

NYSAN Policy Brief

Pathways to Student Success: The Role of Afterschool Programs in Increasing High School Graduation Rates in New York State

“Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma, and yet just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation, and half of the students who begin college never finish. This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow.”

– President Barack Obama, in a speech to Congress on February 24, 2009

As President Obama suggests, the high school graduation rate is a barometer of the health of American society and the skill level of its future workforce. Growing economic disparities between young people who finish high school and those who drop out serve as incentives to increase the high school graduation rate. For that and other reasons, it is especially troubling that the dropout rate in America is increasing.¹

This well-documented national dropout crisis is as dire in New York State as elsewhere. Upstate or downstate, urban or rural, the system of schools, afterschool and summer programs, and other youth services must do more in order to better prepare young people for college and/or the workforce. The dropout crisis is not merely a technical or administrative issue, but rather an equity issue² that requires youth-serving professionals to fundamentally rethink policy and practice to help prepare 21st century kids with 21st century skills.

This policy brief outlines the ways in which the afterschool community can and should play a central role in building an education and youth service system in New York State that contributes to higher graduation rates.

Benefits of High School Graduation:³

High school graduates are less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system than dropouts.

Participation in high-quality pre-Kindergarten increases the chances of graduation from high school.

A 1% increase in high school graduation rates would save approximately \$1.4 billion in incarceration costs, or about \$2,100 per each male high school graduate.

High school graduates, on the average, earn \$9,245 more per year than high school dropouts.⁴

Dropout Facts at a Glance: New York State (2007 high school graduating class) After four years:⁵

69% of youth in New York State graduated from high school; 17% were still enrolled.

51% of African-American students graduated from high school; 29% were still enrolled.

47% of Hispanic students graduated from high school; 30% were still enrolled.

39% of students with disabilities in New York State graduated from high school; 29% were still enrolled.

25% of English Language Learners in New York State graduated from high school; 41% were still enrolled.

Linking Afterschool to Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement

The services provided by high-quality afterschool programs help prevent students from disengaging from school and dropping out, and support and expansion for high-quality afterschool programs is critical. These programs can be especially crucial in reaching young people who are most at risk at turning points as they transition from middle school to high school and are searching for meaningful academic, vocational, and recreational activities that keep them invested in their own success. A study of a high-quality afterschool program in Los Angeles found that participants were 20% less likely to drop out of school than similar students in the district who did not attend the program.⁶ In addition, a 2007 study in New York City found that middle school students who attended high-quality afterschool programs earned more credits in the ninth and tenth grades, the years when many students disengage.⁷

Most students spend more than 20% of their learning time outside of school.⁸ Coordination between the afterschool community and the K-12 education system, in addition to greater investment in expanding afterschool opportunities, will strengthen the system's overall capacity to meet students' learning needs. This can significantly increase high school graduation rates across New York State for all kids, regardless of location, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. While afterschool programs cannot replace the teaching and learning that must occur in school, they can complement and/or supplement what happens during the school day.⁹ Afterschool programs are natural partners to schools' efforts to provide engaging and enriching learning opportunities that help keep kids in school.¹⁰

Quality afterschool programs support learning and development and are a necessary part of creating effective pathways for student success and are a critical ally in the high school engagement and graduation equation. These programs:

- ◆ Promote leadership development through student engagement, service, and/or employment
- ◆ Provide safety and supervision for kids, thereby decreasing the risk of kids being victims or victimizing others and reducing the incidence of risky behaviors
- ◆ Build caring relationships with adults and expand the network of role models in children's lives
- ◆ Sustain and support the efforts of effective early childhood and K-12 practice
- ◆ Offer high school students opportunities to earn credits and stipends for work done outside of school hours in their communities, providing incentives to stay in school

The Role of Afterschool in Dropout Prevention

Afterschool programs can contribute to students' school success and in building a sense of responsibility for themselves and to their communities. Research findings show that participation in afterschool programs is associated with a number of long-term benefits, including¹¹:

Increased academic achievement in reading and in math

Higher self-esteem

Improved school attendance (including in high school)

Higher levels of student engagement and motivation to learn

Positive interpersonal relationships with peers

Deeper connections to school

Positive outcomes in high school credit accumulation

Increased likelihood of high school graduation

Reduced delinquency

What are 21st Century Skills?¹²

As education reform begins to focus on promoting 21st century skills, afterschool programs can play a central role in supporting these efforts. 21st century skills refer to what students can do, rather than the particular knowledge they possess, and are built through relevance, participation, choice, relationships, and rigor. 21st century skills often include the following attributes, many of which are hallmarks of high-quality afterschool programs:

Information and media literacy

Communication skills and teamwork

Critical and systems thinking

Problem solving

Creativity and intellectual curiosity

Self-direction

Social responsibility

Global awareness

Financial, economic, and business literacy

Civic literacy

Policy Recommendations

In order to create a youth-serving system that leads all young people to high levels of achievement as high school graduates and beyond, elected officials and education policymakers should consider a range of strategies to address student engagement and dropout prevention.

