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Attracting and Retaining Middle School Youth Participants  
in Afterschool Expanded Learning Programs:  
A Descriptive Case Study

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Michelle Renee Perrenoud

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2015

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Attracting and Retaining Middle School Youth Participants  
in Afterschool Expanded Learning Programs:  
A Descriptive Case Study

by

Michelle Renee Perrenoud

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Co-Chair

Professor Eugene Tucker, Co-Chair

The purpose of this study was to address the problem of low attendance and growing attrition of middle school students participating in afterschool programs. This study centered on youth and practitioner perceptions of the conditions that foster young people's interest, attendance, active participation, and meaningful engagement in middle school afterschool expanded learning programs funded with After School Safety and Enrichment (ASES) and/or 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) grants. A one-size fits all approach to attracting and supporting youth in afterschool programs is ineffective; focusing on understanding and meeting the needs of this adolescent group is an essential component to supporting and sustaining their attendance. Three elements were found to be keys in fostering enrollment and continued

attendance for youth in these programs: (a) alignment between what matters to youth and the content of the activities and program; (b) thoughtful staff recruitment and development processes; (c) meaningful collaboration and shared decision-making between staff and students.

Youth and staff involved in these programs described environments, experiences, and activities in which young people were active, both mentally and physically, and engaged in tasks that were meaningful, varied, involved learning, and supported their mastery. Interesting experiences and wide-ranging tasks were favored over routines and conditions that discouraged young people's desires to participate and learn in the hours outside of school. Their perceptions provide insight into three frameworks on effective engagement practices with middle school adolescents during afterschool programs: (a) Convergence of Mattering: A Youth Perspective-Centered Model; (b) Validity of the Learning Experiences Continuum and Process, and (c) Participation-Involvement-Engagement (PIE) Continuum. These frameworks illustrates a shift from traditional approaches of addressing categories in isolation to the connectedness of categories and a confluence of contributing factors, and their relationship to a quality learning experience that further drives attendance by validating and meeting students' expressed needs and interests. Moving students along a continuum from participation to involvement and to the ultimate goal of full engagement is a recommended goal for programs. Reviewing the implications and implementing the recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers will strengthen middle school afterschool programs thus helping to alleviate the attendance crisis.

The dissertation of Michelle Renee Perrenoud is approved.

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2015

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the middle school students attending the afterschool programs and staff members working at each of the sites in which this research study took place, and to the District and Organization leaders who said “yes, let’s learn something together”. Thank you for your courage to participate and your desire to make middle school afterschool programs stronger.

I also dedicate this work to all of my former students working as capacity builders in the field of afterschool and expanded learning programs. Although you called me teacher, I was the one who was learning. Thank you!

Finally, I dedicate this work to my mother and father, Linda and Terry Perrenoud, who first taught me the value of having an education and the importance of critical thought and the pursuit of life-long learning.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Like no other state in the nation, California leads in the financial provision of federally- and state-funded afterschool programs serving students in grades K–12 with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (California Department of Education, 2012a) and After School Education and Safety (California Department of Education, 2012b) grants. Its investment in this area is concentrated in schools in low-income neighborhoods with the greatest needs (Lee, 2010), serving 4,446 schools and over 450,000 students daily in 2015 (CDE-ASD personal communication, May, 2015). In the continuum of afterschool services, from elementary school to middle and middle to high school, there is current concern regarding a statewide attendance crisis of middle school students, grades sixth to eighth including ages 11 to 14, participating in these programs. Some believe this trend is due to a lack of interest while others believe the youth of this age have many alternate choices of activities during the hours after school. Still others believe that young staff members who are not experienced in working effectively with this specific age group need targeted professional development, or that program requirements need to be revamped to allow for developmentally innovative opportunities that support the growth and achievement of students. No matter the reason for this attendance attrition issue, some stakeholders beyond this group believe funding should be reallocated to meet more pressing attendance needs in afterschool services for students who are younger or older than these middle grades.

Middle school afterschool programs are recognized as a safe, supervised environment in the hours after school, and the benefits of these programs extend far beyond simply having a safe place to go (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). These programs, also referred to as expanded learning

opportunities, work with schools, families, and communities to help keep youth engaged in learning (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). Sustaining the interest of middle school youth in learning is particularly critical. The connection to school in the middle school years is essential to students' success as they transition to ninth grade and beyond, especially considering nearly one in four students fails to graduate from high school on time (Balfanz, 2009).

Research indicates that regular participation in quality expanded learning opportunities can help keep teens on a positive academic trajectory and support their successful promotion, graduation, and transitions into college and/or careers on time (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). According to the Little, Wimer, & Weiss (2008), "a decade of research and evaluation studies, as well as large-scale, rigorously conducted syntheses looking across many research and evaluation studies, confirms that youth who participate in afterschool programs can reap a host of academic, social, prevention, and health benefits" (p. 2). The Harvard researchers found "powerful evidence" demonstrating the effectiveness of afterschool programs that achieve sustained participation, offer quality programming, and feature strong partnerships (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008, p. 10).

### **Background of the Problem**

Within the field of afterschool programs, middle school is arguably where the largest challenges in practice occur. Although there are many types of out-of-school learning opportunities and activities available to middle school youth, most service providers share similar challenges and concerns when trying to attract and retain the attention and engagement of this age group (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Middle school students named the top two barriers to their participation in afterschool programs as disinterest/boredom and the desire to relax with

friends as opposed to learning more (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Many afterschool programs have not yet found the mix of right ingredients to engage this age group (Halpern, 2002).

Originally, low attendance was thought by some to be a symptom of middle school students being fickle (Halpern, 2002), and that with time, these funded programs would find the right ingredients to recruit, engage, and retain participants. However, diminishing attendance has become a problem that can no longer be considered simply adolescent fickleness. Attempts have been made to alter the formula with little success. Even with programmatic changes, attendance, including frequency and duration, continues to lag, which suggests these programs are not engaging to the young people they are meant to serve. In order to build attendance and retention, which in turn will assist students in personal growth and academic development, we must identify what can be done to meet the interests and needs of students in this age group while also meeting grant requirements of the programs.

The primary concern at the provider level is the transition students confront between elementary and middle school, and again between middle and high school, and the unique developmental needs faced in these transitional periods. Indeed, in addition to facing increasingly demanding academics, middle school students are dealing with the challenges of meeting social and developmental benchmarks as they transition from elementary school and then later into high school. “Afterschool programs can provide an avenue for helping them successfully navigate these challenges while building skills necessary for academic success, learning to get along with others, and fostering positive attitudes toward community and school” (Jones, 2008, p. 20). Afterschool programs can make a difference in a variety of additional ways according to the Search Institute (2009), including keeping kids off the street and away from negative peer influence; preventing them from falling behind academically and keeping them on

track for graduation through tutoring and homework assistance; and keeping them engaged and excited to come to school and afterschool by offering career skills, community service opportunities, and enriching activities like music, dance, and theater, which are increasingly being squeezed out of the regular school day.

While organized programs provide many developmental opportunities, the benefits are only realized when students go beyond simply attending to become psychologically engaged in activities (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Programs can help keep students healthier through recreation and good nutrition; they can also promote positive youth development by providing strong relationships with adults, a sense of belonging, leadership opportunities, and other developmental assets that are associated with success in school and avoidance of problem behaviors. While these supports lie within an afterschool program, staff cannot help until young people come through the door. In order to get students through the door, programs must first appeal to their interests, and students must be personally motivated to cross over the threshold.

### **The Context of Afterschool Programs**

The hours just after the final school bell rings are the peak time for juvenile crimes and risky behaviors, including alcohol, tobacco, drug use, and sex (Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center found that youth who do not spend any time in afterschool activities are 49% more likely to have used drugs, and they are 37% more likely to become teen parents. Youth are also at a high risk of becoming victims of violence during the hours after school, particularly between the hours of 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. (Lee, 2010). In fact, the highest rate of juvenile crime occurs between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999), the hour after most youth are dismissed from school. Researchers estimate that every dollar invested in afterschool programs saves \$2.50 in crime-related costs (Lee, 2010).

Moreover, participation is related to outcomes including higher rates of school attendance and lower dropout rates; improved attitudes toward school; stronger connections with adults and peers; improved health and ability to make healthy choices; and more opportunities to learn about and choose college and career options (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). In spite of these benefits, participation in afterschool programs remains relatively limited.

### **National Context**

There are more than 12 million children in grades six through eight living in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Nearly 2.2 million participate in an activity during the hours just after school, 3.7 million are unsupervised (in their own self-care) after the school day ends, and the remaining 6.1 million are reported to be in the care of a parent or guardian (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Nearly 3.2 million youth who are not participating in programs after school report they would attend an afterschool program if it were available to them.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative is the only federal funding source within the U. S. Department of Education dedicated exclusively to afterschool programs. Of the 2.2 million middle school youth participating in afterschool programs, only 1.4 million are able to benefit from participation in a 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC-funded afterschool program across the nation (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). These findings are sobering, and when coupled with low attendance in programs by the youth these programs are intended to serve, the link suggests that program design and quality need to be examined. By examining program design and quality of these programs, staff can better meet the needs and interests of youth further maximizing students' attendance and participation in currently funded programs. The nation continues to have much work to do to meet the needs and interests of this unique age group.

## **California Context**

Afterschool programs across the country provide critically-needed expanded learning opportunities to our nation's children and families (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). California voters and policymakers have recognized the need for afterschool programs, and the state leads the nation in commitment and financial investments (Afterschool Alliance, 2014b). Through primarily state funding and substantial support from the federal government, more than 450,000 students each day at more than 4,400 elementary, middle, and high schools in nearly every county statewide are offered safe, constructive programs and activities (California AfterSchool Network, 2013). California taxpayers currently invest a groundbreaking \$550 million per year in After School Education and Safety (ASES) K–8 afterschool and summer programs (voter approved initiative Proposition 49). Add in the \$19 million federal 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funding for K–8 programs and the \$24 million for 9–12 programs, and California supports more publically funded Expanded Learning Programs than all other 49 states combined (Afterschool Alliance, 2014b; Lee, 2010).

As impressive as this investment may be, the state faces attendance worries. In fiscal year 2012–2013, there were 1,079 ASES and/or 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funded middle school programs in the state of California; of these programs, 300 (nearly 28%) faced fiscal reduction due to low attendance (CDE-ASD personal communication, April, 2013). This is the most recent data documenting ongoing and recurring voluntary and involuntary funding reductions made to programs serving middle school youth. This is the fifth consecutive annual report from 2008/2009 through 2012/2013.

The lack of sufficient student attendance in afterschool programs is problematic because grant reduction processes are required by California Education Code (EC) Section 8483.

Specifically, EC Section 8483.7 requires that the California Department of Education (CDE) reduce grant awards for program sites if, in the most recent year (excluding the first year of the grant), attendance is less than 75% of the targeted attendance level, or, in two consecutive years, participant attendance is less than 85% of the targeted level. The lack of sufficient attendance is an overarching issue for additional reasons, as some stakeholders make assumptions about what the lack of attendance could mean regarding the needs and desires of middle school students for afterschool programs. For example, some may assume that these programs are not needed, and that tax dollars should be redirected to other age groups or program types, such as for additional elementary-aged afterschool programs or year-round programming, including summer programs.

In many cases, it is challenging for some stakeholders to recognize other mitigating issues driving low attendance data. As an example, in some cases grantees may be viewed “not-in-good-standing” because the programs are not able to earn minimum program attendance annually. This can make the programs appear unable to attract youth to attend, further supporting the assumption that federal and state funds set aside for middle school afterschool programs could be used in other ways. The school sites that the afterschool programs serve may lack ample instructional day enrollment to draw sufficient student participation into the afterschool program. Specifically, they may not have enough students to meet the afterschool grant attendance requirements so that programs can remain in grant compliance with a rating of “good-standing.” This example, based solely on the lack of afterschool program attendance as the assumed problem, has little to do with knowing whether middle school students are interested in the program or find it appealing or engaging, or whether it provides a quality experience to the students being served. Thus, the idea of redirecting program funds from middle school afterschool programs to other programs, for this reason, is short-sighted; the issue deserves

further exploration.

### **Local Context**

The Los Angeles County Office of Education, After School Technical Assistance Unit represents Region 11 (Los Angeles County) in the provision of technical support for all 2,200 afterschool programs funded with 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC and/or ASES funding. In fiscal year 2012–2013, there were 304 funded afterschool programs serving middle school students and these programs were facing challenges similar to those described above; fiscal reductions impacted 38 (13%) of the 304 sites (CDE-ASD personal communication, April, 2013). Researching how (and if) the experiences and interests of sixth- through eighth-grade students participating in “good-standing” programs inform the development of the most well attended programs would shed light on how to design program activities that make learning meaningful and relevant, and how out-of-school learning can support student engagement.

### **Studying the Problem**

Afterschool expanded learning programs have real potential to enhance students’ academic, social, and developmental success. But to attract middle school youth, programs need to offer experiences for these adolescents that look and feel different from those designed for elementary school children or high school teens (Morehouse, 2009). Deschenes, Little, Grossman, and Arbreton (2010) indicated that attention to developmental differences is critical to the strategies that keep middle school and high school youth engaged in out-of-school programs over time. In addition to tailoring program design for the correct age group, success relies on staff from both the instructional day and afterschool program to carefully and collaboratively plan. In other words, afterschool programs can better support youth development and increase potential for achievement by strategically coordinating the program with the

instructional day as well as uniting with families and community at large (Lauver, 2012).

Research indicates all components of after school programs, including program design, facilitation, engagement practices, and activities, must be appropriately targeted to meet the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of the youth in this age group (National Middle School Association, 2010). The components, which are interwoven with one another, include a wide variety of structures, supports, and materials that most effectively meet the middle school student in all areas of his or her development (National Middle School Association, 2010). It is important to consider the intent of the various concepts, specific activities and programs, and operational features of these programs in expanded learning.

According to the California Department of Education After School Division director, Michael Funk, “Having successfully answered the challenge of scale with the combination of federal- and state-funded afterschool programs, California leaders are focusing attention on ensuring that all afterschool programs offer high quality expanded learning opportunities (personal communication, October 19, 2012). For middle school programs, this may include examining program models and revisiting what activities (both enrichment and academic) are available to students; how these activities are structured; how youth themselves are involved in designing the activities; and what learning outcomes are desired for this group. Questioning whether learning is taking place in informal contexts should no longer be the main focus, but rather the focus should shift to how different programs and contexts contribute to learning over time (Rahm, 2004). To respond to this line of inquiry, researchers are encouraged to begin documenting what it is that young people do in these contexts; how they engage and participate; and how the connections between their joint work with each other and adults are developed and maintained (Vadeboncoeur, 2006). Hollister (2003) further asserted, “A major contribution that

can be made through evaluation studies not aimed at measuring the impact on long-term outcomes is to isolate better strategies for boosting and sustaining participation during this transition and continuing into the middle school years” (p. 21).

I hypothesize that afterschool programs, as informal learning environments, are at their best when they utilize social-emotional learning and youth development along with organized activities to support student learning and personal growth. In such cases, programs may be more appealing to youth and increase their interest to attend regularly while indirectly providing a positive impact on students’ academic achievement. With this hypothesis in mind, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What attracts middle school youth to attend afterschool programs, from students’ and staff members’ perspectives?
2. What activities do middle school youth choose to participate in during afterschool programs and why?
3. In what ways are youth involved in planning activities and selecting materials within afterschool programs?
4. What professional development and prior experiential learning do staff identify as most valuable in preparing them to work with middle school youth in afterschool programs?

### **Overview of the Research Design**

The current study was conducted at ASES-funded middle school afterschool program sites operating in Los Angeles County. Using a list of programs reporting satisfactory attendance as cited by the California Department of Education’s After School Division (CDE-ASD) two afterschool programs were selected as research sites. The research design was

constructed to explore and identify engagement practices and learning environments likely to demonstrate the interests and participation of middle school students that result in desired outcomes, such as higher attendance, retention, engagement, and constructive feedback from students. I administered a descriptive, multi-site case study utilizing observations, surveys, interviews, and focus groups with program staff and students.

### **Significance of the Study**

The results of this study provide evidence that will inform the debate about supporting interests, engagement, and learning for middle school participants and identify the activities and contexts that are promising practices for students' self-efficacy and ownership of their learning. Furthermore, I argue that additional training is needed for practitioners in regard to expanded learning and how to implement the practice in afterschool programs. Beyond simply implementing new practices and adding supports, this practice should be complemented by professional development that will positively affect program design and activities. In addition, I utilize the findings to develop a framework and resources to guide afterschool practitioners in the planning, development, and implementation of a program serving middle school students that is based on meaningful, relevant learning.

I will employ national, state, and county platforms to share the recommendations from the study. On the national front, I will present at the Best Out-Of-School Time (BOOST) conference and 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC conference, both held annually. The BOOST Conference draws over 2,000 instructional leaders and afterschool leaders from across the nation and world. The 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC Conference convenes nearly 1,500 leaders each year. Statewide conferences include the California AfterSchool Network Older Youth Conference and the California Department of Education After School Division Regional Leads convening. These conferences draw multiple

stakeholder groups from within the afterschool field. Locally, within the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) and Region 11, I will offer training and updates to grantees and staff. Additionally, I will share the published works with California Department of Education After School Division, LACOE, and the California AfterSchool Network (CAN) to disseminate to their larger audiences. I will also create and provide live webinars through these agencies.

### **Concluding Statement**

Afterschool programs are a proven strategy for helping to put youth on the path to success. Access to high quality afterschool programs for middle school students is important during this transitional period in life. While access to these programs exists to some extent, they need to be revamped to appeal to and maintain the interests of middle school youth. Discovering how best to serve these students in the hours after school is an essential component of our efforts to support their personal growth and academic achievement and to sustain their attendance, thereby ensuring these programs remain viable.

Afterschool programs that integrate instructional day concepts within expanded learning environments, allowing for real-world application, can be part of a greater solution in helping middle school youth realize the potential of learning. Getting closer to understanding how to effectively meet these young people's needs is pivotal; otherwise, we will continue to fail to adequately address the identified challenges, needs, and interests of this age group, as they potentially seek fewer positive alternatives to fill their time. The question remains if they will distinguish between healthy and unhealthy (or even risky) substitutes during this critical adolescent development stage of their lives and during the discretionary, free-time period after the school bell rings. The goal is to create a scenario where an afterschool program exists and appeals to youth, and they, therefore, make the healthier choice to attend.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

We know that in order for youth to fully benefit from an afterschool program, they must attend, participate regularly, and become psychologically engaged (Larson, 2000).

