Sustaining Quality After School Programs: Practical Recommendations from the Field

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Importance of this Issue to Schools, Families and Communities

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Study after study is finding that quality and comprehensive after school programs help address a variety of needs of children, families, schools and communities, but sustaining the funding is a serious challenge.

The mounting evidence about the importance and impact of quality after school programs helps in arguing for funding. For example, Fight Crime Invest in Kids (1999) found that the hours 3 to 7 PM had the highest youth crime rate during the school week. In their annual public opinion poll, the Afterschool Alliance (2002) found that voters see after school programs as key to keeping kids safe and helping them learn. A number of large scale after school programs around the country have found key components of after school programs that seem to work and make a positive difference: California's After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program (ASLSNPP) (University of California-Irvine, 2001), LA's Best (Better Educated Students for Tomorrow) (Huang, Gribbons, Kim, Lee, and Baker, 2000), The AfterSchool Corporation (TASC) (Policy Studies Associates, Inc., 2000), Foundations, Inc. (Author, 2003), and Extended Service Schools (ESS) Initiative (Grossman, Price, Fellerath, Jucovy, Kotloff, Raley, and Walker, 2002).The Harvard Family Research Project (July, 2003) summarizes positive results from many after school programs from several points of view.

However it takes more than growing evidence to sustain funding. Often local after school programs get started through a successful application submitted by a group of concerned educators, parents and community groups to a state or federal program. If the proposed local program is ranked high enough, a grant is awarded to help the program get started or to expand services. But the funding for the application is rarely for more than 3-5 years.

To keep local after school programs going forward in strong, positive ways necessitates staying power so that families, children, teachers and the community can count on them being available year after year. Clearly, they need to be sustained. Federal and state funding are critical to starting up programs, but they are notoriously fickle, particularly in tight budget times, and cannot currently be viewed as a constant source of funding for individual local programs.

To keep the programs going forward year after year in a local school or through a school-community partnership requires serious sustainability plans and thoughtful actions.

What should be in the plans? What should be the actions? How do you create the environment in the schools and community to sustain quality afterschool and summer programs? How should these sustainability plans and actions be put together and activated?

With the rapid ramp-up of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers across America, many educators and nonprofit leaders in communities of all types have been grappling with the above questions and many more. The time line of the initial grants was only 3 years so hundreds of afterschool leaders from the school, community and nonprofit sectors have been searching for strategies for sustainability.

What better people to ask about sustainability of funding and support for after school programs than a sample of 21st Century grantees from around the country? That is exactly what we did.

FINDINGS

The grantees were asked to give advice in two ways. First, they were asked to rate eleven commonly recommended sources of funding and resources for sustaining after school programs. Second, they put in their own words three recommendations of what providers of after school programs should do to keep their program going forward when their main source of funding was about to run out.

The grantees were sampled at random from 21st Century Community Learning Centers in16 states (see Appendix A for methodologies). Thirty-one grantees voiced their opinions and suggestions about how to sustain after school programs.

Findings:
Local Grantees' Rating of Sustainability Strategies

The grantees were asked to rate eleven commonly suggested strategies for sustainability. They could rate the suggestions from 10 to 1, with "10" being critical "1" being nice, and "5-6" quite important. Table One summarizes the ratings given by 21st Century Grantees to the eleven possible strategies for sustaining after school programs.

First Finding: None of the eleven suggested strategies for sustainability were rated below "4.9 out of 10." In other words, all eleven were rated better than "nice" and at least "quite important."

Second Finding: Two suggestions were considered most important (roughly a rating of "9 out of 10"), with their ratings approaching statistical significance:

- In kind resources from a school district (e.g., space, supplies), and
- A half-time coordinator paid for by the school district.

Third Finding: While not rated statistically higher than five of the remaining strategies, "a meaningful contribution from a local foundation" (a rating of 7+ out of 10) is worth noting as is "financial support from the city or county government" (a rating of approximately 7).

Fourth Finding: The following suggestions were considered to be quite important (a rating of approximately 5-6 and were not statistically different from one another):

- A sliding fee or volunteer hours supplied by parents,
- College work-study students and college volunteers,

- A specific portion of a person's time donated by two or three youth serving organizations (e.g., Y, Boy's and Girl's Club, 4-H),
- Cultural groups daily supplying artists and music instructors, high school students doing community service every week,
- A corps of senior citizens who help every week.
- High school students doing community service every week.
- One of the items partially funded by the United Way.

