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Assessing Local Afterschool Resources and Needs

By Mark Ouellette

Taking stock of what's needed and what's already there is an essential step for municipal leaders who are interested in building a strong afterschool system in their communities.

Only by assessing community needs and resources can municipalities make sound decisions about future investments in opportunities for children and youth during non-school hours.

However, a thorough assessment requires careful planning and sustained effort because afterschool programs can operate in diverse settings. Afterschool programs may be offered by public schools, departments of parks and recreation, libraries, museums, community-based and faith-based organizations, and youth-serving agencies.

While those that serve large numbers of children or receive public funds may be easily identified, information about afterschool offerings in smaller, privately-funded agencies can be more difficult to obtain.

To learn more about available afterschool opportunities, cities and towns often gather information about the ages and characteristics of children served, the days and hours of program operation, and the range of services, opportunities, and supports provided. Some afterschool programs are targeted to at-risk students, while others are open to all children. Some serve students for only a few hours after the school day ends, while others extend the school day from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. or beyond. Some are designed primarily as recreational safe havens, while others have strong academic components.

These variations in program structure often reflect large disparities in funding as well as substantial differences in family and neighborhood needs.

In assessing unmet needs for afterschool services, city officials frequently rely upon some combination of parent surveys, reviews of program waiting lists, and neighborhood forums or other public meetings that give students and parents a chance to be heard.

Each of these approaches is likely to yield useful information from a different perspective; none of them alone can provide a full picture of community needs.

By documenting what's needed and available, municipal leaders can ensure that all stakeholders are working from a common base of knowledge about what services are in place and where there are gaps. Equally important, an assessment can provide the foundation for developing a common vision and an action plan for the city and its children and youth.

This strategy paper discusses six steps that municipal leaders should consider when conducting a needs assessment of local afterschool programs, and provides examples of how some communities have responded to this challenge. Additional information and assistance related to afterschool programming is available from the Institute upon request.

City Strategies



City Strategies

Define goals, focus, and scope of local assessment efforts.

Local assessments of afterschool resources and needs can serve a variety of purposes. For many communities, an assessment provides a strong foundation for strategic planning and the establishment of funding or program priorities. The data generated through local assessments can also be utilized in other ways. Cities and towns can:

- Disseminate information to parents and other residents in order to increase awareness of and access to programs already operating in the community;
- Provide afterschool program providers, funders, and other key stakeholders with data to help them focus new resources on underserved groups or neighborhoods;
- Create a database of current providers so that they can coordinate their activities when appropriate and develop an information-sharing network; and
- Assess the potential contributions of existing programs in meeting key community goals and objectives (e.g., reductions in juvenile crime or other risk-taking behaviors) by mapping and analyzing trends across various neighborhoods.

The goals and focus of local efforts may also evolve and change over time. In Seattle, for example, the initial purpose of a data collection effort was to generate an up-to-date resource list for parents in need of afterschool services. This initiative led to focus group discussions with parents to learn more about their children's out-of-school-time needs.

During these sessions, parents stressed the importance of providing information about transportation offered by individual programs and their capacity to serve language minority students. This feedback from parents improved the resource list, but it also triggered new discussions about unmet needs in these areas.

Reaching agreement upon the target population(s) to be served by afterschool programs, including the ages of children to be served, is another key step in defining the focus and scope of local assessment efforts. Some communities choose to focus primarily upon children in elementary and middle schools, while others are also concerned about needs and opportunities for preschool or high school students.

Every community embarking on an assessment effort should ultimately ask, "How will the information we collect be used, and how will it influence future policies and investments in afterschool programs?"

