational opportunities.

Encourage public and private health insurance programs to contribute to or reimburse the cost of afterschool health and wellness activities.

New York State policymakers can support the allowance of afterschool program participation as a reimbursable health care activity. Doctors often prescribe nutrition counseling or physical activity for overweight and obese children; afterschool programs that agree to offer these services using evidence-based practices for a specified duration of time should be reimbursed. This would allow parents to receive funds to cover afterschool program fees and for no-fee programs to directly receive funds from health maintenance organizations (HMOs) or through Medicaid. A similar program is currently being conceptualized in Wisconsin.

Support afterschool-based health centers and referral systems.

By placing health centers in an accessible location where families are already engaged in an afterschool program, more children and youth are likely to receive health services. Afterschool programs are well-positioned to provide culturally competent health services that are responsive to the needs of participants because they have regular interaction with families in their communities. An alternative option is to co-locate afterschool programs with referral services, which can support family access to food, insurance options, and medical and dental care. For example, an expansion of the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP), run by the Nutrition Consortium of NYS, could allow community-based afterschool providers to receive contracts to conduct outreach and increase participation in federal nutrition assistance and other support programs.²⁵

Support further partnership between the Department of Health, Office of Children and Family Services, and State Education Department to promote health in afterschool programs.

Existing collaborations, including the NYS Youth Development Team and Act 4 Youth, have been effective forums for information-sharing between State agencies and non-agency stakeholders. However, additional investments in partnerships specifically aimed at supporting afterschool providers can expand access to existing resources and encourage more afterschool providers to offer health and wellness-focused activities.

Expand the Healthy Kids, Healthy New York initiative.

Upon receiving a grant from the National Governor's Association, the State created the Healthy Kids, Healthy New York afterschool toolkit and self-assessment tool to help afterschool programs to examine their practices and create healthier environments. At least one hundred programs have used these resources, but hundreds more can benefit from them. This initiative can be expanded using the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) early care model, which provides a structure for self-assessment as well as action planning, staff development, and evaluation.

Promote quality standards to ensure programs are offering health and wellness supports.

High-quality afterschool programs are expected to offer nutritious food options and opportunities for physical activity. By promoting quality standards through use of the NYSAN Program Quality Framework and Self-Assessment Tool, engaging in the AfterSchool Works! New York program accreditation process, and other afterschool quality initiatives, providers will be further inclined to meet standards related to health and wellness.



The New York State Afterschool Network (NYSAN) is a public-private partnership dedicated to promoting young people's safety, learning, and healthy development by increasing the quality and availability of programs available outside the traditional classroom. The positions taken and statements set forth in this document do not necessarily represent the views of all NYSAN members. For a copy of this and other NYSAN publications, visit www.nysan.org.

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