Table 1.   Importance of After School Sustainability Strategies

Strategies Rated by 21st Century Grantees	*Ratings (10 highest; 1 lowest)*
In kind resources from a school district (e.g., space, supplies)	9.4
A half-time coordinator paid for by the school district	8.7
A meaningful contribution from a local foundation	7.5
Financial support from city or county government	7.0
College work-study students and college volunteers	6.9
A sliding fee or volunteer hours supplied by parents	6.5
Cultural groups daily supplying artists and music instructors	6.1
High school students doing community service every week	6.1
A specific portion of a person's time donated by two or three youth-serving organizations (e.g., Y, Boy's and Girl's Club 4-H)	6.1
A corps of senior citizens who help every week	5.7
One of the items partially funded the United Way	4.9

(See Appendix B for statistical analyses.)

> **What do the grantees recommend in their own words
> to sustain quality after school programs?**

The grantees were asked to give their best ideas of how to sustain after school programs when funding was scheduled to end. Specifically they were asked:

You are invited to advise the key players in an after school program that is half way through a three-year grant. What are the first three " things" you would tell them to do to keep their program going and in a quality way after the three-year period?

A wide range of responses and ideas resulted from this question and real-life scenario. The ideas and recommendations can be organized into three categories:

1. Create a Quality Program Coupled with Constant Outreach
2. Collaborate and Develop Win-Win Partnerships
3. Identify and Build a Portfolio of Funding

To provide the full flavor and in-depth nature of the survey responses, the specific words of advice from the grantees have been organized into three general strategies (Tables 2,3, & 4).

Table 2.   Ideas to Create a Quality Program and Outreach Campaign_____

General Approach	*Specific Actions*
Demonstrate to your school board and administration the importance of the program.	
	Show them the better grades, lower discipline referrals and better attendance.
Make program users, families, and lead staff aware of the program quality and funding fragility.	Make sure that the superintendent and board believe in the program.
	Garner the support of the participants' parents to advocate for and recruit support from others.
Have expected outcomes, measure them, and report them loudly and often to everyone touched by the program.	The main teachers/mentors in the program must be real advocates for the program.
	Get name out into the community-splash newspapers with events and successes, and by "word of mouth."
	Publicize your successes through newsletters, VIP visits and testimonials.
Balance academics with fun and enrichment.	Craft an evaluation system that allows you to showcase your results ex- 70% of kids have improved reading skills.

	Build relationships with the regular school staff, be organized and continue looking for best practices with them.
Provide engaging activities.	

Table 3.   Strategies to Collaborate and Build Win-Win Partnerships

General Approach	*Specific Actions*
Form a partnership with local government	Work directly with city and county officials to gain support for the programs.
	Form partnerships with local governments together with businesses, civic organizations and parent groups.
Develop strong community collaboration	Focus on providing services for partners (*you have the students and the space)*, don't initially look at costs or expenses—look at providing them with what they need to accomplish their missions and goals—and then ask them to help with your objectives.
	Speak with local community agencies (community-based and faith-based organizations) to help support and fund program, from the beginning.
	Be visible in your community, the more people who know about the program, the more likely it is to be funded.
Have a developed group of volunteers to help staff	Aggressively recruit volunteers and bring in guest speakers.
	Make sure that the staff/volunteers are of high quality and train them.
	Form a 20% club at each site- this means bring in 20% of volunteers per enrollment per campus (site). An example would be if you have 200 students participating-you would need 40 volunteers to meet your goal. .
Continue/enhance relationships with colleges/college age students.	Work with local high schools and colleges to recruit students to earn service and internship hours and help with the program.

Table 4.   Methods to Develop a Portfolio of Funding Support_____

General Approach	*Specific Actions*
Start Early	Start looking for new funds and begin application processes for new funding now!
	Begin with philosophical buy-in of potential partners and gain financial support later.
Take time to do asset mapping and to list possible partners.	Early on, have all partners find funds to replace any they received from the grant.
	Form a sustainability task force committee to work on alternate funding ideas.
	Get students involved in asset mapping to support the program and it's development.
	List possible partners such as community agencies, county extensions, colleges, cultural and arts organizations, youth groups, kinships, senior citizen groups, law enforcement, civic and faith-based groups.
Charge a reasonable fee	Identify existing funding sources that can be tapped (e.g., Title I in schools, Child Development Block Grants, state grants) in local entities and school district programs.
Recognize all kinds of resources and invite all kinds of contributions	Get parents involved by having a small fee for tuition, using a sliding scale for families with more than one child in the program.
	Develop a fee schedule by researching local providers and considering family income.

Incorporate new players into the initiative.

Access Title I Supplemental Services or State Intervention funds for academic support and couple them with outside
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collaboration for enrichment, supervised recreation and art and music opportunities.

Engage city, school, and county to partner in solving funding problem.