Unfortunately, there is currently a statewide attendance crisis among middle school students in California's federally- and state-funded afterschool programs (CDE-ASD personal communication, April, 2013) and we need to know much more about the issues in order to address this crisis. While there is an emergent body of research that documents afterschool programs over the past decade and a half, relatively little is known about middle school afterschool programs.

This chapter focuses on the unique and critical role of afterschool programs that are well-suited to provide for the development of young people. Specifically, I examine literature relevant to the issues that frame and challenge middle school afterschool programs. I also focus on the attendance crisis plaguing these programs, which must be addressed in order to develop models of program design, curriculum, and professional development that most effectively meet the desires of youth participants as learners and the needs of program instructors as educators.

The literature review consists of four major sections: (a) the genesis of afterschool programs as they have shifted from a youth development movement to a recognized field of informal education designed to support student achievement; (b) essential components of effective learning in the afterschool context; (c) empirical research on issues related to afterschool learning, particularly the social-emotional aspects of the learning process; and (d) the particular issues that must be taken into account in the design and delivery of effective middle school afterschool programs. Included in this final section is literature covering developmental

characteristics of adolescents ages 11 to 14, factors that affect motivation and engagement in afterschool programs, and evidence of how effective afterschool programs can benefit youth.

### **The Genesis of Afterschool**

It is important to consider the history of afterschool programs in order to understand the critical decision of whether they should be designed to serve the development of the whole child, or to narrowly support student achievement and instructional day academic outcomes, or some to consider alternatively, if a blending of the two. Importantly, the field of afterschool programs is fairly new and continues to shift and be shaped by societal needs (Halpern, 2003). Currently, there is not an existing discipline that defines or bands all youth-serving agencies together, as the afterschool field has not developed as a single formal system of service. Adding to the variables, afterschool programs remain diffuse and flexible in their missions (Halpern, 2004).

Robert Halpern (2003) documented the evolution of afterschool, including the types of programs and the roles they play in the lives of youth. He began by providing evidence from over a century ago of activities taking place in the hours after the school bell rang, to the more familiar afterschool programs that began taking place in communities across the nation in the mid-twentieth century. He has detailed the rationales and objectives of these programs and how they were shaped by prevailing societal ideas about children and youth, and have detailed the relationship between afterschool programs and schools, further analyzing how the programs balanced young people's needs for guidance and supervision with their equally important need for spontaneity and self-expression. Additionally, Halpern has outlined the current directions and expectations for the future of afterschool programs. I draw from these details to provide a synthesis of historical events and overview of afterschool, from its beginning to present day.

Afterschool programs, first recognized as childcare services taking place in the hours after school, have existed in America for well over a century. These services and activities originated as safe places, far from the streets, where young people could gather and play by exploring, learning, and growing together. In their earliest form, agencies and organizations such as the YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, and churches offered organized activities as settings for the development of participating youth. These agencies and activities served as safe havens, built character, and met the social and emotional needs of needy and poor children. Likewise, they served the greater good of society and the wellness of America's children (Halpern, 2002).

Each historical era has brought to organized childcare a plethora of societal issues and prevention strategies for which policymakers and communities have endorsed specialized youth-serving agencies to aid the government, including for work skills development, health and nutrition education, character education, and delinquency prevention. It was not until the 1970s that childcare services began to be seen as a child development institution of public interest, service, and fiscal investment. In the early 1990s, there was a growing interest in understanding and addressing the risks and opportunities youth faced. In 1990, the Carnegie Foundation of New York commissioned a report from key stakeholders, researchers, and scholars that is now considered a seminal document. From *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Afterschool Hours* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992), the “afterschool movement” was borne out of the childcare industry. This report was a first attempt to focus formally on an asset-based approach (Benson, 1998) to working with and serving young people. This approach is meant to draw on the strengths that youth bring with them and to build them up, as opposed to the deficit-based approach of trying to “fix” kids (Pittman, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003). With policymakers' interests and continued public investment, creating and maintaining

afterschool programs soon emerged as a vital interest in schools and communities across the nation.

In this same era, youth development programs offered during the hours after school began gaining popularity. Researchers, policymakers, and funders had high and broad aspirations for these activities to become programs that could improve young people's academic performance, strengthen their social skills, and keep them safe, all while reducing risk-taking behaviors and providing childcare (Halpern, 2003). As originally posited in *A Matter of Time* by members of the Carnegie Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs, "these programs would allow for additional valuable learning time and healthy development with a variety of stimulating, constructive experiences that contribute to preparing young people for today's world and passage to competent, mature adulthood" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992, p. 25).

Halpern (2004) pointed out, however, that in the 1990s, "new constituencies were discovering the afterschool field, and quickly defining it in relation to their own concerns" (p. 2). This action taken by outsiders—of defining the societal ills that afterschool programs could address—was a misalignment for the field, with its unique focus on whole child development. Political pressures and outside forces began to have influence, and the focus of childcare began to migrate from youth development to the elevation of a school's performance through improved student academic achievement. This shift ultimately contributed to the federal government passing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, and to the allocation of just over \$1 billion for the implementation of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) afterschool programs across the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

NCLB required that 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC-funded afterschool programs provide enriched learning activities that complement (not duplicate or extend) learning during the instructional day and at home. The underpinnings of the NCLB–21<sup>st</sup> CCLC programs require afterschool providers to align offerings to boost ailing academic achievement of schools and students, paralyzing efforts to focus on youth development as their primary strategy. All 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC-funded afterschool programs provide the following services to students attending high-poverty, low-performing schools: (a) academic enrichment activities that help students meet state and local achievement standards; (b) a broad array of additional enrichment services designed to reinforce and complement the regular academic program; and (c) literacy and related educational development services to the families of children who are served in the program (California Department of Education, 2012a).

Indeed, a central substructure of NCLB–21<sup>st</sup> CCLC in the field of afterschool was shifting focus from the development of the whole child, which includes social, emotional, and academic learning, to a narrower focus on boosting student achievement and academic outcomes under the federal emphasis of Title 22 focusing on standards-based accountability. While afterschool programming was best known before the 1990s for providing a safe space for kids and opportunities for personal development, “new public and private initiatives created a broader base for afterschool programming in the schools, making providers further susceptible to school-related agendas” (Halpern, 2002, p. 2). The school-related agendas and academic deliverables of increased student achievement and accountability further sidetracked the field from defining, researching, and evaluating its own value-added benefits in development of young people (Halpern, 2002; Wilson-Ahlstrom et al., 2014).

This was seen by some as a “hijacking” of the field of afterschool (Halpern, 2003) when the greater focus should be placed on positive youth development. However, Halpern noted, “traditional providers were nonetheless too diverse, decentralized and perhaps inexperienced in public advocacy to come together to develop the simple, resonant, problem-oriented story-line demanded of a public issue in American life” (p. 2). Based on the findings outlined in *Confronting the Big Lie*, several national leaders from the afterschool field were able to unite and begin addressing appropriate expectations and outcomes, albeit too late to impact the triggering preventative and remedial transference of the NCLB–21<sup>st</sup> CCLC movement.

### **Effective Learning in the Afterschool Context**

Today, there is a call for a revised vision and role for the field of afterschool, focusing less on what youth should learn and more on how youth learn best. Following *A Matter of Time* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992), loosely coupled with afterschool programs becoming part of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the focus remained on academic achievement. As afterschool programs showed only nominal achievement gains and were failing to make measure against improving academic achievement (Halpern, 2000), it became clear nearly a decade later the field of afterschool needed to (re)define its own course. Sam Piha (2010), a pioneer in the field of afterschool, stated:

Afterschool programming is a unique institutional sector that must offer more than safe havens, homework assistance, and recreational enrichment during the hours after school. If afterschool programs are to achieve their true potential, they must become known as important places of learning. Learning that complements, but is distinguished from, the learning that happens at school or home. And more specifically, learning that excites

young people in building new skills, the discovery of new interests, and opportunities to achieve a sense of mastery.

This statement may best encapsulate the potential future and direction of the field of afterschool, especially as it pertains to leadership efforts in California (and the nation) with a focus on quality.

Piha now leads the Learning In Afterschool & Summer (LIAS) Project, which is an effort by afterschool advocates and leaders to unify the field of afterschool and promote effective learning for young people (see Appendix A). Through LIAS, five essential principles were created to define effective learning in afterschool programs. Specifically, learning should: be *active*; be *collaborative*; be *meaningful*; support *mastery*; and *expand horizons* (Piha, 2010). These principles are strongly supported by the growing science of learning and are also based on many other theories, including learning philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (469–322 B.C.), education (Dewey, 1915), social development and self-determination (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985; Duerden & Gillard, 2011), youth development (Pittman et al., 2003), social-emotional learning (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007), and brain research (Sylwester, 1995; Willis 2007). Also, as supported by some of today’s education leaders and scholars, including: Tom Torlakson, Superintendent of Public Instruction for the California Department of Education; Deborah Vandell, Professor of Education and Psychology and Dean of the School of Education at University of California, Irvine; Carol Tang, Director of the Coalition for Science After School; Pedro Noguera, Professor of Education at New York University; Paul Heckman, Associate Dean and Professor at University of California, Davis; Reed Larson, Professor at University of Illinois; and Judy Willis M.D., authority on brain research regarding learning and the brain-- voiced in, *Learning In Afterschool and Summer Project – How Kids Learn DVD (2013)* that although a

nontraditional component of the educational system, afterschool programs can implement these five principles in unique ways to complement traditional school-day learning and learning at home through quality expanded opportunities. Researchers, Piha, Cruz, & Karosic (2012) documented afterschool programs throughout California that were demonstrating the learning principles in action to better help afterschool practitioners learn about practices and how to align their programs.

Essential to the quality of afterschool learning—and central to the LIAS principles—is recognition of the unique setting and the importance of the practitioner’s craft. To be more precise, there are significant differences between subject-based learning in a formal instruction environment, such as school, and learning that occurs in an informal education environment such as afterschool programs. Afterschool practitioners strive to meet young people where they are and as they are while engaging them in a process of learning from a context of the everyday (Batsleer, 2008). Their primary role is as a facilitator of learning, helping young people build connections from what they learn in the instructional day to their real-world encounters. Their work often involves dialogue and conversations—listening and talking with young people and developing genuine and authentic relationships (Batsleer, 2008).

Practitioners can also help students make personal connections and find a safe place for learning that allows them to explore their interests and begin to construct their identities while also growing into their own voices. This connection through conversation between the afterschool program instructor (informal educator) and the young person (learner) conveys a sense of mutual learning through everyday contexts. Learning is not derived from a pre-established standards-based curriculum, but instead occurs because of the immediate significance to those involved.

Likewise, one of the most critical features of high-quality programs—a feature that is necessary to achieve positive outcomes—is high-quality staff. Youth are more likely to realize the benefits of programs if they develop positive relationships with staff, and staff can only build these relationships through positive, quality interactions with youth. Genuine and caring relationships are a critical element in building trust. Without this trust, engagement practices and program activities will fail, and attendance will not be sustained (Perrenoud, 2009).

The practitioner's craft (Cain & Laird, 2011) is arguably the most critical component in the learning achievement. In order to stay ahead of the demands of coordinating with the instructional day, Common Core strategies, youth development, and learner needs, practitioners must have access to and use the most relevant tools of instruction and engagement. This is where the five LIAS learning principles come into play as teaching (pedagogical) elements that set the stage for quality instruction and engagement—every lesson, every activity, every day, and with every young person. What makes these five principles so powerful is the synergy created when the practices are demonstrated as a synchronized routine, at both high frequency and high quality. This body of practice supports the learning performance of learners and creates a learning environment that is especially engaging to young adolescents.

The LIAS learning principles exemplify the level of maturity of the field of afterschool. This maturity has allowed the field to reach a place parallel to current scientific discourse on learning, reflecting common practices supporting how young people learn. Simultaneously, formalized schooling is transitioning towards this effort, and the new Common Core State Standards will assist in this shift. This current shift is moving us towards a merging of the current course and a more familiar pathway of what field practitioners have known to be our authentic purpose. Today, programs are integrating a youth development approach—including

social-emotional learning and the LIAS learning principles—with Common Core State Standards, to further address one of the larger educational issues of our time: the achievement gap.

California leads this charge to advance youth work with the development of practitioner educators and with the continued support of expanded learning programs. Recently, the California Department of Education After School Programs division director, Michael Funk, avowed, “These [LIAS] principles are being used increasingly by California county offices of education and program leaders to further define engaged learning and quality expanded learning opportunities of afterschool programs” (personal communication, October 19, 2012). This convergence of a renewed focus on youth development, concentration on engaged learning, and intentional integration of LIAS learning principles is how field leaders will begin to move comprehensive programs from a focus on grant compliance to the integration of quality standards that develop the whole child while supporting their passion for learning and academic achievement.

### **Empirical Research Related to Afterschool Learning**

Afterschool as a recognized field is relatively new and, as such, the literature reflecting the content and practices is significantly less robust than that related to the instructional day. The empirical work that does exist is diverse in terms of topic, quality, and scope, and there is not yet a comprehensive body of research dedicated to documenting and assessing the practice, efficacy, and promise of nearly decade-old state- and federally-funded afterschool programs. Although the administrators who run these programs are mandated to report specific data to the state and federal governments, neither entity has synthesized this data set in a meaningful way that is publicly accessible. Moreover, most programs collect their own data or hire external

evaluators to design studies focused primarily on grant compliance and program improvement. These data are not empirical in nature nor are they generalizable. Thus, the field of afterschool is in desperate need of empirical attention. More studies are needed about fundamental program aspects, including but not limited to effective program practices, instructional models, and staff development.

Given the lack of empirical research in the field of afterschool, it is critical to examine aspects of other, more established bodies of literature in order to bring them to bear on creating research-based learning practices in afterschool programs. An important first step is to investigate the psychology of how children learn to inform afterschool program development (e.g., program activities, instructional practices). Exploring the literature on the social-emotional aspects (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007) of the learning process will provide useful information for afterschool practitioners as they seek to develop relevant and effective learning opportunities for youth.

### **Social-Emotional Learning**

Due to the rapidly changing world, the role of education and the effect of learning on day-to-day living have undergone permanent changes (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Gardner, 1999). Schools have undergone a great expansion of their accepted mission and are expected not only to educate students, but also to produce competent, caring, healthy and contributing citizens (Greenberg et al., 2003). As such, recognizing how youth learn is becoming as important as valuing what they learn (Piha, 2010). High-quality expanded learning opportunities make a powerful contribution to student achievement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006), and this is where a well-designed afterschool program can link the two concepts.

Combining education with expanded learning opportunities and social-emotional learning is becoming a new standard. Social-emotional learning is often referred to as the “missing piece” (Elias & Arnold, 2006, p. 6; Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013, p. 12), representing a part of education that links academic knowledge with knowledge of specific skill sets. These skills include communication, confidence, or conflict resolution, all of which are “important to student success in schools, families, communities, workplaces, and life in general” (Elias & Arnold, 2006, p. 2006).

Many who work with youth connect and interchange the terms positive youth development and social-emotional learning. Both concepts seek to enhance student resilience by fostering social and emotional competence and by establishing caring environments characterized by high expectations and youth participation. Positive youth development places a greater emphasis on out-of-school, community-based programs, activities, and organizations. At the individual level, beyond social and emotional competency, positive youth development also specifically stresses youth autonomy, nurturing a belief in a positive future, youth voice, youth participation, and youth empowerment.

Social-emotional learning and positive youth development both greatly impact student learning and academic achievement in afterschool programs (as informal learning contexts). Social-emotional learning is the scientific basis for the youth development movement and also serves as the research-based foundation for the LIAS learning principles and focus on how kids learn. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has ushered in one of the most urgent challenges—the need for fostering knowledgeable, responsible, and caring students. Today’s students are faced with unparalleled demands. The focus is now on gaining the skills, attitudes, and values that enable them to

function productively in a diverse and rapidly changing society. It is no longer enough to simply achieve academically (Elias et al., 2007).

School-based prevention and youth development interventions provide the most benefit when they promote the growth of students' personal and social assets while improving the quality of the settings where they learn (Eccles & Appleton, 2002). Vadeboncoeur (2006), in describing support for informal learning contexts, observed:

The increasing attention to and funding of programs that engage youth outside the formal institution of schooling was motivated by a number of overlapping concerns, including a desire to improve school achievement, a commitment to youth safety, and an interest in enrichment programs that offer opportunities for youth to explore and study in the art or sciences, coupled with occasions for social and emotional learning (p. 239).

Moreover, as Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) noted, programs that enhance young people's social and emotional learning skills cover such areas as "self-awareness and self-management, social awareness and social relationships, and responsible decision making" (p. 11).

In the first pivotal book on school-based social-emotional learning programming, *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (Elias, et., al, 1997), scholars drew upon scientific studies, best practices, field observations, and the successful efforts of educators across the nation. From this research, they provided a framework and guidelines to help educators and practitioners design, implement, and evaluate coordinated programming to enhance the social and emotional development of youth during and after school. Similarly, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger (2011) directed a meta-analysis of 213 positive youth development, social-emotional learning, character education, and prevention

interventions. Both reviews looked at the impact of social-emotional learning programs on students' social-emotional learning skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance.

The reviews indicate that social-emotional learning programs: are effective in both school and afterschool settings and for students with and without behavioral and emotional problems; are effective for racially and ethnically diverse students from urban, rural, and suburban settings across the K–12 grade range; improve students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, and positive social behavior; reduce conduct problems and emotional distress; improve students' achievement test scores by 11 – 17 percentile points” (Payton et al., 2008, p. 3).

Durlak et al. (2011) noted that effective programs and approaches are typically “sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (S.A.F.E.)” (p. 4) to achieve skill objectives. In addition, they use “active forms of learning while focusing on the development of specific personal or social skills” (p. 4). The magnitude and scope of these benefits suggest that social-emotional learning programs are among the most successful youth development programs offered to school-age youth. Given these positive findings, (Payton et al., 2008) recommended that “federal, state, and local policies and practices encourage the broad implementation of well-designed, evidence-based social-emotional learning programs during the instructional day and afterschool” (p. 3).

In another meta-analysis, Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) reviewed results from 73 afterschool programs. This was the first meta-analysis to evaluate outcomes achieved by afterschool programs seeking to promote personal and social skills of young people in order to

describe the nature and magnitude of these gains and to identify the features that characterize more effective programs. Data indicated that afterschool programs had a statistically significant impact on participating youth. Participants reported an improvement in self-perceptions, greater bonding to their schools, reductions in problem behavior, and improvement in school grades and academic achievement. The implication is that afterschool programs merit support and recognition as an important community setting for promoting young people's personal and social well-being, growth, and adjustment.

