

## PROMISING APPROACH # 4

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### **Offer Activities for Youth in Youth-friendly Spaces within Existing Public Buildings**

Many schools and community-based organizations around the world have created programs to form youth-friendly spaces—also referred to as out-of-school time (OST) or after-school programs. These programs offer safe places in which young people can enjoy supervised and productive activities, enhance their academic achievement, and develop positive relationships with adults and their peers.<sup>1</sup> While OST programs vary, they all share the primary goal of preventing and/or greatly reducing the likelihood of young people engaging in risky or unproductive behavior. Additional goals of OST programs include reintroducing participants to learning, helping them to continue their education or to find employment, connecting them with their communities, strengthening families and communities, fostering youth leadership, and helping them to acquire life skills. OST programs can take many forms, but the most effective programs usually consist of a mixture of academic, cultural, and recreational activities to both teach and engage young people. Sponsors of OST programs include schools, community-based organizations (CBOs), faith-based organizations, youth-serving organizations, local governments, and volunteer groups. Although the costs of this kind of program vary, using existing infrastructure, such as schools, helps to keep costs low.

#### **How Do Youth-friendly Spaces Reduce Risky Youth Behavior?**

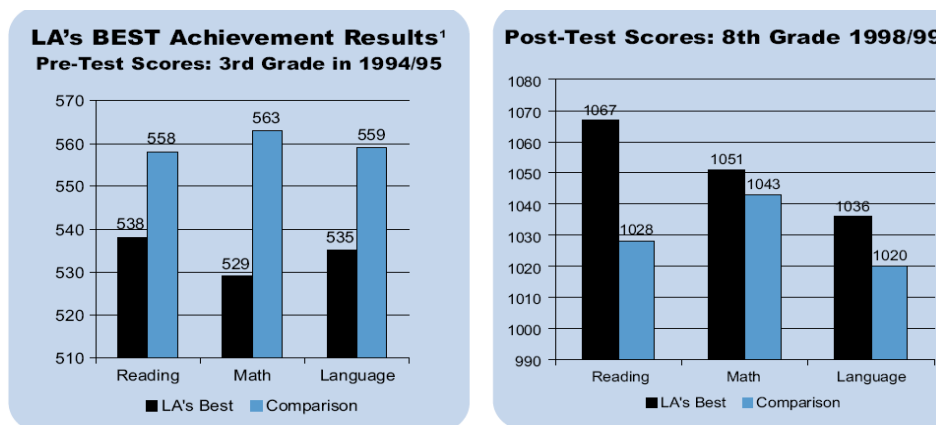
OST programs add productive time to a young person's day, not only by giving him or her chances to learn new skills but also by reducing the chances that he or she will engage in negative and/or risky behavior, which might have occurred had the young person been inactive or unsupervised. These programs are based on two ideas. First, they attempt to mimic or improve upon the environment created by school by providing structured activities that are led by caring adults. This kind of environment and adult support are both thought to reduce all kinds of risky behavior by young people, ranging from a greater propensity to remain in school, to safer sexual practices, to less violent behavior. Furthermore, they increase positive self-image and self-esteem, promote positive social development, and improve interpersonal skills among young people. All of this lessens the likelihood of young people engaging in risky behavior.<sup>2</sup> Second, research in the United States has shown that most risky behavior by young people takes place during the after-school hours, typically between 3 and 5 p.m. When young people are provided with structured activities in a supervised environment, they are less likely to have the time to engage in activities that can be harmful to themselves or others. In addition to these benefits, many programs focus on encouraging specific kinds of positive behavior, such as academic activities, homework support, and problem solving. These programs may have an even greater impact on academic achievement and school attendance than a program that, for example, focuses on sports.

#### **Research Findings: Providing the Evidence Base**

Research has demonstrated that young people who are not supervised during after school hours are much more likely to use alcohol, drugs, and tobacco; engage in criminal and other risky behavior; do poorly in school; and drop out of school than those who have participated in after-school programs that provide constructive activities supervised by caring and responsible adults.<sup>3</sup> Although very few rigorous evaluations of the impact of after-school programs have been carried out to date, particularly in developing countries, the available evidence does show that these programs have had some success in reducing risky behavior among young people and increasing their employability. Brazil's *Open Schools/Abrindo Espaços* program, which provides a combination of academic, athletic, cultural, and work-related activities for young people after school and on weekends, was able to achieve a 60 percent reduction in community violence, as well as

reduced rates of sexual aggression, suicide, substance abuse, theft, and armed robbery, in the participating state of Pernambuco.<sup>4</sup> In Macedonia, spending time in community-based, youth-friendly spaces (*Babylon Youth Centers*) that provide nonformal education activities, including life skills training, contributed to the reduction of violent behavior among young people, making them more employable than those who participated less or not at all in those programs, as well as more active citizens.<sup>4</sup> The *Boys and Girls Clubs* program in the United States, one of the longest-running after-school programs in the country, offers academic assistance, cultural enrichment, drug and alcohol prevention, life skills training, mentoring, parent and community involvement, and sports and recreation. Evaluations found that this program has reduced delinquent behavior, increased academic achievement and career aspirations, and improved attitudes toward school among participating young people.<sup>6</sup> New York City's *Beacons* program, which is made up of community centers located in public school buildings, offers activities such as recreation, adult education, free after-school childcare, leadership development, parent support groups and counseling, social services, and educational enrichment. An evaluation has shown that young people who participated in *Beacon* sites that provided higher-quality youth development activities were significantly less likely to report that they had cut classes, hit others to hurt them, deliberately damaged other people's property, stolen money or other property, and/or been in a fight.<sup>7</sup> An evaluation of LA's *BEST*, an after-school program that provides a safe environment, educational enrichment programs, and recreational activities primarily to minority students and young people from low-income families, showed how a cohort of LA's *BEST* students began third grade scoring below their peers in the comparison group but completed eighth grade scoring higher than their peers (see figures).