Some data collection efforts have sought to identify potential funding sources in a community or have focused on specific issues such as staffing and transportation needs. Others have looked more broadly at the ability of the community's afterschool programs to provide high-quality services and meet current needs:

- The City of Grand Rapids asked program providers about their current accreditation and licensing requirements. The resulting data added to concerns about program quality and prompted the City to create a new set of local standards for afterschool providers.
- A needs assessment conducted by the City of Indianapolis identified several public schools without afterschool programs. The Mayor's afterschool programs coordinator worked collaboratively with a local business that had a strong presence in these unserved neighborhoods to establish an afterschool program at one of these schools.
- The Partnership for Afterschool Education (PASE), a coalition of afterschool providers in New York City, asked programs about their waiting lists as a way of informing policymakers about the need for new investments in afterschool programs.

Develop multiple ways to gauge child and family needs.

Reliable estimates of the need for afterschool programs are a critical element in the development of both short- and longer-term strategic plans for local communities. Cities have utilized several different approaches in assessing local needs:

- While analyses of program waiting lists, such as that undertaken by PASE, are likely to understate the extent of need in the community, they remain one of the simplest and most easily understood measures of the number of children who are unable to gain access to afterschool services.
- In Baltimore, the number of enrolled students from low-income families (as reflected in the number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches) has also been used as a general indicator of the level of need for publicly-supported afterschool programs.



- A city-school district partnership in Fort Worth sought to obtain a more direct measure of afterschool needs by surveying parents throughout the city and analyzing their responses.

Other strategies for municipal leaders interested in assessing afterschool needs can include partnerships with area United Way agencies and local colleges or universities that may have access to community data of various sorts.

Use survey and “mapping” techniques to create an inventory of resources.

To collect data on local programs for young people, some communities have adopted Community YouthMapping, developed by the Academy for Educational Development's Center for Youth Development and Policy Research. Community YouthMapping provides a well-organized framework within which youth themselves can canvass and map the neighborhoods in which they live. YouthNet, a local non-profit agency in Kansas City, Missouri, used this technique to gather basic information about all youth agencies in the city as part of a needs assessment effort.

Other communities have employed written surveys or phone calls to gather the necessary information. In Baltimore, for example, officials collected a fairly comprehensive set of data (covering an estimated 90 percent of afterschool program opportunities) primarily through phone calls. In Philadelphia, the survey instrument was a mail questionnaire followed up with phone calls; 800 of the 1,200 surveys were returned.

Look for partners in survey design, data collection, and data analysis.

Another key consideration is deciding which organization will collect, analyze, and house the data. City agencies and individual non-profit organizations often do not have the additional personnel to take on this task. In addition, turf issues can arise over who has ownership of the information. To resolve these issues, the leadership team working on afterschool issues in Fresno, California, is jointly developing a web page that will be hosted by a local non-profit organization, with each of the partners linking to the page. Partners in this broad-based initiative include the Mayor's Office of Education, city school district, county school district, department of parks and recreation, and community-based and faith-based organizations.

Once stakeholders have determined what information should be gathered and how it will be used, an important next step is

to scan the community to see if anyone has already attempted to glean this information. If this is the case, the community might want to build on the information already gathered. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the leadership team that is working to expand afterschool programs decided to build its data collection on the existing databases established by the local United Way and another non-profit agency. Other strategies may include connecting with local United Way organizations for information or working with a local university.

Explore multiple uses of compiled data.

Once a database is established, it is critical that the information reaches both the target audience and the larger community. Several communities have used the following tools to communicate their findings to the public:

Internet: Philadelphia, Seattle, and New York City have websites that allow community members to search for information about afterschool programs in their neighborhoods or near schools in which their children are enrolled.

Kiosks: Detroit set up a YouthMapping Prevention Kiosk in community centers, an interactive online directory where residents can find out about afterschool and other youth programs in their neighborhoods.

Phone banks: In San Francisco and Boston, the needs assessment data was used to create telephone information lines for youth and their parents. Staffed by trained young people, these services (Youthline in San Francisco and Boston Youth Zone) provide easy access to information about activities for children and youth during non-school hours while also responding to a broad range of other inquiries and requests for help.