### **Afterschool Programming for Middle School Youth**

Adolescence is a time of enormous potential for learning, as well as a time of continuous transition, change, and growth. Early adolescent learners—specifically, youth ages 11 to 14 years (Erickson, 1963), typically in grades five through eight—are different from the early childhood learners from whose ranks they are emerging (Crocket, 1995). The literature has shown early adolescence to be a highly developmentally specific and critical period for development. Young people are especially vulnerable to initiating or escalating behavioral problems during transitional periods, including the transition from elementary to middle school, and from middle to high school (Ayers et al., 1999). This period of time is often referred to as “early adolescence” (Erickson, 1963), the “rollercoaster years” (Giannetti & Sagarese, 1997), and a “turning point” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). These young people are uniquely experiencing five main areas of growth and development central to this period of time: physical; cognitive; social-emotional; language and communications; and creativity and self-expression. Due to the many and varied changes early adolescents must navigate, these years are a dynamic and confusing stage of life, in which young people deal with

the psychosocial crisis of defining who they are and where they are going in life (Erickson, 1963).

Adolescents need to be appreciated for their individuality, understood for their multifaceted individual dimensions, and recognized as bringing diverse perspectives and experiences to their learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). As such, it is necessary to understand the ideal conditions under which they learn (Beamon, 2001; Lambert & McCombs, 1998). In order for optimal learning to occur, students need to make connections mentally and emotionally with prior knowledge, understandings, and personal experiences (Crawford, 2007; Halpern, Heckman & Larson, 2013). Adolescent learning involves active, collaborative, and meaningful engagement that must be promoted within a supportive setting and appropriate context, with the assistance of other students and adults (Beamon, 2001; Perkins, 1995; Piha, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Considerations in Middle School Programming**

Within the field of afterschool, middle school programs are arguably where the largest challenges in practice occur. Primary causes of these challenges at the site level can be narrowed to attrition in attendance, as well as young staff members who are perceived as inexperienced in working effectively with this specific age group. In an ASES and 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC policy brief, researchers Huang and Matrondola (2012) offered some frequently mentioned obstacles for middle school afterschool programs that included, “youth disinterest and staff perceptions of the troubling attitudes and behaviors of the participants” (p. 5). Fallis and Opotow’s (2003) complex definition of “boring” as a reason to cut class is instructive as we think about young people and their disinterest in afterschool programs:

When students describe something as boring, they are not just describing the absence of something or being disinterested. Upon investigation, they mean something very specific: a one way, top down, unengaged relationship with a teacher [program instructor] whose pedagogy feels disrespectful because it is not designed to “tempt, engage, or include” them. From a youth perspective, boring is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It is the predictable outcome of specific decisions and actions of the teacher [program instructor] and school [afterschool program] (p. 7).

Given that low attendance continues to be attributed to a lack of interesting and appealing activities (as originally reported by U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, in 2003), coupled with the notion that educators have the power to make strategic decisions that affect young people’s learning (Crawford, 2007), it is important to determine which activities are considered engaging and motivating—and more importantly why—from the youth perspective. This will help the afterschool field directly address issues of attendance and retention, and the creation of meaningful, engaging, and relevant learning experiences for middle school youth. A reexamination of pedagogy, curriculum, project-based learning, asset-based teaching, and youth development are also needed to determine relevancy for today’s youth.

Considering the aforementioned dearth of literature from within the field of afterschool, especially as it pertains to middle school programs, we may better serve the evolution of middle school programs by exploring the question, “How do we address the need for new and innovative ways to engage middle school adolescents in the hours after school?” Again, it is important to bear in mind this is a crucial juncture in the growth of young people, as they are still developing both as students and individuals. Full understanding of adolescent development as it relates to program design is critical for creating a new beginning for afterschool program leaders and their

professional development. Additionally, the degree to which these programs become educational supports to the student, as well as educational partners with the instructional day, directly relates to the understanding of developmental needs, learning capacities, and how best to support students in an informal learning context where the experiences of play and engagement are central to supporting exploration, discovery, and learning.

### **Motivation and Engagement: Focusing on Youth Voice, Choice, and Action**

Adolescence is a time of enormous learning and development, as well as a time for continuous transition, change, and growth. Reports support the case that afterschool programs are capable of improving important youth outcomes (Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007) and that designing effective middle school afterschool programs is essential if we are going to hold the attention of middle school youth and support them in their search to better understand who they are and who they want to become (Morehouse, 2009). According to Morehouse (2009), “The challenge is to create programs that are significantly different from what is offered at the elementary level after school and yet provide developmentally appropriate structures, opportunities, and choices for middle schoolers, as opposed to older teenagers” (p. 3).

Many middle school youth “vote with their feet” when it comes to deciding whether they will attend an afterschool program (Kotloff & Korom-Djakovic, 2010). Often, low attendance can signal that a program is not designed to meet the unique needs and interests of this population. To remedy low attendance issues, many programs focus on isolated efforts designed to support staff development, implement quality improvements, provide funding, and establish data tracking systems.

Studies of the effects of afterschool programs on student learning have yielded mixed findings with a focus on programs instead of youth experiences (Huang & Wang, 2012; U.S.

Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, 2000; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). In a seminal article, Honig and McDonald (2005) suggested one problem of this line of thinking is that scholars have drawn conclusions about the extent to which afterschool programs “affect student learning without grounding their analysis in learning theories that can help explain both what constitutes a productive learning environment and the extent to which afterschool programs support such an environment” (p. 2). Secondly, they argued, “socio-cultural learning theory also suggests that research in general may focus on the wrong units of analysis—that is, on the effectiveness of afterschool programming as an entire sector or on programs differentiated by their main activities” (p. 2).

Honig and McDonald advised, “Afterschool studies tend to focus on programs rather than on youth, thereby missing the broad ecology of factors beyond the individual program that can affect youth’s afterschool experiences and explain impact” (p. 2). Furthermore, they added, “Afterschool programs and other learning environments affect learning not as an entire sector or at the program level but at the level of staff and youth participation—what staff and youth do day to day in programs” (p. 2). For this reason, the current study asked how *what actually happens* between staff and youth in programs can explain the effect on students’ learning, rather than what settings achieve particular learning outcomes.

### **Improving Attendance and Retention**

There is a difference between how key terms—including recruitment, promotion, enrollment, attendance, retention, participation, and engagement—are defined and operationalized in the afterschool field, although many staff often do not clearly differentiate the terms from one another. Participant *recruitment* and program *promotion* are two sides of one coin; each supports the other. Recruiting students with thematic promotional pieces describing

the program, clubs, activities, skills, and experiences youth will have is essential to igniting their interest. Without these items, the possibility of students voluntarily *enrolling* in a program is slim. Even if they do enroll, until they actually attend the program we cannot count them as participants.

*Attendance* refers to a young person attending the afterschool program on a given day, whereas *retention* refers to a young person's regular attendance over time (Simpkins Chaput, Little, & Weiss, 2004). The afterschool program practitioner faces three major issues with attendance: initial participation, ongoing attendance, and retention, which must be addressed before engagement (Simpkins et al., 2004; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005). Both attendance and retention are related to, but distinct from, participation and engagement, which make up the other side of the coin. *Participation* refers to a young person being physically present in afterschool activities, although possibly bored and disengaged; *engagement* refers to a young person's voluntary participation and intrinsic interest in program activities (Simpkins Chaput et al., 2004).

Attendance and retention of youth in afterschool programs are both positively associated with many academic and other youth outcomes (Simpkins et al., 2004). In *Critical Hours*, Miller (2003) drew the following conclusions: "youth benefit from consistent participation in well-run, quality afterschool programs; afterschool programs can increase engagement in learning; afterschool programs can increase educational equity; and afterschool programs can build the key skills necessary for success in today's economy" (p. 6). Sustained participation and retention in afterschool programs can be cultivated (Afterschool Alliance, 2014a). The following research study is grounding for where middle school afterschool programs are in 2015 and where high school afterschool programs were in 2006. A research study at Harvard's Chapin Hall

(Chaskin, R. J., & Baker, S., 2006), of 99 tenth-graders in four Chicago Public Schools, which revealed:

Tailoring programs to youth interests, needs, and schedules, as well as providing a wide variety of enriching opportunities for youth to be exposed to new ideas, new challenges, and new people, has been found to be an important factor for promoting sustained participation (p. 7).

Studies have found that afterschool programs can promote personal, social, and academic skill development, as well as build very important connections to the school, while also reducing risk behaviors and increasing citizenship (Little & Harris, 2003). They can also reduce antisocial behavior and drug and cigarette use, and increase civic engagement (Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003). Findings from the Harvard Family Research Project are encouraging and not surprising, in that youth show more positive outcomes based on frequency (more days per week) and duration (over a number of years) (Redd, Cochran, Hair, & Moore, 2002), thus making attendance and retention especially important.

### **Conclusion**

Afterschool programs can be a primary community setting for enhancing young people's social-emotional development. Unfortunately, many practitioners are unaware and unable to access potentially relevant theories regarding youth development and youth development practices due to "academic inaccessibility: this is problematic because many of these theories fit real-world application" (Duerden & Gillard, 2011). The recent focus on the academic benefits of afterschool programs tends to overlook the fact that many were created based on the idea that young people's participation in organized activities in the hours after school would be beneficial for their personal and social growth (Durlak et al., 2010).

Afterschool programs can be at their best when they utilize social-emotional learning and youth development as contexts of development, and organize expanded learning activities to support student growth and to impact positively their academic achievement. Continuing to measure afterschool program effectiveness against the wrong outcomes remains fruitless, it further sidetracks the field of afterschool from pursuing how kids learn best and from supporting their whole development, including personal growth and academic achievement (Halpern, 2004). Congress will continue to consider legislation that will allow afterschool funds to be redirected if programs do not quickly produce certain outcomes. Additional research is needed to identify quality program characteristics in order to understand why some are more successful than others and to understand the relationship between program quality and youth outcomes in order to improve afterschool programs (Durlak et al., 2010). To fully understand the needs, discussions must take place with program instructors and with youth attendees. When we begin to focus on the right questions, we can help to create a revolutionary way to view afterschool. This will help establish a platform to support the future of afterschool as it evolves with the ever-changing needs of today's society and its youth.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

While a body of research documenting afterschool programs has emerged over the past decade and a half, the focus has been on the elementary level, with relatively little known about middle school afterschool programs. Thus, the current study centered on youth and practitioner perceptions of the conditions that foster young people’s attendance, interests, active participation, and meaningful engagement in middle school afterschool expanded learning programs. Their perceptions provide insight into and support for recommendations on effective engagement practices with middle school adolescents during afterschool expanded learning programs.

This study focused on the ways in which successful middle school afterschool programs—as informal, expanded learning contexts—are designed to promote relevant learning experiences for middle school students. I explored the perceptions of program instructors and participants at two effective middle school afterschool programs to determine what makes the programs successful. This chapter focuses on the research design and procedures used to answer the research questions. I include a summary of the site selection process, participant selection process, data collection methods, data analyses methods, and ethical considerations.

#### **Research Questions**

The goal of this study was to identify the competencies afterschool program staff need to engage middle school youth in ways that encourage them to attend the program regularly. More specifically, the inquiry was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What attracts middle school youth to attend afterschool programs, from the students’ and the staff members’ perspectives?

2. What activities do middle school youth choose to participate in during their afterschool programs and why?
3. In what ways are youth involved in planning activities and selecting materials within afterschool programs?
4. What professional development and prior experiential learning do staff identify as most valuable in preparing them to work with middle school youth in afterschool programs?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This empirical study comes from a perspective of social constructivism with a “relativist epistemological orientation...acknowledging multiple realities having multiple meanings, with findings that are observer dependent” (Yin, 2014, p. 17). Moreover, with this approach, “The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied,” (Creswell, 2013 p. 8). I relied on multiple sources of evidence by capturing the perspectives of different program participants and stakeholder groups. The data were triangulated, further articulating how and why different meanings illuminated my topic of study (Yin, 2014). I sought to understand the context and setting of the participants’ experiences by visiting the identified afterschool program sites and personally gathering information via observations and survey instruments. In order to fully understand and make meaning from participants’ experiences and perceptions, I used one-on-one interviews and focus groups with open-ended questions. These personal interactions were essential to the understanding of the experiences and perceptions of participants. As the researcher, I interpreted the findings, generating a pattern of meaning from the data collected in the field.

## **Definition of Key Terminology**

Although all programs take place during the hours after school and the terms “after school program” and “afterschool program” are often used interchangeably, for purposes of this study I am making these terms explicit to add precision and ensure clarity of understanding for the reader. The terms necessary to understand this study are defined below.

**Afterschool Program:** The term “afterschool program” is used to refer to expanded learning programs in California that receive their funding through ASES and/or 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC and operate under the requirements of each funding source including being open every day that a funded school is in session. (This study focuses on this type of afterschool program.) These “afterschool programs” predominantly take place on the school site, while some are offered at an off-site location.

**After School Program:** The term “after school program” is used to refer to programs that are offered during the hours after the school bell rings and do not operate under the requirements of ASES or 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC. These “after school programs” may either be (a) sanctioned and provided by a school and operate on-site or (b) sanctioned by a school, however provided by other agencies/organizations while operating either on or off the school site.

## **Research Design**

This was a qualitative, descriptive, multi-site, case study. I collected data from observations, surveys, interviews, and focus groups. I immersed myself as an ethnographic researcher at each of the sites, utilizing observations as the primary method of data collection (Merriam, 2009). The intended goal was to capture a thick description of what I observed, to access the meanings of participants’ experiences in afterschool programs, and to further explore, explain, and describe the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013; Geertz, 1973; Yin, 2014).

I conducted two case studies. One site was district-operated while the other was youth agency-operated. Focusing on two separate research sites allowed me to compare and contrast information when I examined practices. My intent, however was not to engage in a comparative analysis of the two sites, but rather to utilize them as different sources of information relevant to answering the guiding research questions.

I utilized observations as the central data collection strategy, as these data would yield contextual happenings. The observations allowed me to immerse myself in the culture of each afterschool program, to capture the observed experiences and perceptions of the students and staff. Additionally, I utilized surveys with students, frontline staff, and site coordinators. The survey data helped contextualize interview, observation, and focus group responses, and vice versa. I utilized interviews with students, site coordinators, both agency and community-based organization (CBO) directors, and the grant manager. The student interview data helped contextualize the interview and survey data provided by all other stakeholders. Finally, I conducted two focus groups with frontline staff, one at each research site, in order to gain insight into the rationale behind their survey responses. The qualitative research methods were selected over an alternate form, as Yin (2014) suggested: “out of the desire to understand a complex social phenomena” (p. 4) and “to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation” (p. 52) with “embedded units” (p. 55). Utilizing a quantitative or mixed methods approach would not have accommodated such a narrative.

### **Site Selection**

The afterschool program sites selected for this study were located within one of the largest school districts in the United States. In this district, almost 76% of students qualify for the USDA Free and Reduced Lunch program, and nearly 31% are identified as English

Language Learners. The vast population of students (667,000) in this district—and the diversity of this student population—translates to a significant need for quality afterschool programming, often filling in the gaps that can be experienced in the school day.

Two sites were selected from the district based on a list of programs reporting satisfactory attendance (i.e., 85% or better) to the California Department of Education After School Division. Sites were also selected based on preliminary work from the Regional County Office of Education After School Technical Assistance Unit site visit project that indicated promising and proven practices of instruction, engagement, and activities. Participating sites were selected to ensure support systems were comparable and therefore did not affect the study as a variable. Both research sites were in good standing with the California Department of Education Afterschool Division in regard to achieved program attendance, were in operation every instructional day, and served approximately 100 youth daily, with a team of approximately five to nine site-based staff. Additional focus was placed on programs with a site coordinator who had served in a leadership position for two years or more. Two sites were randomly selected from those meeting the predetermined criteria.

### **Site Description**

The district served in the role of lead educational agency (LEA) for the After School Education and Safety (ASES) grant funding purposes and is referred to in the dissertation simply as “the district.” Within the district, a specific branch, which I refer to as the “expanded learning branch” (ELB), oversaw afterschool programs. Within the branch there were two types of afterschool program providers, internal and external. The internal service provider operated Site 1 as a district-operated site and is referred to as the “middle school agency” (MSA). The

external service provider that operated Site 2 is a community-based organization (CBO) and is referred to as such.

Figure 3.1 below illustrates the hierarchical information and reporting relationships within the district, expanded learning branch, and afterschool program sites included in the research study.

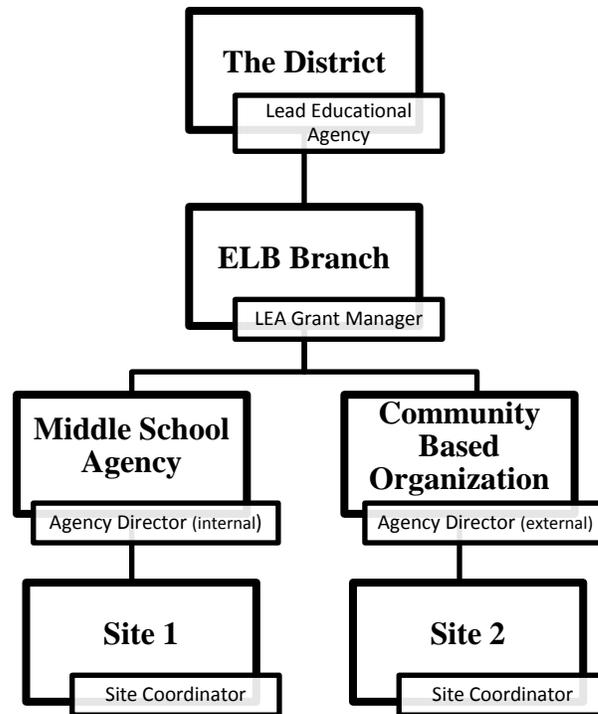


Figure 4.1. Hierarchical information and reporting relationships within the district, expanded learning branch, and afterschool program sites.

The name of the school district, afterschool program, and research sites chosen for this study have been changed to protect the rights of its employees, the afterschool program, research sites, and participating youth. Staff consent was obtained prior to the start of the study, as was parental permission for youth participants, in conjunction with youth assent. For a closer examination of detailed information regarding each research site including site description; program schedule, activities schedule, and activity descriptions, refer to Appendix B. For details regarding staff members' and student participants', refer to Appendices P and Q respectively.