### Test Results of LA's BEST Participants and Non-participants in Third and Eighth Grades



Source: American Youth Policy Forum 2003.

In designing these programs, it is important to remember the potentially adverse impact that at-risk youth can have on each other's behavior. This was a lesson learned by the *21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers* program in the United States, which included as participants over 1,000 children and young people mostly from low-income and high-risk backgrounds. An evaluation of the program showed that young people who participated in the program demonstrated higher rates of risky behavior, school suspensions, and disciplinary actions than those who did not participate in the program. The evaluation found that these negative results were due to the fact that the program included only at-risk young people. If programs are open to all young people, then this makes it impossible for the participants to define themselves collectively as "deviants" and acting out on the basis of that identity. Another factor in the program's failure was not providing enough structured activities that offered opportunities to learn skills and interact with adults in a positive setting, instead of simply providing a space for young people to hang out. The program also lacked properly trained staff who could act as mentors and could appropriately monitor the program's participants.<sup>8</sup> Active supervision by adults who can monitor behavior and serve as mentors is key.

## Moving Forward: Factors for Success

- *Involve young people in the design, organization, and implementation* of events, especially recruitment.
- Provide fun but *highly structured activities, always supervised* by a caring adult.
- Hire *high-quality teaching staff* who are truly committed and trained to work with at-risk youth and who use interactive, youth-led, and relevant teaching methods.
- *Partner with CBOs, juvenile justice agencies, law enforcement, and youth groups* for making referrals and sharing information.
- *Involve family and community members* in program activities to strengthen family and community life, which can lead to improved outcomes for at-risk youth.
- *Create a strong partnership with faculty and staff of nearby schools* and coordinate the curriculum of the after-school program with the curriculum taught during the day.
- To avoid deviant peer contagion, *open the program up to all young people*—not just at-risk youth—because a group made up only of at-risk youth can come to define its collective identity in terms of deviance and continue behaving in accordance with that identity.
- Try to *avoid including younger children in the same group or class as older at-risk youth*, because those who are younger are more susceptible to engaging in risky behavior.
- Ensure that *programs targeted toward older children have a different focus and different methodologies than those geared toward younger children*.

### Endnotes

1. American Youth Policy Forum. 2006. "Helping Youth Succeed Through Out-of-School Time Programs." American Youth Policy Forum, Washington, D.C.
2. American Youth Policy Forum 2006.
3. American Youth Policy Forum 2006.
4. World Bank. 2007a. "The Promise of Youth: Policy for Youth at Risk in Latin America and the Caribbean." Unpublished report. World Bank, Washington, D.C.
5. World Bank. 2007b. Implementation Completion Report (ICR), Macedonia Children and Youth Development Project. World Bank, Washington, D.C.
6. Arbreton, A., J. Sheldon, and C. Herrera. 2005. "Beyond Safe Havens: A Synthesis of 20 Years of Research on the Boys & Girls Clubs." Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, PA.
7. American Youth Policy Forum. 2003. "Finding Fortune in Thirteen Out-of-School Time Programs, A Compendium of Education Programs and Practices." American Youth Policy Forum, Washington, D.C.
8. Dodge, K.A., T.J. Dishion, and J.E. Lansford. 2006. "Deviant Peer Influences in Intervention and Public Policy for Youth." *Social Policy Report* 10(1). Society for Research in Child Development, Ann Arbor, MI.

<b>Key Implementation Considerations</b>	
<b>Anticipated Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger self-image</li> <li>• Increased self-esteem</li> <li>• Positive social development</li> <li>• Improved interpersonal relationships</li> <li>• Greater involvement of families and communities in the education of at-risk youth</li> <li>• Less risky behavior</li> </ul>
<b>Secondary Effects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater engagement in learning</li> <li>• Increased school attendance</li> <li>• Increased academic achievement</li> <li>• Better student behavior</li> <li>• Acquisition or augmentation of skills</li> </ul>
<b>Responsible Agency/Actor</b>	Schools, CBOs, faith-based organizations, youth-serving organizations, local governments, or volunteer groups
<b>Targeted Risk Group</b>	Types I, II, and III
<b>Target Age Group</b>	12–18
<b>Examples of Cost per Beneficiary</b>	United States: Between US\$10 and US\$32 per youth/per day, excluding the cost of space (2005) <sup>a</sup>
<b>Necessary Initial Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership and coordination with faculty and staff of local schools</li> <li>• Partnership with CBOs, juvenile justice agencies, law enforcement, and youth groups (recruitment)</li> <li>• High-quality staff</li> </ul>
<b>Specific Examples &amp; Level of Effectiveness (Strong Evidence and Emerging Evidence)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• United States: <i>Boys and Girls Clubs</i>—Strong evidence (<a href="http://www.bgca.org/">http://www.bgca.org/</a>)</li> <li>• United States (New York City): <i>Beacons Program</i>—Strong evidence (<a href="http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/services-afterschool-beacon.html">http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/services-afterschool-beacon.html</a>)</li> <li>• United States: Los Angeles' <i>BEST (Better Educated Students for Tomorrow)</i>—Strong evidence (<a href="http://www.lasbest.org">http://www.lasbest.org</a>)</li> <li>• Brazil: <i>Abrindo Espaços/Open Schools</i>—Emerging evidence</li> <li>• Macedonia: <i>Babylon Youth Centers</i>—Emerging evidence</li> </ul>
<b>Issues to Consider for Replication and Sustainability</b>	Preventing the potential influence of risky behavior among at-risk youth requires opening the program to young people of all risk types, backgrounds, and needs.

Source: a. Public/Private Ventures 2005.