(1) Engage diverse stakeholders from a variety of disciplines and sectors:

- ◆ Educate and include business leaders, community groups, and others vested in community development in supporting workforce development by employing older youth.
- ◆ Include afterschool program staff - many of whom have built caring relationships with students - as part of a more 'personalized' high school experience.
- ◆ Engage community colleges by encouraging them to participate in school and community-based organization (CBO) partnerships aimed at re-engaging dropouts or those at risk for dropping out.
- ◆ Include a full range of stakeholder organizations, including schools, afterschool programs, CBOs, and social service agencies, as part of dropout prevention plans.

(2) Transform educational experiences for youth:

- ◆ Minimize grade repetition (which increases disengagement and the odds of dropping out) by increasing attention to student engagement in collaboration with high-quality afterschool programs.
- ◆ Increase access to summer learning opportunities, many of which are operated by CBOs, particularly high-quality middle school to high school bridge programs that help 9th graders be promoted to 10th grade, a key factor to improving the odds of graduation.
- ◆ Include the afterschool community, including local and regional networks, in policy development and implementation of strategies in school districts, regional student support services centers, and statewide efforts.
- ◆ Identify and share best practices and models at the regional and state level.

(3) Develop a comprehensive and systemic response:

- ◆ Provide a role for afterschool programs as districts develop multiple pathways and/or credit recovery strategies for students to stay on track toward earning a recognized credential.*
- ◆ Encourage shared professional development between school-day staff and afterschool staff to create strategies for increasing student engagement, aligning curriculum or content, and learning from data.
- ◆ Rethink how schools use time by considering an expanded school day or year in order to provide students with a broader range of developmentally appropriate options to support their success.

(4) Prepare for federal policy developments,¹³ such as:

- ◆ Expansion of the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, which would make it possible for out-of-school youth to enroll in education and literacy programs in local schools, libraries, and CBOs.¹⁴
- ◆ The Graduation Promise Act, which is incorporated into early drafts of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and provides \$2.4B in support of struggling high schools.
- ◆ The renewal of the Higher Education Act, which includes developing alternative pathways to graduation that allow students to work toward their diplomas while accruing college credits.

Conclusion

Re-engaging students at risk for dropping out of high school requires policy responses and changes to practice. Many are disconnected from school, have learning or developmental disabilities, come from under-resourced communities, or are English Language Learners. Afterschool programs are well-positioned to support the work of schools by giving students opportunities to form close, informal relationships with adults, by providing academic supports, and specifically targeting the social, emotional, and leadership development of youth.

* While a general equivalency diploma (GED) can be a viable option, research suggests that receiving a GED does not yield equivalent benefits as a high school diploma. In the United States labor market, people with GEDs perform at the same level as high school dropouts, suggesting that high school engagement and a pathway to graduation are still the best opportunities for success (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2008).

How Afterschool Programs Support America's Promise Alliance's Five Promises

America's Promise Alliance has identified five elements that will help end the dropout crisis, and afterschool programs have a central role to play in fulfilling them:

Promise #1: CARING ADULTS

All children need support and guidance from caring adults in their families, at schools, and in their communities.

High-quality afterschool programs:

- ◆ Recruit, hire, and train diverse staff members who value each child, understand developmental needs, and form positive relationships with children, youth, and families

Promise #2: SAFE PLACES

All children need to be physically and emotionally safe wherever they are - from the actual places of families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities to the virtual places of media. High-quality afterschool programs:

- ◆ Provide safe, supervised, healthy environments for youth, thereby supporting crime prevention and reducing violence, vandalism, gang activity, and other adolescent crime

Promise #3: A HEALTHY START

All children need and deserve healthy bodies, healthy minds, and healthful habits. High-quality afterschool programs:

- ◆ Contribute to drug and pregnancy prevention through supervised activities that reduce the likelihood of risky behaviors
- ◆ Provide effective venues for improving nutrition and physical activity, leading to childhood obesity prevention

Promise #4: AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

All children need the intellectual development, motivation, and skills that equip them for successful work and lifelong learning. High-quality afterschool programs:

- ◆ Improve student achievement in school, with regular participation linked to higher test scores, better work habits, higher attendance, and reduced behavior problems
- ◆ Support social, emotional, and physical development through a positive program climate and well-rounded enrichment activities that develop skills, confidence, and higher educational and career aspirations
- ◆ Align activities and academic components with school standards and curricula

Promise #5: OPPORTUNITIES TO HELP OTHERS

All children need the chance to make a difference in their families, at schools, and in their communities. High-quality afterschool programs:

- ◆ Prepare youth for today's workforce through teaching skills and knowledge typically not taught during the school day
- ◆ Engage youth in a diverse variety of service learning offerings that allow them to exercise choice and actively participate in their communities

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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Endnotes

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