### **Rationale for Selecting the Particular Sample**

Currently, there is a dearth of research related to afterschool programs serving middle school students. In addition, there is a significant lack of youth voice represented within the research that does exist. The primary reason for focusing on middle school students was to specifically understand their attitudes, perceptions, meanings, and experiences in order to begin solving the attendance issue from this key stakeholder group's perspective.

Afterschool program staff members who worked at the site level were selected as a primary research group because they hold the most important adult role in relation to the youth who are served by the program. Additionally, they are responsible for the daily operation of activities and facilitation of the students' experience, including the opportunity for an expanded youth voice in multiple facets of the program, from choice of program offerings to identification of appropriate supplies and materials. It was critical to understand frontline staff attitudes, perceptions, meanings, and knowledge about middle school students and the ways they were meeting students' academic, social, and emotional needs. This information was used to identify gaps between the expressed interests and needs of students and the program design, staff development, and activities facilitation.

### **Access to Site and Participants**

I was able to gain access to the district afterschool programs by way of agreement with the grant manager. This individual agreed to champion the project and the data collection process, allowing me full access to the program, documents, staff, and youth for each research site from fall of 2014 through spring of 2015. The grant manager positioned this study with an introductory letter to each site. The letter expressed support for the research as an asset to the field of afterschool and asked the sites to cooperate due to the potential benefit to them and the

future of middle school afterschool programs for the district. The letter outlined the project, including the purpose, objectives, methods, my role, and participant confidentiality.

Additionally, in the fall, I visited each site's staff meeting to introduce myself, develop a face-to-face connection, and verbally reinforce the reason for the study and that their participation was voluntary.

### **The Leadership Factor: Relationships and Connections Count**

Much of the success of this research study lies in the leadership aspects of the relationships and connections that are at the center of this work. For nearly ten years I have built collegial, trusting relationships with the leaders and staff of the participating district, branch, and organization. In turn, the leaders from these agencies were willing to participate in this research study and to support their site-based staff teams' involvement. Without reciprocated trust built over a long period of time at both of the organizational and individual levels, this study and the data collection process could have been challenging to complete as efficiently and effectively as I was able.

Site Coordinators were more than participants in this study; they were also involved and engaged in creating an atmosphere of inclusion, involvement and transferred encouragement for this study and me (as a researcher) with their staff members, students, and the parents/guardians of participating students. Due to established relationships and connections, issues that could have become roadblocks (i.e., open communication; gaining consent, permission, and assent forms for participation; and openness to participate in surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations) were mitigated because of the trust and respect each stakeholder group have of one another and the good work taking place at each of the afterschool programs.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Working with each site coordinator, I immersed myself as an ethnographic researcher. Observations, surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups, or any combination of these four sources, were utilized to answer the research questions (see Appendix B). I visited each site ten times over a separate six-week period, during which research methods were replicated for the duration. Visits lasted from about 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. and during this time I observed four to six different activities for 30–40 minutes each. I recorded each observation utilizing a structured protocol.

Data were coded for patterns and then triangulated to compare the data between sites for similar and distinct patterns and themes. The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded using two digital recording devices. Recordings were transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed on an ongoing basis throughout the study.

### **Observations of Program Staff and Students**

I utilized observations as the central data collection strategy, as these data yielded contextual happenings. The observation template consisted of categorical headings/questions that were correlated to the research questions and helped yield observational data to contextualize findings from other data sources (see Appendix C). I observed for data in general categories including:

- What is happening at program entry?
- What does the learning environment look like?
- What does learning look like?
- What are students doing?
- What are staff members doing?

- Do students seem happy?
- Do students seem engaged in their activities?
- Do students have close relationships with program staff?
- Do all students interact with each other respectfully?

My field notes encompassed aspects of the learning context to uncover the ways in which relevant factors intersected and consequently affected the social actors within the context itself. New categories emerged that were specific to the context. I utilized surveys from students, frontline staff, and site coordinators, as well as my observations, to understand the newly emerging categories. I conducted further analysis to consider combinations of survey data, interview data, focus group data, observation data, and other emerging themes.

### **Surveys of Program Staff and Students**

I administered surveys to three stakeholder groups: students, frontline staff, and site coordinators (see Appendices D, E, and F, respectively). The student survey identified demographic data and participants' interests, choices, and involvement that affected their decisions to regularly attend and participate in the afterschool program. The frontline staff and site coordinator surveys were designed to capture staff attitudes and beliefs about what motivates youth learning and what engagement practices best support this learning in afterschool programs.

Surveys for both the program instructors and youth were administered during the same period of time. Once the period for survey response closed, I first analyzed the youth surveys, and then program staff surveys. I generated reports for online responses. For paper surveys, I added data to the data summary report. Once the data were coded, themes arose, and this allowed me to revise and refine interview and focus group protocols.

## **Interviews**

I conducted interviews with students, site coordinators, both MSA agency and CBO directors, and grant manager. The amount of time allocated for each interview varied based on the role held by the interviewee, because within each role lies variations in perspective, depth of knowledge, experience, and expertise. Student interviews included a random sample of at least 10 students from each research site. I selected participants randomly from those who had completed the survey. Each student interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. The purpose of the student interviews was to contextualize student survey responses (see Appendix G). As such, the protocol contained broad thematic questions, which served as a beginning point for more targeted, probing questions. These emergent questions then uncovered the rationales and thought processes underlying site coordinator and student responses.

I interviewed site coordinators from both sites in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the rationale for their survey responses. Each site coordinator interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The protocol also contained broad thematic questions that served as a springboard for more targeted, probing questions (see Appendix H). These emergent questions uncovered the rationales and thought processes underlying student and staff responses. I also interviewed the middle school agency (MSA) director and the CBO director representing each site in order to gain an understanding of their perceptions about what motivates middle school students to attend and continue engaging in their afterschool program (see Appendix H). Each director interview lasted approximately 120 minutes. Directors did not complete a survey, which makes this interview the only data collection point for this stakeholder group. The interview data gained from directors helped contextualize the interview and survey data provided by staff.

I interviewed the grant manager who was overseeing both sites in order to gain an understanding of his perceptions about what motivates middle school students to attend and continue engaging in their respective afterschool program sites (see Appendix I). This interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. The grant manager did not complete a survey. The interview data helped contextualize the interview and survey data provided by the agency director and the site staff for each site within this study.

### **Focus Groups with Frontline Staff**

I conducted two focus groups with frontline staff, one at each research site. All staff members were invited to participate. Focus groups took approximately 120 minutes to facilitate. The purpose of these focus groups was to gain insight into the context surrounding their survey responses. The protocol (see Appendix J) contained broad thematic questions, which served as a springboard for more targeted, probing questions. Their responses led to emergent questions, which uncovered the rationale and thought processes underlying their survey responses. Further analysis was conducted in light of observation and survey data.

### **Role Management and Ethical Considerations**

Although I work for the Los Angeles County Office of Education in the After School Technical Assistance Unit, and I was previously known to many of the staff working in these programs, I presented myself to the district, agencies, and site leadership teams as both a social scientist doing case study research and an educational leadership graduate student. When I was onsite with youth participants and program staff, I presented myself as a doctoral student researcher and observer. I remained focused on the research I was conducting and not providing technical assistance as I would if I were on-site in my professional capacity.

Providing confidentiality was of utmost importance, and I went to great lengths to ensure participant confidentiality at all levels. I created pseudonyms prior to data collection so as not to reveal identifying information that would single out an individual or agency. All files were saved on my computer and were password protected. Files containing actual names were encrypted and destroyed after the study. To further ensure their understanding of my role, and to eliminate bias or the potential for conflict of interest or perceived threat, I also shared that I would follow a specific protocol within each data collection method to avoid sloppy procedures and to ensure that all participants would be asked the same questions. Although I worked closely with many individuals (each working in different levels with the organization hierarchy) at each site within the study, no information was shared other than general findings at the end of the study.

I recognize that my own background shapes my interpretation of the data. Therefore, I positioned myself in the research to acknowledge how my interpretation flowed from my personal, cultural, and historical experiences. To mitigate bias, multiple methods of data collection were used and the data collected were triangulated to compare sources and verify data (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

I did not begin this study until I received Internal Review Board (IRB) approvals from the University of California, Los Angeles, and also from the district. Signed staff consent forms were acquired from each site (see Appendix K), as were signed parent/guardian permission (see Appendix L) and a signed youth assent (see Appendix M) for each youth participant. The district, parents/guardians of the potential youth participants, staff, and site coordinators each received a copy of the problem statement and details about the planned approach for conducting the study. Program instructors and parents of potential youth participants were made aware of

the intent and purpose of this study in the introductory letter. Student attendees at each site were also included in this orientation of information. All participants were given the ability to opt out at any time, without reprisal.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

Utilizing descriptive research is an innovative means to fuse both qualitative and quantitative data to reconstruct contextual happenings. A challenge can include the possibility of subjectivity and error on the researcher's part. To diffuse my researcher bias I utilized multiple methods of data collection to triangulate findings. Also, considering my study took place at two sites within one district, a threat to credibility included the lack of generalizability to the entire population of afterschool programs serving middle school students.

To address the potential of an insufficient evidence threat, and in order to have as large of a response as possible, I worked with the site-based leadership teams to follow up with parents, youth, and staff about participating in and completing the survey. I also followed up in such a way as to encourage participation, not coerce it. To reduce reactivity, I shared with them that their participation and candid responses (Maxwell, 2013) would help me to better understand the data and findings. All interviews and focus groups were recorded using two digital devices. Transcripts were created verbatim by Rev.com and field notes intentionally detailed.

Finally, I shared the case study for each site with the lead educational agency grant manager and each program's director, along with findings relating to the agency/organization and program. This was accomplished in a meeting involving the grant manager, agency/organization director, two to three managers, and members of the site-based teams. Members of the MSA and CBO staff teams were provided the opportunity to refute or correct any of the information provided to them. No changes to the content of either case study were

requested. All administrative staff members reacted positively to the study and subsequent findings.

### **Conclusion**

The case study used a qualitative research methodology. A multi-stage process was utilized to select the district and a specific set of afterschool programs within the district that met predetermined criteria. Data collected will inform perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of program instructors about youth and their motivations to attend afterschool programs, select activities, and define what is meaningful and relevant about learning as a result. The findings may impact future training for staff working in middle school afterschool programs. The results of this study can be shared with the California Department of Education Afterschool Division, the Regional County Office of Education After School Technical Assistance Teams, local districts, and afterschool programs serving middle school students, site administrators, teachers, and afterschool program staff to improve middle school afterschool program attendance.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Through observations, surveys, interviews, and focus groups, I explored the views of youth and practitioners on the conditions that foster young people's attendance, interests, and participation in middle school afterschool expanded learning programs. To determine which activities and experiences were considered by youth to be attractive and why, I asked the students and staff about their personal experiences within successful programs. These data revealed students' attitudes and perceptions associated with afterschool programs, what the programs meant to them, and how their experiences nurtured their attendance and influenced their participation and engagement. I was guided by the following research questions:

1. What attracts middle school youth to attend afterschool programs, from students' and the staff members' perspectives?
2. What activities do middle school youth choose to participate in during afterschool programs and why?
3. In what ways are youth involved in planning activities and selecting materials within afterschool programs?
4. What professional development and prior experiential learning do staff identify as most valuable in preparing them to work with middle school youth in afterschool programs?

To answer these questions, I examined the afterschool expanded learning programs at two Southern California middle schools located within a single district in Los Angeles County. Both sites were selected randomly from a list of typical sites meeting the study's criteria. Site 1 was district-operated and Site 2 was community partner-operated. The sites were similar in that both were in good standing with the California Department of Education After School Division,

had demonstrated successful past attendance by youth, and were guided by site coordinators with at least two years of afterschool leadership experience.

As described in the previous chapter, I visited each site 10 times over separate six-week periods of time, during which I interviewed the site coordinator and randomly selected students, and also conducted a focus group with frontline staff. I also interviewed the lead educational agency grant manager, the CBO director or MSA director, and the site coordinator for each research site. In addition to conducting the observations and interviews, I also gathered surveys from students, the site coordinator, and frontline staff at each site.

The findings from this study are presented in five sections. Each section integrates data from both afterschool programs in order to identify and describe the themes that appeared regarding each participant group's responses across methods. The first three sections address the activities and experiences that middle school students and staff indicated were attractive and that nourished students' interests and sustained their attendance: the first section describes what attracted students to attend the programs; the second focuses on the activities students chose to participate in and why; and the third addresses the opportunities students had to be involved in planning activities and selecting materials. Then, in section four, I detail the underlying factors that frontline staff indicated were grounding experiences regarding the rigor of the hiring process for their positions, preparation for the roles in which they served, and the support of their ongoing professional development. Finally, in the last section of the chapter, I provide a summary of the findings.

**Research Question 1: What attracts middle school youth  
to attend afterschool programs, from students' and staff members' perspectives?**

This section addresses the themes that appeared in youths' self-described interests in and attraction to attend the afterschool programs, as well as the perspectives staff members had about what they think mattered to youth. I devote specific attention to identifying and describing themes that were most important to youth. Overall, there was more similarity than difference across sites with regard to the kinds of activities and experiences mentioned and where attractions/interests were integrated in the context of mattering. However, the differences that did emerge are noted and discussed.

**Students' Perspectives on What Matters**

Students were asked to indicate the extent to which specific reasons for coming to the afterschool program mattered to them. Their response choices for each item were "This really matters"; "This kind of matters"; and "This does not matter." Figure 4.2 provides a snapshot of youth responses to the seven categories.

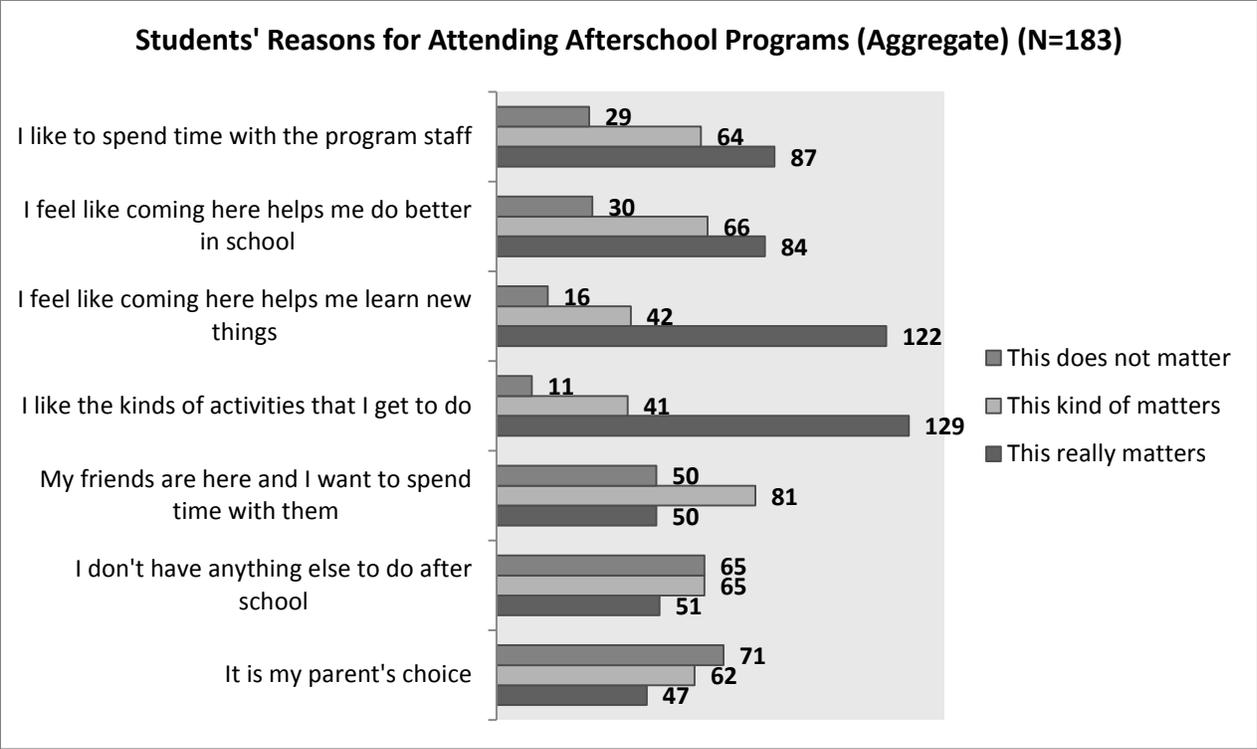


Figure 4.2. Student survey responses regarding the degree to which specific reasons mattered in their decisions to attend the afterschool programs (Sites 1 and 2 combined).

The most salient reasons students had for choosing to come to the afterschool program were, “I like the kinds of activities I get to go to” (94%) and “I feel like coming here helps me learn new things” (91%). In descending order, the following reasons were also important: “I like to spend time with the program staff” (84%), “I feel like coming here helps me do better in school” (83%), and “My friends are here and I want to spend time with them” (72%). The lower percentages in the final two categories—“It is my parent’s choice” (36%) and “I don’t have anything else to do after school” (38%)—indicate that most students were not compelled to attend the programs for these reasons.

When those students who indicated that their parents’ choice really mattered were asked why, many students at Site 1 (6 out of 25) and Site 2 (9 out of 22) reported that having their parents’ permission as a courtesy to attend was the important factor for them (because the

program is a safe place to be and personally wanting to participate) while it was still their youth-driven choice to attend or not. Comparable numbers—at Site 1, 9 of 25 students and at Site 2, 7 of 22 students—indicated their attendance was out of necessity because one or both parents worked, and they wanted a safe place for their children during the hours after school. The remaining students at Site 1 (10 of 25) and Site 2 (6 of 22) indicated it was solely their parents’ (adult-driven) choice that they attend, and not their own choice. Of these specific students, four at Site 1 and three at Site 2 also indicated they did not want to attend but had to for academic support and intervention reasons.

Also, as indicated in Figure 4.2, most students did not report coming to the afterschool program because they had nothing else to do after school. Among the 83 students at Site 1, only 23 (28%) reported this “really matters,” and of the 98 at Site 2, only 28 (29%) gave the same response. In other words, most students recognized the value of attending the afterschool program for other, positive reasons.

An unexpected finding was that spending time with staff mattered more to participation, by 12%, than spending time with friends. This contradicts what we know from learning theory that middle school youth would rather spend time with peers than with adults. These data are significant because they reveal the importance of staff in attracting students and sustaining their participation.

In order to gauge the level of satisfaction within the program in relation to a variety of social-emotional factors, all participants were asked to respond to a series of survey prompts with a range of answers from “Yes, I do,” to “Sometimes, I do,” to “No, I don’t.” Table 4.1 provides an overview of student responses to the nine categories.