Discussion, Summary and Conclusions

This "voices from the field" survey adds to our understanding about what actions and approaches have the most promise in sustaining funding for after school programs. While there is no one definite answer for sustainability of after school programs, the 21st Century Community Learning Center grantees from around the country give us some clear pathways, partnership building strategies, and resources that can potentially lead to success.

These voices from the field report that sustaining a quality after school programs requires multiple sources of financing. We found that all of the strategies that were suggested in the survey were rated at least " quite important," although some of the suggestions were considered to be more important than others. Not surprising the top four rated suggestions can provide the core funding to operate a sustainable afterschool program. Those suggestions are:

- In kind resources from a school district (e.g., space, supplies),
- A half-time coordinator paid for by the school district,
- A meaningful contribution from a local foundation, and
- Financial support from city or county government.

The remaining seven strategies can provide the quality elements, the enrichment components and the extra hands and hope to make the afterschool program successful and they were all basically rated the same. They are:

- A sliding fee or volunteer hours supplied by parents.
- A specific portion of a person's time donated by two or three youth serving organizations (e.g., Y, Boy's and Girl's Club, 4-H).
- Cultural groups daily supplying artists and music instructors.
- High school students doing community service every week.
- College work-study students and college volunteers.
- A corps of senior citizens who help every week.
- One of the items partially funded by the United Way.

In addition to ranking a list of funding strategies, the grantees were asked to give their best ideas for maintaining after school programs when funding from a grant was scheduled to end. They tended to recommend a set of very helpful actions which could broadly be organized into the following three overall strategies:

1. Create a Quality Program Coupled with Constant Outreach

2. Collaborate and Develop Win-Win Partnerships
3. Identify and Build a Portfolio of Funding

The overall strategies and specific actions recommended are each important in their own right, but also interconnected. For instance, the respondents suggested that the manner in which the individuals and groups being approached for funding and support is important. Clearly, partnerships and collaboration seem to have the most potential. They explain how essential it is to have collaboration and support both in and outside the schools. For example, the suggestions range from "demonstrating to your school board and administration the importance of the program to getting volunteers."

When these resources are tapped and mobilized for support appears to be important, too. Starting early is a key. It takes time to build trust and collaboration. So beginning very early and often to seek funding and partners is recommended. Win-win partnerships are critical.

Getting and constantly communicating positive results are important, too. Quality programs matter, both for achieving good results for children and families, but also for holding on to and securing new funding. For example, the respondents urge "getting your name out into the community and having expected outcomes." The grantees also suggest that the popularity of after school programs among parents, students and teachers often is not mobilized and shared with the broader community and decision makers, but should be.

Several people who reviewed the findings felt strongly that one area that was understated was the importance of private philanthropy and foundation fundraising. This is not surprising given that many after school directors may have little experience in this area and it is really hard work. Perhaps partnering in a significant way with a non-profit group and even at times having them be the lead partner may help with sustainability by raising funds from sources not typically tapped by schools or after school programs.

The bottom-line is simple. If an after school program is operating on one grant and with out involving partners in and outside the school, this program will most likely terminate out when the grant runs out. That is sad! Practitioners in the field tell us it doesn't have to be that way.

After school programs can be sustained and improved, but this doesn't happen easily or by accidentally. Besides taking much more aggressive actions to sustain their programs locally, they and others interested in quality afterschool programs should be strong and continuous advocates working for increased funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers at the federal government level. State governments should also be pushed to begin or expand their funding for quality after school programs and community learning centers.

In conclusion, we found that the suggestions and advice that we received could be useful in helping maintain after school initiatives beyond the initial funding period from one grant. We found it beneficial to have 21st Century Community Learning Center grantees from around the country offer their advice and hope that it will provide useful information in sustaining funding and support for other after school programs.

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Appendix A- Methodologies

Questions

The survey that was sent out contained two sections for grantees or their representatives to fill out. It was first field-tested in California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota in a small group setting and the results were used from these grantees as well as those randomly sampled.