Printed material: New York City and Seattle also publish resource guides or directories that are broadly disseminated throughout the community. Seattle has distributed a print version of its database to every elementary and middle school student.

Investigate options for sustaining assessment efforts over time.

One of the primary challenges facing cities as they set out to track opportunities for youth is finding ways to continue to update and provide access to their databases over time. Initial funding may support the creation of the database, but the database will be of no use if the information is not updated periodically.

One of the soundest strategies to ensure sustainability is to allocate resources to create a permanent position charged with this responsibility. Officials in Little Rock, Arkansas, for example, are developing a position in city government to collect and maintain data on afterschool and other youth development programs.

In addition to hiring of staff, cities are using other strategies to keep their data complete and up-to-date. In Philadelphia, for example, the database manager distributed handbooks to all programs that responded to an initial survey. Organizations that did not respond to the survey but received copies of the handbooks asked to be included in future databases. Philadelphia also has a full listing of out-of-school programs on its website, along with an online form that allows new programs to input their information.

Examples

Baltimore, Maryland

As a starting point for local data collection efforts, the Family League of Baltimore and the Baltimore Office of Children, Youth, and Families identified roughly 100 organizations that had previously applied for afterschool funding. This list was supplemented with information from the parks and recreation department, the United Way, the Police Athletic League, and the school district. Initially, basic information (e.g., location, hours of operation, staff contacts) was gathered via telephone calls from these organizations about services to youth during non-school hours. These data have been used to identify neighborhoods where few programs are available.

The Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center is expanding the database by surveying the identified afterschool programs. The Child Care Resource Center has found the data collection to be a challenging process due to low response rates, despite the fact that they are working from an existing list of providers. A future strategy will require more intensive telephone follow-up.

Lessons learned from Baltimore

- Initial data collection is easier when there is an established relationship between the organization requesting the information and the one providing it.
- Data gathering efforts should build upon existing databases compiled by local funders or other organizations, such as the United Way.
- Front-end planning to make data collection more thorough and systematic pays off down the road by facilitating data analysis.

- Geographic information system (GIS) maps are very popular. If organizations know that a map of the community will be created, they are often more willing to provide information about their programs.
- Convening existing providers is an effective way to advertise data gathering efforts, while also garnering more support from afterschool program providers.

Grand Rapids, Michigan

A coalition led by the Grand Rapids Office of Children, Youth, and Families has developed a community afterschool coalition with 118 different stakeholder groups. A subcommittee of 16 individuals representing 12 different organizations was appointed to develop a survey and identify afterschool programs in Grand Rapids. After reviewing surveys already used in different communities, the committee created its own survey and sent out more than 700 copies to identified providers. To increase public awareness of the data collection tool, the committee developed public service announcements and worked with local television and radio stations to get the spots on the air.

Once the information was gathered, the City of Grand Rapids developed several strategies to give community members access to the database, including: securing a commitment from the *Grand Rapids Press* to produce a booklet on the database; creating a website that will display the information by neighborhood; and working with the United Way on the launch of a “first call for helpline” where any community member wanting information about community resources for children and youth can dial 211.

Lessons Learned from Grand Rapids

- Cities should use the media to raise awareness about a survey before disseminating it to afterschool providers.
- It is important to include local foundations in your survey efforts, since foundations may fund programs that were not initially identified to receive a survey.

New York, New York

To launch its initial data collection effort, the Partnership for Afterschool Education (PASE), a non-profit collaborative of afterschool providers – including city funded and operated – in New York City, mailed surveys to the 700 afterschool providers in the organization’s existing database. This database was eventually expanded to 1,700 afterschool providers as PASE reached out to other



organizations with their own databases. Initial response rates were very low, prompting PASE to move to a phone banking system to complete the data collection.

Once the information was compiled, PASE found that parents had a difficult time using it. In response, PASE partnered with a New York City government agency to print hard copies of the database. These guides were distributed to parents by community-based organizations. Many parents have found the printed material to be more convenient than conducting an internet search.