Table 4.1

Students' Social-Emotional Responses about Attending the Afterschool Program (Aggregate)

<b>Students' Social-Emotional Responses About Attending the Afterschool Program (Aggregate)</b>		
<i>Students:</i> Please respond how you feel about the following statements:	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>I feel like I have friends at this program. (N=178)</b>		
Yes, I do	158	89%
Sometimes, I do	15	8%
No, I do not	5	3%
<b>I like coming to this program. (N=180)</b>		
Yes, I do	150	83%
Sometimes, I do	26	15%
No, I do not	4	2%
<b>I have fun in this program. (N=180)</b>		
Yes, I do	139	77%
Sometimes, I do	38	21%
No, I do not	3	2%
<b>I feel safe when I am in this program. (N=179)</b>		
Yes, I do	138	77%
Sometimes, I do	34	19%
No, I do not	7	4%
<b>I think the program looks and feels like a place for someone my age. (N=180)</b>		
Yes, I do	137	76%
Sometimes, I do	31	17%
No, I do not	12	7%
<b>I feel like the staff care about me in this program. (N=179)</b>		
Yes, I do	124	69%
Sometimes, I do	48	27%
No, I do not	7	4%
<b>I feel good about myself when I am at this program. (N=180)</b>		
Yes, I do	114	63%
Sometimes, I do	54	30%
No, I do not	12	7%
<b>I feel like other students in the program treat me with respect. (N=179)</b>		
Yes, I do	106	59%
Sometimes, I do	61	34%
No, I do not	12	7%
<b>I think the rules are fair in this program. (N=180)</b>		
Yes, I do	106	59%
Sometimes, I do	59	33%
No, I do not	15	8%

All categories received an aggregate percentage of at least 59% in the “Yes, I do” response, indicating the majority of students were satisfied in each of these areas. The two categories with the highest responses in “Yes, I do” were, “I have friends in this program,” and “I like coming to the program” at 89% and 83%, respectively.

The “Sometimes, I do” response was selected in each of the areas, but the three most notable were: “I feel good about myself when I’m at this program”; “I feel like other students in the program treat me with respect”; and “I think the rules are fair in this program”. These responses indicate a moderate level of satisfaction among some youth and demonstrate room for purposeful attention by staff. Helping shift as many youth from the “Sometimes, I do” to the “Yes, I do” response category will strengthen those students’ perspectives and further fortify their attendance.

Isolating the “No, I don’t” responses lends further support to the notion that students were satisfied with their experiences; the aggregate percentages in this grouping were between 1.6% and 8.37%. While the students’ responses were more spread out between all three choices, staff responses concerning their understanding of students’ perceptions fell primarily into the “Yes, I do,” with a handful in “Sometimes, I do.” The only exception was in response to “I think the rules are fair in this program.” This gap between student responses and staff perception could indicate more time should be spent understanding adolescent development, youth development strategies, social-emotional awareness, developing authentic relationships with each student, and improving the culture of the program. Overall, these data are notable indicators that the majority of students were enjoying the afterschool program activities, were building positive relationships, and were satisfied with their overall experience.

I delved a bit deeper to find out what was causing the relative dissatisfaction among students with respect to rules—especially considering youth were generally satisfied with their afterschool program experience, and the success of the program overall. Some qualitative responses to the survey question indicated students who selected “No, I don’t” were unhappy about two rules: (a) that they could not leave campus after the last bell, and (b) that they could not buy food and return to program with it. The students were unhappy with two rules the program had established that did not allow them to fulfill their own desires. Students felt the other rules were fair and more so that they were behavioral norms and expectations with which they agreed.

**Student Perceptions at Site 1.** Table 4.2 describes the top five items that “really” and “kind of” mattered to Site 1 students when they were choosing whether or not to attend the program. There is only a 6% margin between the top four categories, indicating that they were nearly equally important to the students. There is a 2% margin between the top two categories and a 4% margin between the top three categories. Taken together, the top three categories indicate that personal development mattered most to students at Site 1.

Although research and intuition may tell us that youth care for time with peers and friends over time with adults, youth at Site 1 expressed by a nearly 16% difference that spending time with staff mattered more to them than spending time with friends during the program. While the latter appears low in the categorical scheme, it is noteworthy that 72% of students reported that having their friends there and wanting to spend time with them mattered, making it important and foundational in the context of these data.

Table 4.2

Factors that Most Affected Appeal of Afterschool Program (Site 1)

<b>Site 1: Student Surveys</b>			
<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Factors that Mattered Most (High to Low)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>1</b>	I like the kinds of activities I get to go to	77/83	92.77%
<b>2</b>	I feel like coming here helps me do better in school	75/83	90.36%
<b>3</b>	I feel like coming here helps me learn new things	73/82	89.02%
<b>4</b>	I like to spend time with the program staff	72/83	86.74%
<b>5</b>	My friends are here and I want to spend time with them	59/83	71.08%

*Note:* By grouping the response categories “this really matters” and “this kind of matters” students at Site 1 report the following “matters” when describing why they come to their respective afterschool program.

**Student Perceptions at Site 2.** Similarly to students at Site 1, students at Site 2 indicated personal development (i.e., specific activities and the chance to do better in school) was important in their choice to attend the program (Table 4.3). The top two categories, separated by just 2%, mattered nearly equally to all students. Moving on to category three, there is a 12% decline in the percentage of students saying the item mattered, signifying how salient the first two categories were to the students at Site 2. Also, like students at Site 1, students at Site 2 put “My friends are here and I want to spend time with them” fifth on the list; it was important to 73% of the students.

Table 4.3

Factors that Most Affected Appeal of Afterschool Program (Site 2)

<b>Site 2: Student Surveys</b>			
<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Factors that Mattered Most (High to Low)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>1</b>	I like the kinds of activities I get to go to	93/98	94.89%
<b>2</b>	I feel like coming here helps me learn new things	91/98	92.95%
<b>3</b>	I like to spend time with the program staff	79/87	81.44%
<b>4</b>	I feel like coming here helps me do better in school	75/97	77.31%
<b>5</b>	My friends are here and I want to spend time with them	72/98	73.46%

*Note:* By grouping the response categories “this really matters” and “this kind of matters” students at Site 2 report the following “matters” when describing why they come to their respective afterschool program.

**Site 1 and Site 2 Differences.** There is one key difference between the sites—a margin of 13% regarding how much “I feel like coming here helps me do better in school” mattered. At Site 1, most young people had the option of choosing for themselves if they would participate in homework assistance or Math Lab daily, unless (a) either of their parents required them to do some or (b) their grades were too low to participate in the enrichment clubs of their choice and staff required they get support to raise their grades through either of the academic assistance components. At Site 2, all students were required to participate in homework assistance for the first 60 minutes of the afterschool program before rotating to their enrichment club of choice.

Interestingly, for students at Site 1, doing better in school may have been of prime importance and supported their empowerment; students were required to demonstrate to their club coach on an ongoing basis that they were in good standing with their grades, whereas students at Site 2 knew that homework assistance would be a daily occurrence, regardless. See Appendix O for a closer examination of each of the similarities and differences across the seven categories.

### **Staff Members’ Perspectives about What Matters to Students**

Staff members were asked to respond to a similar survey prompt regarding their perspectives on what they thought mattered to students: “Why do you think your middle school students participate in your afterschool program?” The following two tables (Table 4.4 representing Site 1 and Table 4.5 representing Site 2) depict data collected from staff survey responses at each site. Specifically, the tables compare student and staff responses across the seven categories. It is important to call attention to both the similarities and differences between staff and student responses. While alignment clearly exists across some categories, there are

gaps as well. In spite of these gaps, the students were highly satisfied with their afterschool programs and their experiences.

*Table 4.4*

Comparison of What Mattered to Youth to What Staff Think Mattered to Youth (Site 1)

<i>Students</i> reported which factors “really” or “kind of” mattered when choosing to participate in the afterschool program.		<b>Student Percentage</b>	<b>Frontline Staff Percentage</b>	<b>Site Coordinator Percentage</b>
<i>Staff</i> reported which factors they thought “really” or “kind of” mattered when students were choosing to participate in the afterschool program.				
Student	I like the kinds of activities I get to do	92.77% (77/83)		
Staff	They like the content of the activities the program offers		75.00% (3/4)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	I feel like coming here helps me do better in school	90.36% (75/83)		
Staff	They feel like participating in the program helps them do better in school		75.00% (3/4)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	I feel like coming here helps me learn new things	89.02% (73/82)		
Staff	They feel like they learn new things by participating in the program		50.00% (2/4)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	I like to spend time with the program staff	86.74% (72/82)		
Staff	They like to spend time with me and the program staff		75.00% (3/4)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	My friends are here and I want to spend time with them	71.08% (59/83)		
Staff	Their friends attend and they want to spend time with them		75.00% (3/4)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	It is my parent’s choice	29.77% (28/98)		
Staff	It is their parents’ choice		50.00% (2/4)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	I don’t have anything else to do after school	27.71% (23/83)		
Staff	They don’t have anything else to do after school		50.00% (2/4)	100.00% (1/1)

*Note:* Student data is representative of student perspectives about what matters from their perspective. Staff data is representative of staff perspectives about what they think matters to students.

Table 4.4 reveals that staff members who were working directly with youth at Site 1 were in tune with what students reported mattered to them concerning attendance at the afterschool program—specifically, their academic achievement and personal development, as represented across the first three categories. Staff members indicated youth may have chosen to attend the program to spend time with friends and with staff equally (75% each), although students clearly indicated by a nearly 16% margin that spending time with staff mattered more. Also noteworthy, staff supported general adult perceptions that youth did not attend afterschool programs of their own choice, but because they had to. However, students reported that their parents’ preferences mattered least to them when considering whether to attend the afterschool program (30%).

Table 4.5

Comparison of What Mattered to Youth To What Staff Think Mattered to Youth (Site 2)

<i>Students</i> reported which factors “really” or “kind of” mattered when choosing to participate in the afterschool program.				
<i>Staff</i> reported which factors they thought “really” or “kind of” mattered when students were choosing to participate in the afterschool program.		<b>Student Percentage</b>	<b>Frontline Staff Percentage</b>	<b>Site Coordinator Percentage</b>
Student	I like the kinds of activities I get to do	94.89% (93/98)		
Staff	They like the content of the activities the program offers		85.71% (6/7)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	I feel like coming here helps me do better in school	92.95% (91/98)		
Staff	They feel like participating in the program helps them do better in school		100.00% (7/7)	0.0% (0/1)
Student	I feel like coming here helps me learn new things	81.44% (79/87)		
Staff	They feel like they learn new things by participating in the program		42.85% (3/7)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	I like to spend time with the program staff	77.31% (75/87)		
Staff	They like to spend time with me and the program staff		71.42% (5/7)	0.0% (0/1)
Student	My friends are here and I want to spend time with them	73.46% (72/98)		
Staff	Their friends attend and they want to spend time with them		85.71% (6/7)	100.00% (1/1)
Student	It is my parent’s choice	28.57% (28/98)		
Staff	It is their parents’ choice		42.85% (3/7)	0.0% (0/1)
Student	I don’t have anything else to do after school	22.96% (22/96)		
Staff	They don’t have anything else to do after school		42.85% (3/7)	100.00% (1/1)

*Note:* Student data is representative of student perspectives about what matters from their perspective. Staff data is representative of staff perspectives about what they think matters to students.

Table 4.5 shows staff members who were working directly with youth at Site 2 were in tune with what students reported mattered to them about their interests in attending the afterschool program—their personal development, as represented across the first two categories.

Of note at this site, staff members perceived youth chose to attend the program disproportionately (by 43%) to “Spend time with friends” versus to “Spend time with staff”; students clearly indicated—by a nearly 8% margin—that “Spending time with staff” mattered more. Also noteworthy, students and staff both reported that “Learning new things” mattered more than “Doing better in school” when students were deciding whether to attend the program. This is especially interesting, considering all students at Site 2 were required to participate in 60 minutes of academic focus prior to the enrichment rotation.

Similar to Site 1, Site 2 staff members’ perceptions generally supported adult perceptions that youth did not attend the afterschool programs by their own choice, but because they had to. However, students reported that their parents’ choices mattered least when they were considering whether to attend the program. At the two sites, staff and students also shared the perception that students’ personal development mattered most in determining interest in attending an afterschool program.

Interviews with MSA and CBO directors and the grant manager for both sites revealed that the further away an adult was from working with youth on a daily basis, the more likely it was that gaps would exist between what they thought mattered to youth and what youth said mattered to them. In each case, individuals in these staff positions believed youth chose to attend the afterschool program (in no specific order) to spend time with their friends, to go to certain activities, because of their parents’ choices, and because they did not have anything else to do after school. Although the activities mattered most to students at both sites—and all of the staff and administrators agreed with students about this—all of the other categories and the adults’ understandings of how much these factors mattered to students varied vastly across administrators and staff.

**Research Question 2: What activities do middle school youth choose  
to participate in during afterschool programs and why?**

This section addresses themes that emerged regarding the activities chosen by youth attending the afterschool programs and their motivations for those choices. In addition, staff members' perceptions are addressed concerning what was offered to meet the needs of students. Specific attention is given to identifying and describing themes that were most important to the youth. Overall, there were more similarities than differences across the sites with regard to activities chosen and reasons for making those choices, however, the differences that did emerge are noted and discussed.

**Student and Staff Perspectives about Choice**

Students were asked to respond to the following prompt: "Do you get to choose what you do in the afterschool program?" Their response choices were: "Yes, all of the time"; "Some of the time"; and "None of the time." The majority of students across both sites reported having a choice, either some (48%) or all of the time (43%). Only 9% said they never had a choice. At Site 1, students were most likely to say they had a choice some of the time (56%), while the students at Site 2 were more likely to say they had a choice all of the time (52%).

Results from staff responses were closely aligned to those received from students. Seventy-five percent of frontline staff at Site 1 and 71% at Site 2 believed students chose what to do in the afterschool programs all of the time, while the remainder of participants indicated that students would say they had choice some of the time. In line with student responses at each site, the site coordinator at Site 1 felt the students would indicate they had a choice some of the time, while at Site 2 the coordinator responded that students would indicate they had a choice all of the time. Alignment between the majority of staff and students is a fair indication that staff teams

were meeting the needs of students in this area, which is key to a successful program. Students who felt they had opportunities to choose their paths in areas that were important to them were also more likely to find meaning in the program and, therefore, continue to attend.

### **Students' Perspectives on Choosing Activities**

Students were asked to indicate how they decided what activities to participate in when they were at the afterschool program. They were provided a list of activities and asked to select which of five options best described why they participated: “I choose to do this because I’m interested in it”; “I choose to do this because I helped design it”; “I choose to do this because my friends do it”; “All students have to do this”, and “My parent wants me to do this.” Across all activities at both sites, the majority of students reported, “I choose to do this because I am interested in it” (82%). Only 8% of students indicated they chose particular activities because they helped design them, and only 9% said they chose activities because their friends do them. A smaller number of students (less than 1%) indicated choosing to participate in activities because their parents wanted them to, specifically two students in sports and fourteen students in homework help. No students reported “All students have to do this” in any category except homework help and only at Site 2 because of the design of the program and homework assistance is the first rotation activity of the day.

At Site 1, students reported their interest to participate was highest in dance (86%), followed by sports (79%), and finally homework help (76%). In regard to dance and sports, the majority of students further elaborated that opportunities to improve athletic skills and attend competitions and compete against other schools were fun and important—so much so, it made the activities even more attractive to participate in than if they only learned the skills but did not have a culminating event to showcase their abilities and compete against other teams (as

audiences and competitors). Interestingly, students at Site 1 indicated homework help provided the largest opportunity for them to help design the activity (with a 20% response), while only 7% and 3% reported such an opportunity in sports and dance, respectively. On average, 8% of the students participating in the Site 1 afterschool program selected to participate in an activity because their friends were doing it.

At Site 2, students reported interest levels were highest in sports (98%), then band/music (94%), dance (87%), and cheer (87%), followed by homework help (74%), and cooking (73%). These students reported that sports and cheer, more than dance, offered opportunities for developing skills desired for competing against other teams. Students in dance and band/music indicated that school and community performances provided audiences for their work, while students in cooking said cook-offs allowed them to demonstrate their new skills and showcase their abilities to peers. During the interviews, students participating in each of these activities drew attention to the importance of getting to learn about the activities in which they were participating and of developing the associated skills. They also appreciated the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities to outside audiences through competitions.

As with Site 1, students at Site 2 indicated homework help provided the most opportunity for them to participate in the design of the activity (22%). Cooking and cheer were also selected as activities with the opportunity for student involvement in the design, at 13% and 9%, respectively. No students at Site 2 indicated they participated in sports or dance for this reason. On average, 6% of students participating in the afterschool program chose to participate in an activity because their friends were doing it. Cooking and dance were the activities students were more likely to choose because of their friends, while sports was least likely, and band/music were not likely.

The correlation between responses from students at both sites regarding homework help and the opportunity to help design the activity was unexpected, with much higher responses than enrichment club activities like dance and sports, which provide more opportunity for student guidance and leadership. Students at each site participating in homework support activities were asked to explain this trend. Responses from students at Site 1 included, “I can choose what I want to do and in what order,” “I have the freedom to sit with my friends,” “I can work by myself some days and like with my classmates on days I need more help,” and “We are allowed to talk to each other or even listen to music with our [ear]buds, and I can stay on task and still get my work done.” Responses from students at Site 2 echoed these remarks: “I can choose to work independently or with a partner” and “I get to decide what works for me, like where I sit, who I sit with, it’s important ‘cuz it’s not like school, it’s better.”

Students from both sites also shared that asking for assistance from either a peer or the staff coach was their decision to make, which was both rewarding and empowering for them. One student at Site 2 commented, “Miss C makes homework time like fun. We focus, she checks in with everyone, and we can work with her or our friends. It’s good that she lets us have some control over how we get it done as long as we don’t get too loud or bother others.”

### **Staff Perspectives about Students’ Activity Choices**

At both sites, frontline staff and site coordinators agreed via survey responses on their perspectives of what matters to youth in the top three categories. Their responses, ranked high to low, were: “Because they are interested in it”; “Because staff encourages them”; and “Because their friends are doing it.” In the last two categories, staff coordinators at both sites agreed with each other, although they differed from frontline staff in their thoughts about what students would perceive for themselves. Site coordinators assumed students would choose “Because they

designed it” followed by “Because their parents want them to”; frontline staff responses were in reverse order. Staff members from each site also indicated they believed students appreciated healthy competitions in the activities they were most interested in, and these were a popular reason for students to come to the programs.