The first section asked grantees to give a score from "10 to 1" to some commonly suggested sources of finances and "people power" to sustain quality after school and summer initiatives. A score of "10" means that it is critical. A "5" or "6" means that it is "quite important." A "1" means that it is "nice" to have. The suggested sources that were rated are as follows:

- In kind resources from a school district (e.g., space, supplies).
- Financial support from the city or county government.
- One of the items partially funded by the United Way.
- A sliding fee or volunteer hours supplied by parents.
- A specific portion of a person's time donated by two or three youth serving organizations (e.g., Y, Boy's and Girl's Club, 4-H).
- Cultural groups daily supplying artists and music instructors.
- High school students doing community service every week.
- A meaningful contribution from a local foundation.
- College work-study students and college volunteers.
- A corps of senior citizens who help every week.
- A half-time coordinator paid for by the school district

The second section gave the grantees a scenario. Here is the situation: <u>you are invited </u>to advise the key players in an after-school program that is half way through a three year grant. "*What are the first three "things" you would tell them to do to keep their program going and in a quality way after the three-year period.*"

Sampling

To gather data a total of approximately 200 surveys to 21st Century grantees around the country, randomly chosen from 16 states. States from which we received surveys included**:**

- Alabama
- Arkansas
- California
- Colorado
- Connecticut

- Nevada
- New York

- Florida
- Georgia
- Illinois

- South Carolina
- Texas
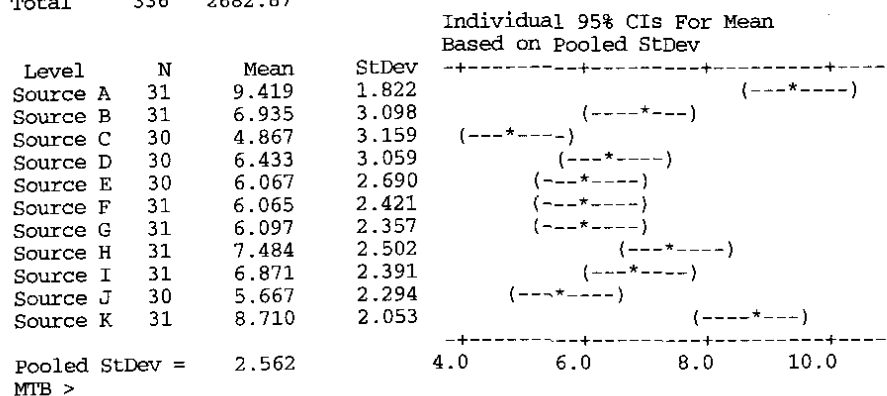- Utah

- Vermont
- Washington
- Wisconsin

The number of sites that returned surveys totaled 31, which gave us about a 15% response rate. While the sample is intended to give a snap shot of ideas, the sampling and return procedures were not intended to represent a national representative sample. However, we periodically ran one-way analysis of variance on the 11 items in the survey to detect differences in the ratings as the responses were returned. There was only minor shifting in averages and standard deviations. While this doesn't substitute for a larger sample, it does suggest the order of priority is probably fairly close to what would be obtained from a larger sample and higher return rate.

The surveys from the 21st Century grantees came from people that worked for the school district, with a few exceptions such as volunteers or a person working with a youth serving organization. In compiling the answers to the open-ended question about what to do if funding was running out, we analyzed all responses. For the numerical data, if we had numerous surveys from the same town or city, we used the one from the project coordinator or if the coordinator did not respond, averaged the surveys from the site.

Appendix B- Statistical Information

One-Way Analysis of Variance

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Analysis of Variance
Source      DF        SS        MS         F         p
Factor      10     543.89     54.39      8.29     0.000
Error      326    2138.98      6.56
Total      336    2682.87
                                    Individual 95% CIs For Mean
                                    Based on Pooled StDev
  Level      N      Mean      StDev    -+---------+---------+---------+-----
Source A     31     9.419     1.822                              (---*----)
Source B     31     6.935     3.098                     (----*---)
Source C     30     4.867     3.159       (---*----)
Source D     30     6.433     3.059              (---*----)
Source E     30     6.067     2.690           (---*----)
Source F     31     6.065     2.421          (---*----)
Source G     31     6.097     2.357          (---*----)
Source H     31     7.484     2.502                 (---*----)
Source I     31     6.871     2.391              (---*----)
Source J     30     5.667     2.294        (---*----)
Source K     31     8.710     2.053                       (----*---)
                                    -+---------+---------+---------+-----
Pooled StDev =      2.562          4.0       6.0       8.0      10.0
MTB >
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- Source A- In kind resources from a school district (e.g., space, supplies).
- Source B- Financial support from city or county government.
- Source C- One of the items partially funded by the United Way.
- Source D- A sliding fee or volunteer hours supplied by parents.
- Source E- A specific portion of a person's time donated by two or three youth serving organizations (e.g., Y, Boy's and Girl's Club, 4-H).
- Source F- Cultural groups daily supplying artists and music instructors.
- Source G- High school students doing community service every week.
- Source H- A meaningful contribution from a local foundation.
- Source I- College work-study students and college volunteers.
- Source J- A corps of senior citizens who help every week.
- Source K- A half-time coordinator paid for by the school district.