Lessons learned from New York

- Make use of existing databases through national organizations such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, city agencies that fund programs, local funders, the United Way, and school-age care associations.
- Make surveys short and simple. Do not ask questions that front-line staff cannot answer. The survey will not be complete if the staff member who opens the survey has to ask the director or site coordinator for answers.
- Actual identification of afterschool programs is the most challenging component of the data collection. It can be very technical and may require outside assistance.

Seattle, Washington

The City of Seattle initiated its data collection efforts by using information from existing lists from the Child Care Information and Referral Service, the public library system, and School's Out Washington, a local non-profit dedicated to expanding the number of afterschool programs in King County. The first survey mailing received a high response rate: over 50 percent. With follow-up phone calls, the response rate reached 80 percent.

The goal of the data collection is to provide parents with a resource list of afterschool programs in their community. Seattle chose not to use GIS maps both because of the expense and because the database and printed materials were determined to be most helpful to parents.

Lessons learned from Seattle

- Maps are not essential to conduct a needs assessment. Seattle – and other cities (e.g., Charlotte, North Carolina) – opted against GIS mapping because of the additional cost and found that developing a database of afterschool programs was sufficient for its needs.

- Databases that allow each community-based organization to update its own information may run into problems with high staff turnover. Moreover, the host organization quickly loses editing power over the database.
- Building relationships with the schools is a helpful way to market the afterschool programs in the database. The Seattle Unified School District distributed copies of the afterschool programs database to students and families.

Washington, Georgia

In 1991, rural Wilkes County, Georgia, became a “Family Connection” Community, as mandated by state law. The Georgia Family Connection Partnership is a public-private partnership created by the State of Georgia and funders from the private sector. Each county was to establish a community collaborative to work to improve the conditions of children and families. In Wilkes County, a new nonprofit – Family Connection – was created to become the decision-making body for children and families within the county.

One of the initial efforts of Family Connection in Wilkes County was to assess the community's investment in children and youth activities. Through a mini-grant from the City of Washington, Georgia, Family Connection employed the “spot-mapping” technique, which uses available public data to identify which areas have the highest crime, lowest income levels, and greatest number of students involved in risky behaviors. Wilkes County's assessment showed clearly that certain areas within the City of Washington lacked services for youth during non-school hours. In particular, the “spot-mapping” effort identified five high-risk areas where the county created five neighborhood afterschool centers targeted to at-risk youth. These afterschool centers focus on literacy and recreation. Centers are located in housing projects (3); a church (1); and a parks and recreation center (1).

Lessons Learned from Washington, Georgia

- In a small rural community, it takes less effort to identify areas in need of afterschool programs.
- Rural communities need to be creative in identifying space and sustaining afterschool programs. In Washington, the youth attending afterschool programs have a yearly fundraiser making and selling picnic tables. The proceeds go to supporting the program.



Resources

City Contacts

Baltimore

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Grand Rapids

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New York

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Seattle

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City of Seattle Department of Human Services
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Washington, Georgia

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Organizations/Websites

Academy for Educational Development, www.communityyouthmapping.org

Forum for Youth Investment, www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Publications

Forum for Youth Investment, Moving an Out-of-School Time Agenda Task Brief #10; Mapping, Monitoring, and Research, available at: <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/grasp/taskbrief10.pdf>

National League of Cities, Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, Expanding Afterschool Opportunities Action Kit, available at: http://www.nlc.org/nlc_org/site/files/reports/afterschool.pdf

The recommendations presented in this paper are drawn from a three-year project, *Municipal Leadership for Expanded Learning Opportunities*, sponsored by the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. Through this initiative, the Institute has worked intensively with municipal leaders to expand the number and improve the quality of afterschool programs in the following eight cities: Charlotte, North Carolina; Fort Worth, Texas; Fresno, California; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Indianapolis, Indiana; Lincoln, Nebraska; Spokane, Washington; and Washington, D.C. The Institute's work has been made possible by the generous support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.