As mentioned previously, it was surprising that students would select “homework help” as offering the most opportunity to participate in the design of the activity. Staff responses at both sites mimicked this sentiment, and staff members did not indicate this opportunity was available to students. This would seem to indicate that staff members were not specifically or intentionally structuring their programs to include this feature in homework help, although it is happening authentically. At Site 1, enrichment activities included: sports, dance, and leadership; at Site 2, sports, dance, cooking, cheer, and music/band were selected by all staff as offering opportunities to “help design it,” although most students did not report that many opportunities were available to them in these activities, except in leadership (at Site 1) and cooking (at Site 2), and those were limited. The percentage of responses indicates that both staff and students do not perceive opportunities to “help design it”. The need for an intentional program design and staff to provide increased opportunities for student input is needed in order to create an environment rich in student involvement in the design of activities, not just participation.

### **Students’ Perspectives on Participation**

Students were asked to describe what was important about how they participated and engaged in their chosen activities. Six statements were provided, and they were asked to select a level of importance for each (or “does not happen”). Only a 10% margin separated results across all six categories. On average, the majority of students across both sites reported it was important that (from highest to lowest): “Staff push me to think critically about what I’m doing

or saying” (55%); “I get to make decisions about my own work” (55%); “I get to ask questions” (51%); “I get to work on projects (activities that are longer than one day)” (48%); “I get to work with my friends on a project” (47%); and “Staff ask me questions about my work” (46%).

While these variables were “important” to the majority of students at both sites, and “kind of mattered” to most others, a few students reported that they were not at all important. It is noteworthy that some reported these things did not happen, meaning they were not experiencing the occurrence of these categories within the program. Thus, staff and administrators need to understand that more work is needed to reach all students. Specifically, “It does not happen” was reported as follows: working with friends on a project (23%); working on projects that last longer than one day (19%); having staff push for critical thinking (12%); making decisions about a student’s own work (10%); being asked questions about student work (9%); and getting to ask questions (5%).

Each of these categories is significant to consider when structuring afterschool programs and staffing activities. The students were attracted to the programs primarily for the activities offered. Their personal interest in those activities came from learning something new and doing better in school while also learning from a staff coach with expertise in the component. Focusing on opportunities for students to work on projects longer than one day, and being able to do it with friends, would be favorable to students at both sites. There is a presumption that if students were to positively experience these categories, they would be more likely to be engaged in the activities offered and have stronger bonds with the staff, and as a result attendance would increase and be sustained.

## **Staff Perspectives About Engaging Students In Learning Activities**

Frontline staff were asked to “Describe the general nature of the learning activities offered in the afterschool program” and to offer their perspectives on how often they used each as an engagement practice. Their options were “teacher-directed” (adults deliver information to students and direct learning), “student-centered” (students are involved in designing the learning opportunities), “project-based” (activities span over the course of days/weeks with sequenced steps and culminating projects), and “activity-based” (students engage in stand-alone activities that last only one session).

At Site 1, half of the frontline staff indicated all four categories were used “all of the time.” When exploring the data further, I found the order of use at the site (high to low) to be teacher-directed and project-based most often, then student-centered, and finally activity-based. At Site 2, a bit more than half of the staff (57%) indicated teacher-directed activities were used “all of the time.” After further analyzing the data, I found the order of use at Site 2 (high to low) to be teacher-directed, student-centered, and then split between project-based and activity-based.

Frontline staff members were asked to describe methods used for purposefully engaging students in learning activities. Responses from both sites indicate all staff members felt they were consistently supporting students and actively engaging them across a majority of options. The highest levels of response were received in “I encourage students to ask me questions” and “I push students to think critically about their ideas and their work,” each with 100% response. Following closely behind, 91% reported, “I encourage students to make decisions about their own work,” and 73% reported, “I ask students questions about their work” and “I provide opportunities for students to work in groups with peers.” Falling at the low end of the spectrum were “I encourage students to ask their peers questions” (64%), “I ask students open-ended

questions” (55%), and “I provide longer term (more than one day) projects for students work on” (45%).

Overall, staff members indicated they felt they were relatively successful in creating opportunities for youth engagement in their afterschool experience. Responses varied in regard to the structure of activities, however all options received at least some response, indicating they believed the practices were being utilized. It is notable that “student-centered” was reported second and third in the ranking of components for Sites 2 and 1, respectively, which could be an indication that improvement is needed in this area with respect to student engagement in activities. Likewise, the majority of staff members reported they were successful in their methods for purposefully engaging students in activities.

Effective engagement requires program and staff members to develop a relationship-building process focused on listening first. Programs will find a higher level of success in building youth engagement with staff members who have the ability to draw relevant information from students (whether through formal or informal settings), utilize that information, and see it through to fruition while including students along the way. These data reveal a larger gap between student-reported engagement and staff responses relevant to student engagement. In other words, staff members indicated they have been successful in this area more often than students report success in this area. This does not necessarily indicate that staff members are not performing well in this area, but rather that there may be room for improvement in the approach taken to engaging and including all students.

Because a portion of students indicated that the engagement methods were not happening in their programs, it could be that they would feel differently if an alternate method was being used. With voice and choice playing a large role in youth engagement, methods currently being

used at both sites in homework help—where students felt they had a significant degree of choice—could prove valuable in other components, as applicable. Because responses from students in this area were not in alignment with those from staff members, further discussion and exploration may provide strategies that can be used throughout programs to align perspectives between youth and staff, and support ongoing program attendance.

We do know students initially chose to attend and participate in these afterschool programs primarily because of their personal interest in the activities offered. For students' increased engagement to occur across all activities, programs and staff must find a meaningful continuum of opportunities for them to take an active role in designing and leading activities. Including opportunities for students to experience sequenced opportunities for voice, choice, and action will help them develop full ownership of the experience.

**Research Question 3: In what ways are youth involved in  
planning activities and selecting materials within afterschool programs?**

This section explores the ways in which students were included and involved in decision-making processes related to afterschool program design and implementation. I focus on both intentional and casual interaction with staff members in regard to the same topic. It stands to reason that students who are provided an opportunity to share their opinions and suggestions in shaping their afterschool programs will feel involved and included, and therefore invested in their experience. Involvement can range from program design and activity structure to implementation and even material selection. In addition to helping students feel included and part of a larger organization, this involvement can play a part in youth leadership development. With intentional opportunities for leadership, students can increase their skills in decision-making, problem solving, and action planning. This further supports the positive relationships

and respect that students gain by attending afterschool programs. Put simply, with involvement comes engagement, and with engagement comes retention.

### **Students' Perspectives on Involvement in Program Planning**

In order to measure the importance of program planning and shared voice, as well as perceived involvement, students were provided five statements and asked to indicate the level of importance or frequency with which each variable existed in their afterschool experience. In particular, they were asked whether or not they felt it was important to “have a voice in what happens in the program.” While an overwhelming number of responses in any one specific answer did not emerge, 49% of students felt it was “important,” while just 31% replied it was “sometimes important.” A much smaller number, 20% of students, did not feel it was important to have a say in what happens in the program. The responses to this first question further support the ideal of meaningful opportunities for students to play a role in creating and shaping their afterschool experiences.

The remainder of the questions in this grouping focused on ways in which staff could potentially include students in this process, and the frequency with which students felt it was taking place. While most students expressed they had a voice in what happens in program “some” or “all of the time” (84%), the same cannot be said in the areas of choosing and designing activities or materials. Percentages on these variables fell across all answers, but more students reported that their opinion was solicited than that they were involved in decision-making (63%), planning of activities (72%), or materials selection (65%). Indications are that students felt their voices were viewed as important, but more emphasis could be placed on sharing ownership with students in the choices being made.

In order to delve further into the topic of student involvement, students at each site were asked about their interactions with staff members at varying levels, including those related to planning and development. They were first asked if they “Talk to staff members about my life and personal stuff.” The majority (58%) responded that they did not, while roughly one-third said they sometimes did. Thus, fewer than 15% of students regularly engaged in conversations with staff on personal topics. In subsequent questions, students were asked about discussions that had taken place in regards to building the afterschool experience jointly with staff. When asked how often they talked to staff about what they would like to see in the afterschool program, most students again replied in the “no” and “sometimes” categories, while roughly one-quarter said “yes.”

When students were asked whether or not staff members engaged them in conversations about “how the afterschool program can be better,” the responses fell evenly across all three answers. While an overwhelming positive or negative response did not surface, the blandness of response does not mean programs can or should continue in the same vein moving forward. While two-thirds of students responded either “yes” or “sometimes” to these questions, approximately one-third did not feel included in the decision-making process. Although these programs have been successful, greater engagement can lead even more participants to feel dedicated and committed to the program.

### **Staff Perspectives on Students’ Involvement in Program Planning**

Staff members were asked complementary questions to those posed to students in regard to the methods used to solicit student opinion and participation in planning for activities within the afterschool programs. The nine items addressed three categories: individual planning, planning with input from other staff members, and planning with input from students. The

statements related to decisions about content, structure, and materials needed. Responses from staff at both sites indicated that they primarily used individual planning, although Site 1 weighed more heavily in this area than Site 2.

Neither site was as reliant on planning with input from other staff members, and the number of responses in this area came in lower than on items related to planning with input from students. In this latter area, responses from both sites were favorable for including students by asking for input on content and structure, but much lower for including student input on materials needed for program activities. Comparing students' and staff members' responses, a gap in perception is evident: Staff members reported including students far more often than students felt they were being included.

To further determine strategies for including students in the planning process, staff members were asked how they involved students in the design and implementation of program activities. Four possible responses were provided, and staff members were asked to select all that applied. The methods of student involvement included surveying all students, focus groups with all students, input from a student leadership team, and informal conversations with students. Neither site was conducting focus groups to solicit feedback, and they reported using the remaining options at varying levels. Based on survey results, each site was more consistently using one mean of involving their students than the other choices provided. At Site 1, "student leadership team" received a 75% response, while "informal conversations" received 71% of responses at Site 2. In this area, both sites would benefit from consistency, in order to intentionally and regularly engage students in the planning and implementation process. With more consistent strategies in place, student-reported perceptions of involvement could increase and in turn bring a higher level of ownership and engagement and, in turn, retention.

**Research Question 4: What professional development and prior experiential learning do staff identify as most valuable in preparing them to work with middle school youth in afterschool programs?**

The afterschool programs selected for this study were charged with a larger job than simply providing a safe environment for students to attend in the hours after school. The programs were expected to provide a robust, active experience with fully developed components in each of the areas described earlier in this chapter. While afterschool program staff were not expected to carry the same credentials as instructional day staff, they needed enough experience and training to successfully incorporate district and program curricula and to develop and execute programming that would provide active, meaningful, and engaging experiences, all while teaching and expanding the knowledge of the youth in attendance. In order to meet these expectations, it is important to ensure consistency in hiring quality staff as well as furthering the development of those staff members through additional training and professional development opportunities.

**Professional Development and Experiences that have been Helpful**

As previously outlined, both sites were currently operating successful afterschool programs, and staff members played a large part in cultivating that success. In order to determine which types of training and education a suitable candidate might possess, the following question was posed to staff: “What kind of professional development have you found most valuable in preparing you to work with middle school youth in an after school program?” Responders were given the opportunity to reply to this question in an open-ended manner, versus by selecting from a grouping of responses. In their replies, 73% reported that training had helped them considerably in their work. The topics of these trainings ranged from time management

and classroom management, to program structure and knowledge of topics being covered (i.e., Common Core, STEM, healthy behaviors, mental wellness), to policies and procedures.

The role of many staff members was to coach or teach a specific sport or class, and therefore they indicated that trainings in their areas of focus (e.g., dance, cheer, sports, coaching, art) played a significant role in laying the foundation for their work in the afterschool programs. Additionally, three of the staff members felt learning how to communicate with youth, especially of this age group, was very helpful in being successful. One of the responses was specifically focused on communication as it relates to student safety and learning how to ask questions correctly.

Beyond education and training, a small portion of frontline staff members (18%) listed experience as being valuable in their work with students. While experience can imply having previously worked in a similar setting or program, participants also highlighted other types of experience. One staff member noted, “I was in the afterschool program here myself when I was in middle school so I knew how things ran.” When asked specifically what kinds of life experiences had prepared them for their work, all staff members noted it was their personal lived experiences that prepared them to know what the students in their programs were faced with daily. Nearly all shared personal accounts about how growing up in the neighborhood of the local school was challenging. Some came from families without a father or mother (this was more the norm than not). Some had immigrated to the country as young children without knowing how to speak English and struggled to find friends and catch up in school. Some had to traverse a community riddled with gangs, and a few had lost friends and family members as result. At Site 1, focus group participants nodded when a peer shared, “Not a lot has changed here, as these are the realities many of the kids in our programs deal with today.”

Half of the frontline staff at each site said they wished they had had an afterschool program when they were growing up, one similar to the one in which they worked. The remaining staff noted that having an afterschool program to attend was really important to them as kids because it was their safe place, with friends and adults who really cared about them. One program director shared that she had a child who was currently in middle school. This type of personal experience provided a different level of understanding and perspective when it came to working specifically with this age group and to dealing with the parents of middle school youth.

When asked the same question, program directors and site coordinators also shared the importance of having staff members who had attended college or were currently in college. A staff member who possessed a strong academic background was extremely helpful when working with youth at a middle school level. Such staff members can help prepare students for high school by bolstering their understanding of the importance of learning and education as it relates to competing in the world today. Also, staff felt that students could relate to college-age staff, who could share real-world advice about education and other decisions students may face in life. By having college experience, staff members were seen as professionals in the eyes of the students; as a result, they commanded a different level of respect.

At one site, the hiring process was discussed throughout the interviews and focus group discussions. This site had been faced with a significant amount of turnover among staff members. The decision was made to alter their approach in the hiring process in order to ensure potential candidates were fully aware of what would be expected of them if hired, as well as to determine if a candidate was fully qualified for the position for which they were applying. This site had implemented a four-step hiring process that now included an application/screening, assessment in areas of interest chosen by the candidate, a panel interview, and finally a

discussion based on an assigned article. The article focused on the engagement of students and how best to reach out to parents to create dialogue. This process allowed staff at the site to see how the applicant thought and communicated, as well as assess his or her potential as a staff coach.

While it was clear that participants believed that training and experience are key factors when hiring staff members for the afterschool programs, it was also important that the continued education and development of staff members be nourished throughout their employment. It is not enough to provide training only in the on-boarding experience. The field of afterschool faces changing curricula, expectations, policies, and procedures. It is imperative that time is spent educating staff in these areas, as well as in areas such as youth development, youth leadership, organizational leadership, and program management. The continued development of staff members plays a significant role in their ability to provide the most engaging and robust experience they can for students. Additionally, areas such as youth development and leadership can boost confidence levels of staff members when they are faced with difficult situations or challenging students.

### **Training and Development Desired in the Future**

In order to determine which topics would be most useful in training and staff development, the following question was posed in the survey: “What kind of professional development do you feel you still need to be better prepared to work effectively with middle school youth in an afterschool program?” Responses to the previous question were focused on topics that would be useful for managing the environment, as well as for design and implementation of the program. For this question, however, responses centered more on youth development and managing individual and group dynamics. Of the 10 responses to this question,

60% provided an answer that could be categorized as the desire to learn an asset-based approach to working with students on behavior management and successfully navigating group dynamics. Furthermore, staff indicated it is important to learn about working with young people to keep them engaged in meaningful activities with appropriate guidance and materials.

In essence, staff members had been provided trainings that were helpful in the operation of a classroom or execution of a program—topics focused more on creating structure and expecting students to respond appropriately once the structure is in place. While the trainings were useful, staff members also expressed a need to learn more about working with students in an asset-based approach, in order to provide an experience that would demonstrate their ability to be caring and competent as leaders and role models. Often, training opportunities were provided to site coordinators with the expectation that the information would be shared with frontline staff. This may have been effective in some instances, but not in all. There were times when it was important to involve frontline staff directly.

In order to further build upon the strengths of staff members, continue their development, and demonstrate support for their professional growth, both frontline staff and site coordinators felt significant value existed in providing coaching and mentoring from seasoned professionals. While a variety of approaches to mentoring were described, one staff member suggested they visit other high performing middle school afterschool programs to observe and learn best practices. This suggestion was met with a favorable response from all members of the focus group.

Based upon all responses on this topic, it is evident that the strategy for operating an afterschool program that is bolstered by quality staff is not easy, nor does the same approach work for all programs. It is, however, crucial for success. In order to hire and retain staff

members who will create a successful afterschool program, it is necessary to focus on more than just one component of hiring and development. By incorporating a multi-level approach, the afterschool staff will be capable and qualified for the job at hand. Hiring the correct person at the outset is a key component for success, but it is not enough to stop there. A multi-level approach includes the hiring process and training at the time of on-boarding, as well as continued education and training for all levels of staff. By continuing to train and develop staff members, will ensure their job capability and demonstrate their genuine value to the program. If staff members feel valued, retention will increase. When staff retention is strong, the program becomes more robust and solid. With a stronger program, attendance numbers among students will become more stable.

### **Summary**

By examining students' perspectives about what matters to them regarding their attraction to an afterschool program, the choices they make about the activities in which they participate, and their involvement in decision-making processes related to program design and implementation, I was able to discover how students' participation in afterschool programs was affected by program design, staff hiring practices, and staff development. Additionally, by examining staff perspectives on what is important to youth and comparing these data to what youth expressed, I was able to discover gaps between what staff think they know about how they are meeting the needs and interests of students participating in afterschool programs and what youth themselves report. These findings indicate that more time should be spent on social-emotional awareness training, development of authentic relationships with each student, and improvement of the culture of programs.

In the next chapter I examine the implications of these findings and make recommendations for practice and policy. I also identify limitations of the study and discuss possibilities for future research on middle school afterschool programs.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Through this research study, I examined students' perspectives about what matters regarding their attraction to attending afterschool programs, the choices they make about activities, and their involvement in decision-making processes related to program design and implementation. In so doing, I was able to discover how their participation in these programs has been impacted by program design, staff hiring practices, and staff development.

Additionally, staff members' perspectives about professional development and prior experience revealed the need for ongoing learning opportunities and innovative hiring practices. These components of effective afterschool programs are often overlooked, even though they help to maintain a consistent staff and minimize turnover.

