

A person in a black t-shirt and shorts is performing a handstand in a large, brightly lit gymnasium. The person is wearing a white cap and has their arms extended horizontally. The background shows large glass doors and a polished floor.

Joining Forces

By Danette Parsley and Sarah LaBounty

PREVIEW

Connecting after-school and in-school programs enhances learning and supports social, emotional, and physical development.

Flexible after-school time is ideal for involving parents and offering parent education.

Enrichment activities, such as field trips or community mentors, increase students' background knowledge and support classroom performance.

“Breakdancing has made me want to go to school more, so I can actually go to breakdancing after school. Breakdanc[ing] made me meet new people, and I just talk more. I talk to people. I practice every day. Like, it’s made me feel more confident.” —Robert, eighth-grade student (WGBH, n.d.a)

Robert’s after-school breakdancing class made a big difference in his education. Not only did he actually go to school more, but he also made new friends and gained confidence. For Robert—whether he recognized it or not—the after-school program meant much more than just having fun and dancing. It opened a new door to learning.

School leaders can maximize after-school activities to support the development of the whole student by working closely with after-school program leaders to create a shared vision and cohesive plan for addressing student needs. Such a plan must capitalize on the strengths of the after-school environment—flexibility, longer blocks of time, and opportunities to build relationships and connect with families—and augment what is being done during the school day. The plan should stem from research about ways to positively affect student achievement.

Influences on Student Achievement

Marzano (2003) identified 11 factors that positively influence student achievement. Those factors can be divided into three categories: school-level practices, teacher-level practices, and student-level characteristics. School-level practices involve school policies and initiatives; teacher-level practices are classroom practices directly under a teacher’s control; and student-level characteristics are related to students’ background.

Schools can use these school- and teacher-level practices and student characteristics as a framework to focus their improvement efforts. Interestingly, Marzano (2000) found that school- and teacher-level influences account for only 20% of the variance in student achievement and that student-level characteristics account for an astounding 80%. To have a more profound impact on student achievement, school leaders must attend to the student-level characteristics, and after-school programs are one way to target students’ home environment, background knowledge, and motivation.

Home Environment

Educators have no control over many aspects of the home environment, but working with parents is one way to tackle

the challenge. Specifically, educators can affect three factors of the home environment: parents’ communication with their child about schoolwork, parents’ supervision of their child’s homework, and parents’ communication of their expectations for academic achievement (Marzano, 2003). After-school programs have at least two means to influence these factors: providing parent education and creating a “home away from home” for students.

Intentionally designed after-school programs often include a strong parent education component. Programs that provide deliberate avenues for parent involvement and education can enhance student achievement and support the school’s efforts. For example, Project GRAD, a national program that works with low-income high school students, employs staff members whose job is to help parents take a more active role in their children’s education by improving their communication with classroom teachers. ASPIRA, a national program that supports Hispanic youth, helps students and parents set academic and personal goals. They also provide support for reaching these goals, such as workshops for parents to learn the skills they need to advocate for their children.

After-school programs also provide students with formal adult support outside of the regular school day. Often, working parents are not available immediately after the school day ends. After-school programs give students somewhere to go that fosters positive relationships as well as learning. Staff members oversee homework and provide such resources as instructional support, books, and computers. They also have the opportunity to talk with students about what they are learning in school and communicate their high expectations for the students’ success. Many high school programs also help students define their life aspirations and map ways to work toward them. These supports complement the efforts of the school day.

Background Knowledge

Educators cannot overestimate the importance of students’ background knowledge on their academic achievement. According to Marzano (2004), “What students already know about academic content is one of the strongest indicators of



Free After-School Tool Kit

The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, has designed an online training tool kit to give after-school program directors and instructors the resources they need to build fun, innovative, and academically enriching activities that not only engage students but also extend their knowledge in new ways and increase their academic achievement. This free staff development resource is built on promising after-school practices in literacy, mathematics, science, the arts, technology, and homework help. You can visit the tool kit, which contains video clips of Robert's breakdancing club and the School of the Hearts, at www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits.

how well they will learn new information relative to that content" (p. 1). In other words, the more students know about the world around them, the more likely they will be able to succeed in the classroom. Methods for enhancing students' background knowledge include direct academically oriented experiences (e.g., field trips, mentoring, service learning); virtual experiences (e.g., online field trips, reading), and vocabulary instruction (Marzano). Although schools and teachers can use the last two strategies without difficulty, the first strategy, providing direct experiences, requires more resources—time, money, and staffing—than are often available. After-school programs, on the other hand, often have the flexibility to provide a wide range of direct experiences.

After-school activities give students and staff members the flexibility and time to participate in such activities as field trips to museums, art galleries, and local businesses. Students' exposure to these environments gives them a scaffold on which to build further learning. Providing these experiences is particularly important for low-income students, who typically have less access to such experiences (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Virtual field trips are

also a great way to expose students to new environments relatively inexpensively. With a computer and a high speed Internet connection, students can visit the Egyptian pyramids at Google Earth, investigate the science of skateboarding at the Exploratorium.edu, or watch an Elephant Seal in action at NationalGeographic.com—no buses, no parent monitors, and no boxed lunches required.

Mentoring and service learning, other common after-school practices, provide ways for the community to become involved in building students' background knowledge. Pairing students with professionals from the community allows students one-on-one time with an adult who can help them gain academic background knowledge. For example, Mentor Portland—a program in Portland, OR—provides mentors for adolescents who are in foster care or who have an incarcerated parent. The student-mentor pairs participate in such activities as going to the beach, riding horses, and rock climbing while building relationships, developing new knowledge, and setting high expectations.

Motivation

Motivation is key to students' academic success, and engagement in

after-school activities can benefit students during the school day. For example, if not for breakdancing after school, Robert might not even be attending class regularly during the day. One way to inspire students is to give them inherently engaging tasks: tasks that connect to the real world, engage their interests, enable them to make choices, and are open-ended.

For example, at the School of the Hearts after-school program in Syracuse, NY, high school students create their own movies, which requires them to write scripts, develop characters, design and create costumes and sets, choreograph the action, and film. Their teacher noted, "What makes the kids so eager to come back every year is the fact that they know they're invested in the project that they made, that they created, and [that] they pretty much control" (WGBH, n.d.b).

Pulling It All Together

Principals can provide leadership by helping in-school and after-school programs join forces to support the development of the whole student and by fostering a shared vision between in-school and after-school programs that recognizes (and takes advantage of) their unique roles. Principals can also facilitate opportunities for regular meetings between in-school staff members (e.g., the school improvement team) and after-school staff members to conduct joint planning. Activities might include:

- Sharing data-based patterns of students' strengths and areas for growth.
- Setting specific goals for improvement that align after-school program efforts with the school's improvement goals.
- Discussing research-based strategies for improvement. For example, how can in-school and after-school staff members work

together to improve student achievement by attending to students' home environment, background knowledge, and motivation?

- Identifying measures to assess progress toward goals.
- Developing plans for communication and collaboration (e.g., communicating about individual student progress between in-school and after-school staff members and cofacilitating family nights).
- Identifying professional learning needs and strategies to support collective goals.

At their best, after-school programs enhance youth development with enrichment opportunities—arts, crafts, homework help, sports, and recreation activities—and support academic development with challenging activities that connect to (but do

not repeat) what students do in the classroom (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005). Maximizing the strengths of the after-school environment and connecting its goals to the school's will help leaders meet the needs of the whole student and motivate that student to dance, to meet new people, to come to school each day, and to set goals and attain them. **PL**

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