

AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING IN COLORADO



NEEDS ASSESSMENT HIGHLIGHTS

Structured, enriching activities for children during the out-of-school hours – particularly high-quality after-school programs – can play a valuable role in preparing them for living, learning and working in a changing world. Studies have shown that good after-school programming is associated with better grades, school attendance, emotional adjustment and social skills. Combined with evidence that unsupervised time is a risk factor for involvement in problem behaviors such as delinquency, violence and substance use, it is clear that comprehensive after-school programming is an essential component of efforts to promote learning and social development for children of all backgrounds.

In Colorado, as in most states, opportunities for young people to engage in activities during out-of-school hours come in various shapes and sizes – from intramural sports, scouting, 4-H clubs and church-sponsored youth groups, to school- or community-based programs focused to varying degrees on academic enrichment, remediation

and/or the prevention of problem behaviors. Programs also reflect the diverse needs of youth with ethnic, gender, geographic, socioeconomic and cultural differences.

But access to affordable, comprehensive after-school programs – well staffed and structured, blending learning and social development, and operating on a daily basis throughout the school year – remains both limited and uneven for the estimated 250,000 Colorado children between the ages of 5 and 17 who are unsupervised in the hours after school.

The Colorado Trust recently set out to learn more about the state of after-school programming in Colorado, and to help identify both priority needs and specific areas requiring increased attention and support. This report summarizes the results of a survey of 101 youth-serving agencies – supplemented by interviews with 50 individuals involved in after-school programs – in five regions of Colorado: Front Range, southern, western, mountain and northeastern.

KEY FINDINGS

Communities and schools in Colorado are, by and large, working collaboratively in a climate of limited resources to optimize after-school programs and services for young people.

In Colorado, as in other states, schools and communities increasingly see themselves as partners – not competitors – in meeting the demand for after-school programs. Fueling this trend is growing recognition of the benefits such collaborative efforts can produce – stronger connections between families, schools and communities; more-strategic and efficient use of resources; and enriched educational experiences and opportunities for children of all backgrounds.

Of the programs surveyed, 60% are located and administered in public schools – typically in collaboration with community youth-service agencies, universities and/or other partners. Other major providers of after-school programs include YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, religious organizations and private schools.

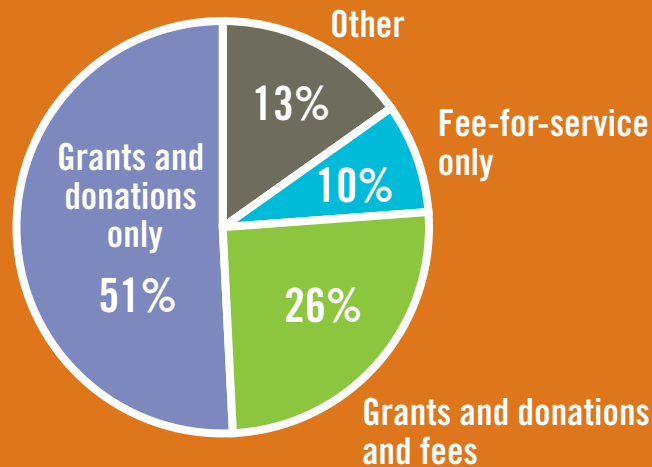
After-school programs vary widely in scope, format and emphasis. At one end of the spectrum are highly structured, five-day-a-week programs focused broadly on encouraging and supporting academic and social development. At the other end are assorted activities and services available on a less regular basis or designed around specific needs, interests or priorities – ranging from providing tutoring and homework help, to reducing delinquency, violence, substance abuse and other problem behaviors.

Despite an upsurge in after-school options in recent years, the survey results point to a number of troubling gaps:

- Survey respondents estimated they are currently serving no more than one-quarter of the children in their communities who might participate in after-school programs and activities, and 60% reported having to “turn away youth because of a lack of resources.”

- Access to well-run, affordable and convenient after-school programs is most limited for low-income, ethnic minority and rural families and children.
- In particularly short supply are programs and services capable of meeting the needs of immigrant and non-English-speaking families. One in three agencies surveyed said they serve significant numbers of Spanish-speaking-only families, and struggle to recruit and retain bilingual and culturally-competent staff.
- The overwhelming majority of after-school programs focus on elementary and middle school students. Many survey respondents noted a growing need for constructive, engaging after-school activities for older youth.

How Are After-School Programs in Colorado Funded?



Although public and private support for after-school programming has grown markedly in recent years, it still falls significantly short of needs.

In Colorado, more than 13,000 rural and inner-city children a year participate in programs supported by federal 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) grants. But there is a large gap between the number of Colorado schools that have received grants (26 over the past six years) and the number whose applications have been turned down (40 last year alone).