I utilized a convergence approach to identify and address how the interconnectedness and interdependence of these findings may impact the continuum of students' attendance and participation through engagement and retention, as well as provide staff with the knowledge, skills, and competence needed to aid students in their endeavors. The findings are contextualized in learning theory, engagement, meaningful and productive choice, positive relationships, professional learning, and hiring practices. The findings also provide empirical support for two useful frameworks: the Learning In Afterschool and Summer (LIAS) Learning Principles (Piha, 2010) and the Quality Standards for Expanded Learning Programs in California (California AfterSchool Network, 2014).

In this final chapter, following a more detailed summary of the findings, I discuss the implications of the research related to the practice within the field of afterschool and for policy

and future research, as well as associated recommendations for each. Finally, I acknowledge the limitations of the study and summarize the contributions of the inquiry to the field.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study addressed the problem of low attendance and growing attrition in middle school afterschool programs by examining two successful programs. The data I collected suggest that with the proper support and structure in place, afterschool programs can be designed to meet the needs and interests of middle school students in order to increase numbers and achieve program attendance goals. Three elements were found to be keys to fostering not only enrollment but also continued attendance for middle school youth in these programs: (a) alignment between what matters to youth and the content of the program; (b) thoughtful staff recruitment and development processes; and (c) meaningful collaboration between staff and students.

First, the evidence draws attention to the dangers of perceptual gaps between staff members and students regarding what matters most to students. I, therefore, discuss strategies for aligning staff and student perspectives so that other programs can replicate successful approaches to providing enhanced quality experiences that support engagement and retention. Second, I address staff members' perspectives on the need for a staff recruitment and selection process that can ensure the identification and hiring of the right candidate, thus minimizing staff turnover and positively impacting program attendance. Moreover, I address the need for purposeful, consistent, and engaging professional learning opportunities. Continued investment in professional development supports a consistent, competent staff, which is crucial to building and maintaining students' ongoing attendance. Finally, I describe the opportunity and value inherent in engaging youth in program development in a meaningful way.

This study shows that afterschool programs serving middle school students can both influence and play an important role in the lives of participants. Evidence points to the likelihood that such programs can reach their attendance potential if program administrators, site-based program staff members, and school leadership listens to what matters to youth and then act intentionally with those youth to create an expanded learning program culture. This combination of elements ensures that learning will be relevant and meaningful for program participants—two key factors that promote their personal growth and academic success while leading to retention in programs.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The findings from this study can inform afterschool program administrators, staff, and students about the gaps between student and practitioner perspectives and how they can adversely influence program participants' experiences. Recognition of these gaps can serve as a guiding influence on program design, practitioners' work, hiring practices, and professional development. The implications that I describe in this section are not about specific plans to magically correct attendance problems, but rather ideas about how to strategize and maximize a process of identifying what is needed, making time, and defining what solutions should look like in order to reach attendance goals.

### **Convergence of Matteredness: Students' Interests are Multi-layered and Interconnected**

The traditional approach of addressing isolated components or conditions of an afterschool program does not provide adequate conceptual or normative means to meet the needs and interests of middle school youth. We must focus on understanding and meeting the multiple, varied, and layered needs and interests of this adolescent group. This is an essential component of supporting their attendance, participation, involvement, engagement, and retention. A one-

size-fits-all approach to attracting and supporting students in afterschool programs is not effective.

The current study has shown that middle school youth who participate in afterschool programs are attracted to five aspects, in the following order: (a) the activities they get to go to; (b) learning new things; (c) doing better in school; (d) spending time with staff; and (e) spending time with their friends. These five characteristics can no longer be considered in isolation, as students highlighted their convergence with one another. Activities alone may initially attract youth to a program. However, as evidenced in the findings, if students are not doing better in school or learning new skills from an engaging staff member with expertise in the content areas of the activities that matter to students, it is likely they will not want to continue attending the program. This finding presents a new way of thinking by youth about their desired afterschool program experience.

The Venn diagram below (Figure 5.1) depicts what students in this study expressed as “really mattering” to them when they described their attraction to and interest in participating in their afterschool programs. This figure illustrates a shift from traditional approaches of addressing categories in isolation, to what I describe as the “convergence of matter-ness.” Here, categories intersect and overlap one another, creating a dynamic fit, with the sum offering so much more than the individual parts. It is important to note that although “Time with Friends” (noted as #5) was rated lowest of the five categories it was still rated “really mattering” and that spending quality time with peers in each of the other four categories was considered foundational to supporting them (almost an unspoken given). This model illuminates what youth described, and what I observed, regarding the connectedness of categories and a confluence of contributing

factors, and their relationship to a quality learning experience that further drives attendance by validating and meeting students' expressed needs and interests.

Convergence of Matterness: A Youth Perspective-Centered Model

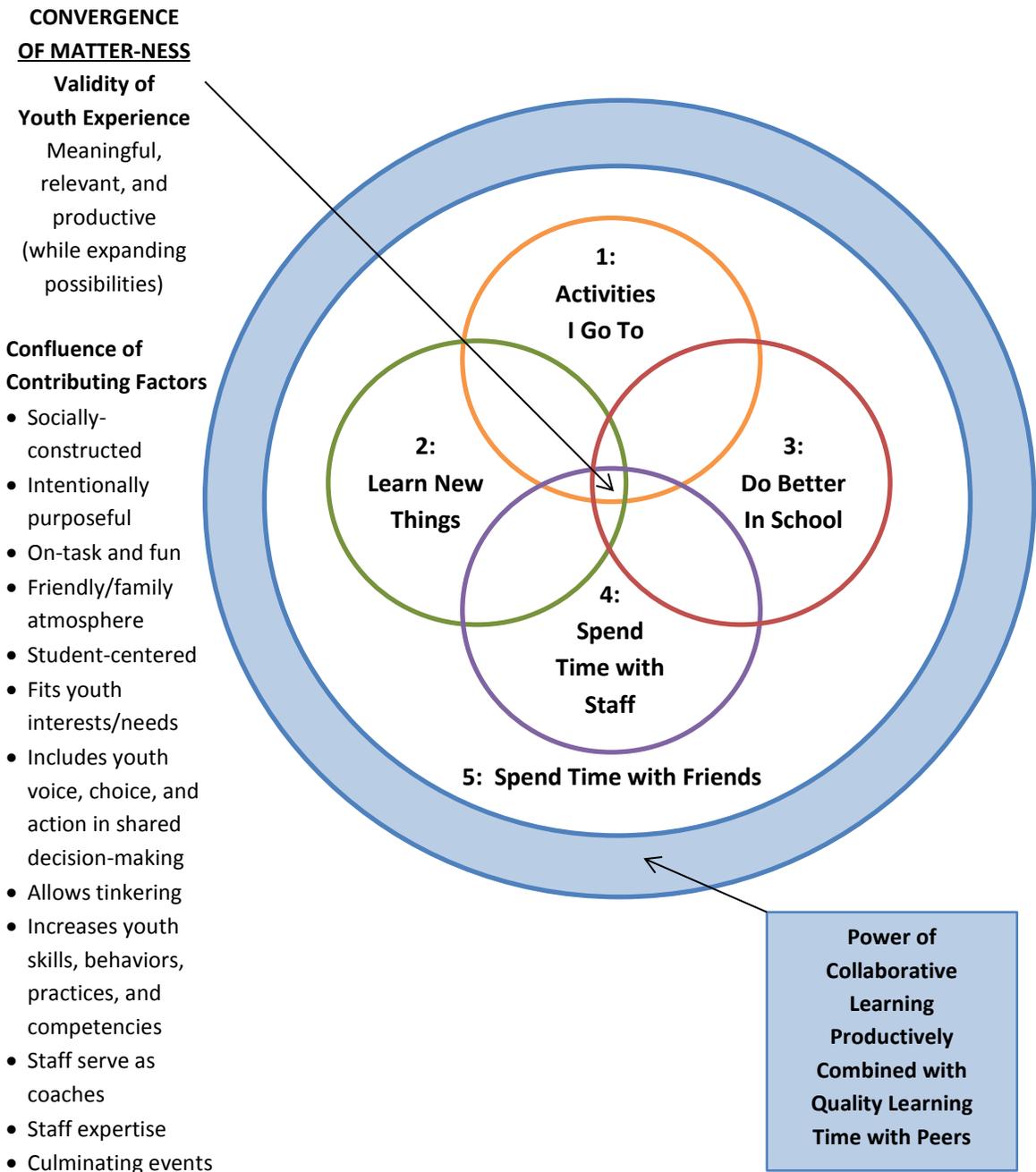


Figure 5.1. Convergence of Matter-ness: A Youth Perspective-Centered Model.

As reported by students, the continuum of participant attendance is supported by a foundation of elements including: (a) a program culture built on a physically and emotionally safe environment; (b) supportive relationships with peers and staff; (c) meaningful and relevant youth participation; (d) challenging and engaging learning experiences; and (e) strengthening of students' academic achievement and nurturing of their personal growth. Students move along the continuum between participation, involvement, engagement, and being enabled to lead and share in decision-making with adults (as appropriate), depending on the fit of the foundational elements to their satisfaction within the program. This is highly influenced by the relationships youth have with staff and the expertise each staff member demonstrates (enervated to robust), through the activities that they personally facilitate. This youth perspective should impact how organizational leaders design program process and content, as well as their hiring practices and staff development.

Students need to know they matter, that what matters to them is important to program staff and that it results in a program that reflects their expressed needs and interests. Staff needs to understand this youth-centered, matter-ness concept because it affects students' participation, experience, and learning within the afterschool program, which in turn impacts their satisfaction, engagement, and ultimately attendance. Staff must enact the convergence of the five characteristics to guide program development, maximize students' meaningful experiences, and drive attendance. Staff in this case is intentionally guiding youth through a learning process that includes exposure to new opportunities and the experience of exploring interests, while helping them to understand the "why" in addition to the "how" and "what" of learning.

## **Enjoyment in Learning**

Time and again, students at both sites shared that “having fun” was an essential ingredient of enjoying learning and wanting to learn. For example, students reported having fun while “playing” in the afterschool program. When I asked them to tell me more about what that meant to them, they described it as dabbling, exploring, and tinkering with new ideas and concepts to get really good at something that “really mattered” to them. Based on my conversations with students and observations of their participation, there seems to be a socially constructed notion of how “fun” and “play” may be mediated and defined at this age and stage of development by middle school youth.

Students also specifically talked about having fun in the context of more structured activities. For example, they talked about staying on task while working independently and listening to music at the same time; staying on task while working with a partner or chatting while multi-tasking on a group assignment; being in a group and being able to get serious about accomplishing an important task while having a good time doing it (versus to just do their work quietly, and often alone). Their enjoyment increased when the program and its staff members championed this notion of “having fun,” as contextually described above. Although “time with friends” was rated lowest of the five categories, it was still rated as really mattering. This suggests that youth perceive there is power in collaborative learning when it is productively combined with quality learning time with peers.

## **Learning must be Meaningful**

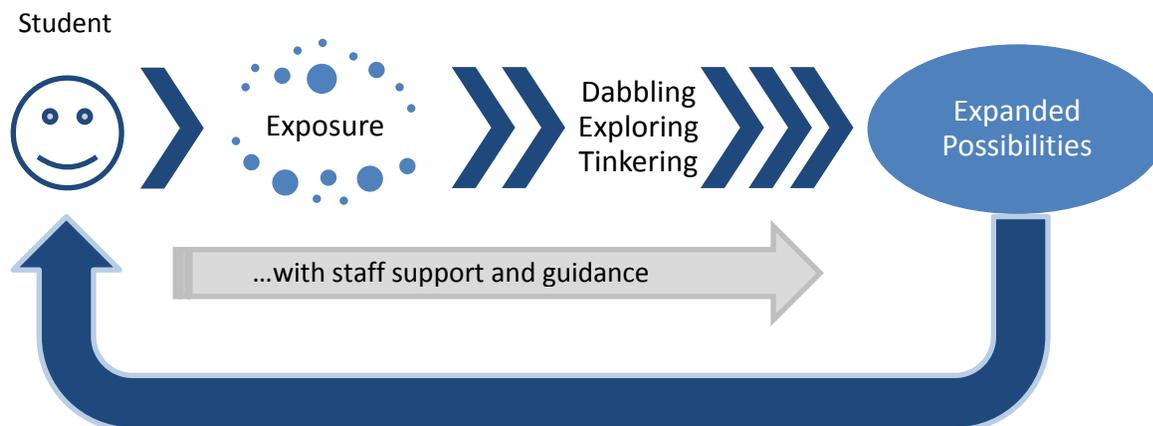
The validity of students’ experience is important to them, and it really matters when they are considering whether to continue attending an afterschool program. Put another way, learning needs to be meaningful and embedded in activities that are important to youth. Opportunities for

young people to integrate skills they have learned in the instructional day with activities offered in an afterschool program allow them to explore and find their passion through different exposures, forms of play, and tinkering. Their play and fun have a purpose. Students seek staff members who create a supportive environment for them to grow, learn, and experience new things. For students, having a positive future image of self really matters, and being supported by staff members who help them explore, both academically and through enrichment opportunities, also really matters.

Figure 5.2 illustrates what students described as their desire to have an experience where they felt enabled, supported, and listened to, and where staff members fostered both their sense of self and a purposefully designed learning environment. The figure depicts the process by which a program can achieve the “convergence of matter-ness” (as depicted in Figure 5.1, arrow to the center). Moreover, it shows the circular validity of experience a middle school student is seeking.

The cycle begins with an interest in or attraction to the afterschool program. The first experience will include dialogue with a staff person and exposure to activities where students discover as they dabble, explore, play, and tinker with concepts and skills development. As they get really good at something, they further expand their possibilities. It is a repetitive sequence of events in a process that can play over and over as youth move further along the Participation–Involvement–Engagement (PIE) Continuum (depicted later, in Figure 5.3) while immersing themselves in deep learning and propelling their attendance, participation, involvement, and engagement.

## Validity of the Learning Experiences Continuum and Process

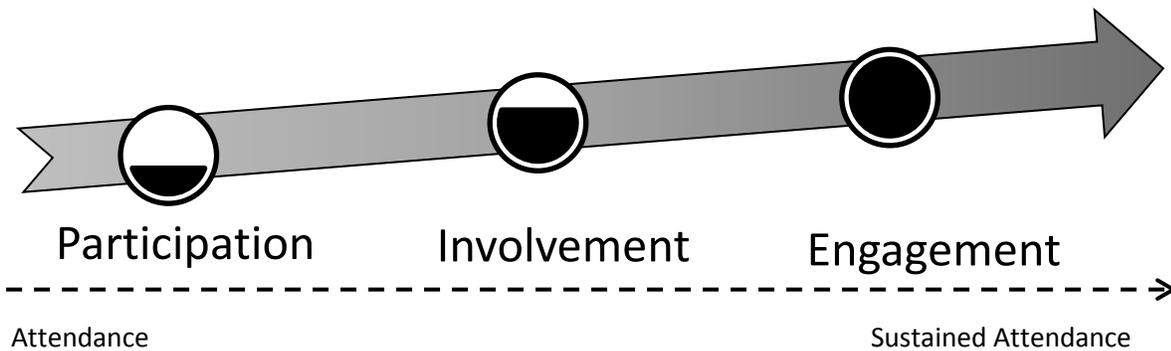


*Figure 5.2. Matter-ness matters: Validity of the Learning Experiences Continuum and Process.*

### **Continuum of Quality Learning Experiences**

In order to increase program attendance, students must first enroll in the program and then begin attending on a regular basis. Recruiting and retaining students are two different sides of the same coin, each challenging in its own way—though retaining students is arguably harder to do. To illustrate the trajectory of student attendance and to link it to student retention, Figure 5.3 illustrates the youth development and engagement approach and the continuum of quality learning experiences youth described as they moved from simply participating to becoming fully engaged. Specifically, this model refers to one’s degree of taking part in an activity and the increased levels of experience that expand possibilities for deeper engagement, immersion, and frequency of attendance. The presumption is that more opportunities for experience, combined with deeper levels of learning, understanding, and getting really good at activities of personal interest, will make students more likely to attend and immerse themselves in afterschool programs. I refer to this as the Participation–Involvement–Engagement (PIE) Continuum.

### Participation–Involvement–Engagement (PIE) Continuum



*Figure 5.3.* Participation–Involvement–Engagement (PIE) Continuum. Linking attendance and engaged learning experience to retention through the Participation–Involvement–Engagement (PIE) Continuum.

Overall the program design should be additive and the structure for participation should be consistent while the content remains flexible. Learning should be designed as participatory, active, meaningful, and productive, giving students a chance to learn in ways that are different from the instructional day classroom. Learning with increased participation, engagement, and action requires an intentional and authentic scaffolding of socially constructed ways for youth to experience the program and to link their progress along the PIE Continuum.

Based on students’ perspectives and input, staff will need to envision what their participation can be. Together with youth they can then create the means for students to gain the capacity to define participation on their own terms. This dynamic fit will help students understand the support they have to make informed choices and share in balanced opportunities for decision-making as a steward of the program, which in turn will increase their interest and attendance in the afterschool program.

#### **Program Staff Hiring Practices**

As is evident from the discussion so far, the staff in afterschool programs is an essential component in student retention. Afterschool administrators and program managers should

consider innovative hiring practices to attract and retain staff members who will work with and support middle school students in expanded learning environments. For example, marketing on college campuses and through social media would help identify candidates from a variety of settings. Moreover, resumes may describe skill, but group interviews demand that candidates put interpersonal and relevant knowledge skills for a particular position to the test. Seasoned staff from within the organization and youth participants can both observe group interview interactions, and each can provide unique insights that a hiring manager might overlook in a traditional hiring process. If policy allows, a prospective candidate could also lead an activity with a group of youth. This is an asset-based approach to gauging whether or not potential candidates will be the right fit for the job and have staying power for the long run.

Adolescents are articulate and savvy in describing the type of staff person who can effectively meet their needs and interests in an afterschool program. Building organizational capacity means attracting and retaining staff members who can serve as role models, academic coaches, and enrichment specialists. They must be highly qualified and formally educated team members who can relate to today's middle school students. Helping staff develop an understanding of the important role they do play in students' attendance and participation is essential.

Youth craves genuine and authentic relationships, and they seek connections with staff members who are confident and can serve as role models. Additionally, they view staff with the required two years of college/vocational education as being at a higher professional level than if they only pass the instructional aide requirement. Those two years of advanced, formal learning, in addition to their academic focus and activity teaching expertise, lend credibility to staff members' status in the eyes of the students. Staff members also serve as role models to the

students in regards to pursuing their own current and future academic pursuits. This connection could be very important in how students travel through life and view post-high school education and lifelong learning. This undergirding does impact the attention of students and their connections to staff and the afterschool program, and it helps retain youth in the program. Thoughtful consideration is necessary when designing staff positions, identifying position requirements, and considering the recruitment process, on-boarding, and available professional learning and development.