(Example of Survey)

Partnership for After School Education (PASE) Agency Mapping Survey

We at PASE are publishing a directory to enhance the sharing of information and resources among youth organizations, schools, parents, practitioners, and funders throughout New York City. This directory will be available through schools, CBOs, and other neighborhood partners, and will help promote collaboration between agencies, provide a wider knowledge of services to communities, and help develop effective planning and policy issues important to the afterschool arena.

Please answer for your site only, except where noted otherwise.

1. **Which of the following best represents your organization?** (Check only one.)
 Arts Literacy Youth leadership Multi-service Other (please specify): _____

2. **What types of afterschool programs does your site offer?** (Check all that apply.)
 Arts/Cultural Community Service Recreation/Sports Intergenerational Homework Help/Tutoring
 Conflict Resolution Literacy & Reading Enrichment Counseling/Group Work Math & Science Mentoring
 SAT Prep & College Counseling Job Preparation/ Career Training Computer GED ESOL
 Youth Leadership/ Peer Education Health Education (HIV/AIDS/Substance Abuse/Pregnancy Prevention)
 Other _____

3. **How does your site identify itself? (Please check only one)**
 School-based Faith-based Community-based Sub-contractor (e.g., “programs for hire”)
 Other _____

4. **What times of the day, days of the week and times of the year does your site operate afterschool & youth programs?** (check all that apply)
 a) **School Year**

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>day</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Monday | <input type="checkbox"/> Tuesday | <input type="checkbox"/> Wednesday | <input type="checkbox"/> Thursday | <input type="checkbox"/> Friday | <input type="checkbox"/> Saturday | <input type="checkbox"/> Sunday |
| <i>afternoon</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Monday | <input type="checkbox"/> Tuesday | <input type="checkbox"/> Wednesday | <input type="checkbox"/> Thursday | <input type="checkbox"/> Friday | <input type="checkbox"/> Saturday | <input type="checkbox"/> Sunday |
| <i>evening</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Monday | <input type="checkbox"/> Tuesday | <input type="checkbox"/> Wednesday | <input type="checkbox"/> Thursday | <input type="checkbox"/> Friday | <input type="checkbox"/> Saturday | <input type="checkbox"/> Sunday |

 b) **Does your site offer programs during the summer?** Yes No

5. a) **On average, how many youth does your site serve per day?** (Please answer for each age group and, again, *ONLY* for your site)
 (Students Served)

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Elementary Age:</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 – 24 | <input type="checkbox"/> 25 – 49 | <input type="checkbox"/> 50 – 74 | <input type="checkbox"/> 75 – 99 | <input type="checkbox"/> 100 – 149 | <input type="checkbox"/> 150 – 199 | <input type="checkbox"/> 200 – 250 |
| <i>Middle School Age:</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 – 24 | <input type="checkbox"/> 25 – 49 | <input type="checkbox"/> 50 – 74 | <input type="checkbox"/> 75 – 99 | <input type="checkbox"/> 100 – 149 | <input type="checkbox"/> 150 – 199 | <input type="checkbox"/> 200 – 250 |
| <i>High School Age:</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 – 24 | <input type="checkbox"/> 25 – 49 | <input type="checkbox"/> 50 – 74 | <input type="checkbox"/> 75 – 99 | <input type="checkbox"/> 100 – 149 | <input type="checkbox"/> 150 – 199 | <input type="checkbox"/> 200 – 250 |

 b) **Under present conditions, can you serve more youth at your site?** Yes No *If yes, how many?* _____
 c) **Do you have any youth on a waiting list?** Yes No *If yes, how many?* _____

6. **Does your agency operate afterschool programs in multiple sites?** Yes No *If yes, how many?* _____
 Please list the names of those sites: _____

7. **Who is the person PASE should contact for more information at your site?**
 Name: _____ Position/Title: _____