Nongovernmental support is limited, too, and highly variable – short-term foundation or corporate grants, cash contributions, donated space or materials, and the like. Many survey respondents cited problems arising from the

reduction or loss of grant support, ranging from significant gaps in programming to employee layoffs.

A large majority of respondents said they viewed increased state and federal support as crucial to the survival, stability and growth of after-school programs in Colorado, particularly in high-need communities.

At the same time, a significant number of respondents acknowledged that the kind of after-school programs and services needed – and the extent to which demand exceeds supply – needs to be more systematically analyzed and documented at the local level. By more carefully assessing their needs and mapping their assets, communities, schools and service providers can improve their ability to not only secure funding, but also to use their resources more strategically.

Schools, communities and youth service agencies need technical assistance, training and support to improve the quality and accessibility of after-school programming.

A large majority of survey respondents listed the following as areas emphasized in their programming: cognitive and social skills-building, citizenship training, creativity, emotional development, educational commitment and achievement, healthy lifestyles and understanding the consequences of risky behavior.

But the survey also revealed that many after-school programs lack a clear, well-defined framework – and, in many cases, amount to little more than an assortment of loosely connected activities and opportunities. Few programs track student outcomes or conduct comprehensive evaluations.

These findings suggest a need for providing schools and communities with resources and tools that enhance their ability to plan, develop and implement comprehensive, high-quality after-school programs.

At the same time, most after-school program providers need training and technical assistance

to expand their capacity to deal with the increasingly diverse needs of Colorado families and children.

Transportation and program hours, for example, are key issues for parents whose work schedules make it difficult to pick up children at a specified time each day. Many families cannot afford even modest program fees. It is particularly crucial to find better ways of reaching out to, engaging and supporting immigrant and non-English-speaking families. Parents may lack the language skills or confidence to act as effective advocates for their children; or they may be apprehensive about contact with schools and other public agencies, fearing it will lead to the identification of problems or shortcomings in their children.

Program providers also need information and training to help them do a better job of recruiting and retaining bilingual staff, and incorporating multicultural education and activities into their programming. Some after-school programs provide time for cultural activities such as arts and crafts, storytelling, folk dancing and traditional celebrations, which give children from different ethnic groups the opportunity to learn about and appreciate one another's traditions and rituals.

Adult volunteers play a vital role in after-school programming. But finding ways to connect with parents – without adding to their burdens – remains a major challenge for program providers.

Although roughly two-thirds of survey respondents reported involving parents and adult volunteers in their programs, parents' role typically was limited to performing routine tasks, providing transportation and "other assistance as needed." Only 25% of participants said parents were involved in program planning, direct supervision, teaching, tutoring, mentoring or fundraising. Indeed, the majority of respondents reported that adult volunteers were more likely than parents to be involved in such activities.

Successful after-school programs provide a range of options for parent involvement, from supervising children's homework at home and attending conferences at school; to volunteering in the classroom, organizing events and helping with fundraising efforts; to being actively involved in program planning, design and oversight.

Successful programs create an environment in which the needs and concerns of diverse families are recognized and supported, and their active participation is encouraged and valued. Various strategies and tools can be used to enhance communication and foster collaboration, including newsletters, open houses, orientation sessions, bi-lingual staff and family-centered activities.

CONCLUSION

A consistent theme in the survey and interviews conducted for this report was the increasingly urgent need to make after-school programs more widely available, affordable and accessible in Colorado, particularly in high-need communities. Too often, access to such programs is most limited for the very children and families – those with economic and educational disadvantages – who might benefit from them most.

Of course, an increased number of programs doesn't necessarily translate to higher quality programs. Planning, design and implementation must be purposeful, strategic and informed by systematic, ongoing analysis of needs, priorities and available resources. Program goals should be clearly

defined, and strongly reflected in the activities and services provided. The performance, progress and impact of programs should be monitored and evaluated, and providers should be encouraged to make greater use of strategies and practices with demonstrated effectiveness.

Finally, increasing the availability and quality of after-school programs hinges on developing adequate, stable funding. Just as important, schools and communities should be encouraged to work together in designing, developing and building support for comprehensive, culturally-appropriate high-quality after-school programs. A collaborative approach is the most likely to produce good results: more-strategic and efficient use of resources; stronger connections between families, schools and communities; and enriched educational experiences and opportunities for children of all backgrounds.

The Colorado Trust is a grantmaking foundation dedicated to advancing the health and well-being of the people of Colorado. Within this mission, one of The Trust's main goals is to provide resources to strengthen families by addressing the needs of children and youth. The Colorado Trust's five-year (2000-2005), \$11 million After-School Initiative has served more than 12,000 4th-9th graders across Colorado. The Colorado AfterSchool Network (www.coloradoafterschoolnetwork.org) also receives support from The Colorado Trust.

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