### **Staff Learning and Development**

If staff has received optimal training in adolescent development and youth engagement, they are comfortable in what they are doing and are better able to relate to students. That connection between students and staff is one of the critical elements in building and sustaining attendance. Moreover, the facilitation of youth development and provision of support to middle school-aged youth requires a stable, long-standing worker/student relationship that is built on trust and genuine caring. Highly trained staff members tend to foster more secure, appropriate relationships with youth and contribute to a program's success in attracting and retaining students who attend regularly. They are an important resource with a significant impact on the quality of services.

Moreover, students placed a good deal of importance on access to and contact with staff members who were going to college or vocational school, had advanced education, and could teach that knowledge and expertise to them. Some students saw staff as "coaches," and that title broadened the meaning beyond sports to include academics, life experiences, and successes, further setting students' mindset that staff members were there to really help them succeed.

These staff members also served as role models for the ongoing pursuit of education and learning.

Staff competence and their ability to connect with and care about youth is something that becomes more evident over time and is amplified with consistent professional development. Establishing protected time for site-based staff members' professional learning and development is one of the most frequently cited challenges within afterschool programs, however. Frontline staff at both of the already successful sites in this research reported a desire for increased professional learning opportunities. Moreover, they expressed that these opportunities should be specifically focused on understanding and meeting the learning needs and interests of middle school students (e.g., youth development, social-emotional awareness, and engagement strategies). These developmental opportunities should be offered regularly and frequently over time.

In light of Common Core standards, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) initiatives, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, College and Career Readiness standards, and the LIAS principles, staff members discussed the need for hands-on training with peers to assist in the acquisition of knowledge, skills, practices, procedures, and dispositions necessary for success in working with middle school students. Just as sequenced learning experiences are important for youth to build their skills, staff members expressed their need for time to build from awareness to expert use in these types of acquisitions. In order to fully invest in a continuous quality improvement cycle to improve student success, site coordinators and frontline staff need more opportunity for professional learning that offers deeper learning, coaching support, and engagement. Staff agreed they would, as a result, feel more confident and better prepared to

integrate academic content into enrichment activities that would energize students and support their ongoing attendance.

Effective professional learning is a fundamental component of promoting student attendance and establishing effective afterschool programs. Professional development should be focused on building staff members' youth development skills, content skills, and engagement strategies that directly link to participant development and their achievement. Program administrators must rethink traditional approaches, and staff must combine their increased knowledge and skills with the ability to facilitate expanded learning experiences for youth. Helping site-based staff develop a deeper understanding of the content they are teaching and the ways middle school-aged youth learn will improve their effectiveness. Learning opportunities will need to include protected time and opportunities for practice, reflection, and collaborative learning with peers, further supported by ongoing coaching from seasoned practitioners.

### **Staff and Students as Collaborators**

Both staff and students were more interested in participating in my study than I had anticipated. Staff members appreciated the opportunity to be observed in their work, and participating in this study did not seem like something that they found tedious and required, but rather it seemed like something they wanted to do. As such, afterschool programs and staff are a more fertile ground for research than scholars may have anticipated.

Moreover, students communicated at a deeper level of thoughtfulness and maturity than I had expected. Once they had a chance to reflect on their afterschool program experience, consider the opportunity to participate in a survey, and be interviewed, students at both sites spoke with dignity about their programs. It was important for me to hear what they had to say, and even more important that they knew that what they had to say mattered to me. By engaging

them in meaningful conversations about topics they were the expert in (their own experiences, interests, and attractions), I forged connections with them, and, therefore, built their desire to be involved.

It is important for the field of afterschool and the staff who work in expanded learning programs to know what matters to youth about their afterschool program experience. Youth should be included as viable partners when a topic is about or impacts them directly. These study participants were articulate and thoughtful, which underscores that adults should listen closely and in an authentic manner when youth are talking. As explained by an 11-year-old student in my final interview:

I think you asked the right questions because you asked the most important ones instead of ones about things that don't matter. I appreciate being asked about what matters to me and that you are really listening to me and the other kids. It can get frustrating when adults don't really care—you can tell because it is more about them than me or people my age. Thanks for doing this. We are lucky you are here.

On many levels, this shows how important it is for youth to be included by adults in program planning and how these interactions emphasize the connections students are seeking with adults in their afterschool programs. As I continued to visit these sites after the data collection phase, students and staff continued to check in with me, anticipating the findings of my study. They really wanted to know what I had learned about them and their program, and how it was going to help others.

Providing opportunities for students to share their input and to have shared decision-making with adults is essential in order to support a program culture rich with student

involvement. For students' increased engagement to occur, programs and staff must provide a meaningful continuum of opportunities for all students to experience sequenced activities that include their voice, choice, and action. This will enable youth to develop full ownership of the engaged learning experience, and for it to become legitimate in students' eyes. Improving staff members' youth development and engagement strategies will build students' satisfaction in the program, and further boost and sustain their attendance.

An important part of promoting authentic youth choice and voice is being ready to step back and let go, remembering there is more than one "right" way to do something. The role of the staff member is to be a "guide by the side" in order to allow students to experience the degree of risk and consequences of their own choices. Success and failure are learning opportunities that must be personally experienced, and afterschool programs can provide a safe space with guided support for these grounding experiences. Staff members can make simple but purposeful changes to program design to positively impact student attendance, participation, and experience. There can be a better match between the adolescent and the environment when there is a balance between positive staff control and shared decision-making among youth, and when students are taught self-efficacy and are being presented with higher but reasonable expectations. Indeed, both programs focused on helping middle school students learn how to make informed choices.

Students who feel they have an appropriate amount of choice and shared decision-making are more likely to feel empowered by a sense of control, purpose, and competence in their participation and increased motivation for engagement in, ownership of, and responsibility for their own learning. Ownership leads to having a stake in a program's success and reaching attendance goals, thus retaining maximum funding. Giving choice and allowing shared decision-making is about empowering students, so they are a part of the process and not powerless.

Having a choice and making informed, shared decisions is as much a motivator as a learning experience and a motivator for attendance.

### **Implications for Policy**

As the field of afterschool and expanded learning programs advances with a focus on quality learning experiences for all students, important questions continue to be asked about what the fundamental purpose and aligned outcomes for these programs should be, and to what extent public investment should be supported. With the move toward Quality Standards for Expanded Learning in California, for example, expanding and enhancing professional learning supports for site coordinators and frontline staff should be one of the state's first priorities. Having a vision for and supporting a professional pathway unique to afterschool for site-based staff is a critical missing element. Advocating for standards for a career ladder and relevant professional learning opportunities will contribute to the stability and support of a professional staff working in these positions while they in turn are building caring relationships and guiding young people in their achievement. A long-term plan, including scaffold learning opportunities, will require dedicated money, time, resources, and outcomes guided by an overarching vision and driven by local efforts designed to build staff competencies, support student attendance, and improve learning outcomes.

A review by the California Department of Education – After School Division (CDE-ASD) Systems of Support Policy Committee of the California education codes and recommendations for changes that need to be considered in order to allow for best practices to take place at middle school afterschool programs would be beneficial to all stakeholders. Furthermore, a review of systems, supports, and specialized technical assistance that are currently in place allowing for understanding middle school afterschool programs and their best

and promising practices is needed to provide consistent support to grantees and site-based staff, especially with respect to attendance practices. Finally, an assessment of the quality and effectiveness of the resources and tools that are available should be created by the California AfterSchool Network (CAN) in partnership with CDE-ASD and disseminated to grantees for their local use.

### **Implications for Future Study**

We must continue to explore why youth come to afterschool programs, why they stay, and how we can learn from successful programs to help solve the attendance crisis. We need additional research to develop replicable strategies that will help middle school programs build and sustain attendance and maximize opportunities for youth growth and development. Future research should include further discussion and exploration of the perspectives of youth and staff, and explore how the differences between the two perspectives can be narrowed. This will further support meaningful youth voice, choice, action, and shared decision-making that can consistently be embedded in afterschool program design. We also need more research on training and professional learning opportunities for site-based staff, specifically those working with middle school-aged youth in expanded learning environments. Likewise, scholars must explore program design that can support youth in their personal development and academic achievement. Also worthy of further study is how hiring practices can best attract and retain qualified staff members—staff members who are the right fit for the program and who can boost relationships with youth, support their engaged learning, and support their consistent attendance.

## **Key Implications with Associated Recommendations**

### **For Practitioners**

#### Key Implication

This study found student/staff relationships really mattered and were the primary relational factor in students continuing to attend the afterschool program. When hiring staff it is important to identify future employees who will be in these positions for the long haul and invest in training and development. With this said, there is a need to address staff development and allocation of funding for recruitment and hiring practices, initial training, and ongoing staff development. There will be an increased cost associated to recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining desirable and suitable staff.

#### Recommendations

- Restructure the roles and responsibilities of staff (as academic coaches, role models, and enrichment specialists) working with and supporting middle school students and specific adolescent needs during this transitional period.
- Ensure that adequate prerequisites for staff expertise align with the qualifications necessary for each staff person working within middle school afterschool programs.
- Revise the process for recruitment and hiring of staff to involve youth in the process.
- Work to shift the hiring mindset, as staff is often anticipated to be transient in nature. Create a culture to seek long-tem, committed staff.
- Create a career trajectory for site-based staff to see longevity and opportunity in their work.
- Hire for professional capacity.
- Hire for advanced education – students with two years, graduates, or retired educators.

- Invest in the quality of program staff.
- Rethink staff development and professional learning opportunities, as well as set aside protected time for and provide consistent and continuous supports including diverse and scaffold training, ongoing coaching, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities for site-based staff.

### Key Implication

Middle school afterschool programs serving middle school students are a crucial link between elementary school and high school. Program environments, activities, and learning for adolescents in middle school differ widely from those who are either younger or older. As such, the developmental appropriateness of the learning environment, activities, and engagement strategies needed to support learning also changes – and needs to look and feel different. There will be an increased cost, including resources, time, and money, associated to take afterschool programs to an adequate level focused on serving middle school students and to the next level of providing quality learning experiences.

### Recommendations

- All staff positions are not the same across afterschool programs: ensure that all staff members have the necessary qualifications to work with and support specifically middle school students in afterschool expanded learning environments.
- Staff members who work in these programs have specific professional development needs: establish a community of practice for middle school afterschool program staff to utilize as a collaborative learning space to share their problems in practice so they can learn from one another and build each-others' capacity. Site visits may be included as good educational and staff development opportunities.

- Create an environment where learning becomes fun and not tedious. Helping staff to be data-driven and to design student learning experiences that include a convergence of matter-ness based on the youth perspective is essential. To do this they must value youth voices and work with youth to incorporate their input into the design of programming.
- Programs provide/staff facilitate academic and enrichment activities that look different than the instructional day by being creative and make learning tangible, socially-constructed, hands-on, project-based, including friendly competition and culminating events, as well as fun for students. Activities and clubs should include the use of Technology, Common Core standards, STEM Learning, Career and College Readiness, Visual and Performing Arts, Sports, Personal Leadership, and Healthy Initiatives (i.e., physical activity, healthy eating, cooking, etc.), as well as Homework Assistance and targeted Academic Intervention support. Programs will require developmentally appropriate supplies (in ample amounts) to support attendance, participation, and engagement of students.
- Staff should receive training in Youth Development and Engagement, Adolescent Development for middle school students, Learning In Afterschool and Summer Principles, Social-Emotional Awareness, and Content specific to the activities being taught. As a result of this training, staff must combine their increased knowledge and skills with the ability to facilitate deeper learning experiences with youth.
- Provide middle school students with opportunities for choice, beyond surface level opportunities of choosing between pre-determined options to being able to create options for themselves. Actively involve youth with structured opportunities to make informed

choices and share in decision-making opportunities with staff about program design and activities of the afterschool program.

## **For Policymakers**

### Key Implication

Nationally, attention has focused predominantly on elementary grades. The 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funding allocation is for afterschool programs serving students in grades K-9. This is problematic because many opportunities offered to middle school students are grouped with programs serving students in elementary grades, instead of middle grades specifically. With more elementary students attending these programs, the needs of middle school students get squeezed out by the demands and needs of the majority of attendees. In California, additional focus has included setting aside funding specifically for programs to serve high school students. However, middle school students and middle school afterschool programs continue to be left out of the existing policy at both the national and state levels.

### Recommendations

- The government (state and federal) must take the first step in addressing the middle grades problems by signaling that middle school students and middle school afterschool programs represent a worthwhile investment.
- Recognize students at different adolescent grade levels need different levels of service and as such programs need increased levels of funding in order to cover costs and to meet student needs. Provide sufficient funding to ensure middle school afterschool programs are established to meet the unique demands of this adolescent age group.
- Generate a shift in perception of staff working in this field are viewed, from a disperse group of specialized laypersons to a professional body with specialized knowledge and

concentrated skills. This will also require creating jobs and career paths people want to stay in and allocating funds to assist the field of afterschool and programs to accomplish this.

- There is a need for the California Department of Education After School Division System of Support Policy Committee to review the California education codes impacting afterschool programs for recommendations of changes that need to be considered in order to best support middle school afterschool programs, including the provision of technical assistance.

#### Key Implication

This study found more collaboration and alignment between middle school afterschool programs and high school preparedness needs to exist to support a seamless transition in experience for students. Middle school students participating in afterschool programs are more likely to enter high school and stay if they have a strong foundation in learning experience, a vision for their future, and an end goal in mind (including promoting between grades, graduating, career aspirations, and continuing their education). There is a need to decide if middle school afterschool programs are a place to help solve the ongoing high school graduation issue.

#### Recommendations

- Require the integration of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in program offerings.
- Require the use of career and college readiness funds be available for use in afterschool programs.

## **For Researchers**

### *Key Implication*

There is a need for more empirical research on middle school afterschool programs, including qualitative case studies of purposeful sampled afterschool programs currently proficient in this area with middle school students. An expansion of the work I have done could help provide additional understanding about how socially-constructed learning environments support student participation, involvement and engagement while further increasing attendance and retention in afterschool programs and how generalizable this is to other programs.

### *Recommendations*

- Rethink the study of afterschool programs serving middle school students, not based on the current elementary school or high school models but via adolescent development of middle school students.
- Study what the expanded learning fields' understanding of youth voice, choice, action, and shared-decision making has to do with the elements of attendance, participation, involvement, engagement, and retention.
- Identify what authentic engagement means at the middle school level.

### *Key Implication*

More needs to be known about how to design 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for this population. With Common Core standards (in which 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are embedded) students are required to master skills so therefore it is important that middle school afterschool programs are coordinated to support this. Given the additional need to understand more about effectively reaching middle school youth specifically, a study might look at how to teach these skills to youth.

### Recommendations

- Help programs to identify types of programming students will come to gain 21<sup>st</sup> century skill sets (type of skills and how it can be done through afterschool expanded learning opportunities)
- Study middle school afterschool programs that are effective in creating these skill sets to learn specifically what does that look like.

### Key Implication

There is an emerging body of literature that is starting to note the value of afterschool programs as important context for teachers. My study suggests well designed middle school afterschool programs would be important learning vehicles for in-service middle school educators.

### Recommendations

- Study middle school teachers and compare the practices, behaviors, and attitudes of instructional day educators (with high levels of engagement) with afterschool program staff.
- Investigate ways instructional day content and structure is similar and different to afterschool programs, such that it would suggest ways for meaningful alignment between the two settings.
- Identify ways that instructional day and afterschool programs could meaningfully collaborate and learn from one another.

## **Contribution of the Study**

The findings from this study contribute to the current body of research on afterschool programs in several ways. I believe that my research can serve as an impetus for meaningful dialogue between youth and adults, where youth are seen as part of the solution to the attendance crisis rather than a cause. Furthermore, this research highlights the value of involving youth in conversations addressing topics that are about them or that impact their lives. We need to give them credit for their meaningful contributions and their ability to make a difference in their own lives. Engaging student voices in afterschool programs is a first step; the next step is acknowledging their contributions by acting on their recommendations, and finally recognizing them for who they are, what they know, and how their knowledge can impact policies and practices.

I am bringing to the forefront a pathway to discuss openly the different facets and complexities of the attendance crisis. The findings of this study can help build awareness and understanding of the complex factors that draw youth to afterschool programs and keep them there. The findings reveal that there is not a single stand-alone strategy for improvement with respect to attendance and retention. Thus, they can help drive the conversation along multiple paths. There is a constant change in the composition of attendance in an afterschool program, year-over-year a new class of students arrives and the older class of students departs. Because of that change, the conversation, the listening, and the acting are especially important because these data affect the current composition of participants in the current program year. This helps inform the field about what middle school students are thinking, and it encourages us to listen to what students have to say.

## **Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations to this descriptive, multi-site case study that should be considered. First, this study was conducted at two sites within one district with a relatively small number of participants. These two sites represent only a small number of middle school afterschool programs in the district, region, and country. In addition, the study was intensive and employed a variety of methods, but it was conducted over a relatively short period of time (three months), further limiting the inclusion of additional research sites.

For the purposes of generalizability, one cannot assume the research sample is representative of the majority of middle school students, site staff, or middle school afterschool programs. Additionally, although it was a purposeful study designed to represent the perspectives of students and views of staff at two schools in one district—and as such it serves as a representative sample for these locations—the concise window of time may be too brief for exhaustive review. Lastly, the small group of students and staff enabled significant participation by each group at each site in the study, providing a robust understanding of their perspectives and views. Without interviewing all students at each site, however, the conclusion that they are indicative of the program sites as a whole is tentative at best.

This study is also potentially limited by my own biases as the principal researcher. I engaged in this work with an existing theoretical framework in mind, and that frame could possibly have influenced me to interpret data to fit my framework and assumptions. I attempted to mitigate my biases in this process by using multiple methods of data collection, as well as contracting an outside company for transcription services, working with two outside researchers to assist me with coding and interpreting interview and focus group data, and using triangulation to corroborate my findings.

## **Conclusion**

Attendance issues are a frequent topic of conversation among middle school afterschool practitioners. At issue, middle school afterschool programs have not received specialized attention regarding program improvement or a system of support to address fully these issues. The primary focus has been on compliance and punitive enforcement of fiscal reductions due to low attendance. Much more attention needs to be placed on efforts to familiarize program administrators, staff teams, students, technical assistance providers, and policymakers with the strategies and supports necessary to ensure that practitioners are able to design programs, hire staff, and provide professional learning opportunities that raise attendance rates of middle school-aged youth.

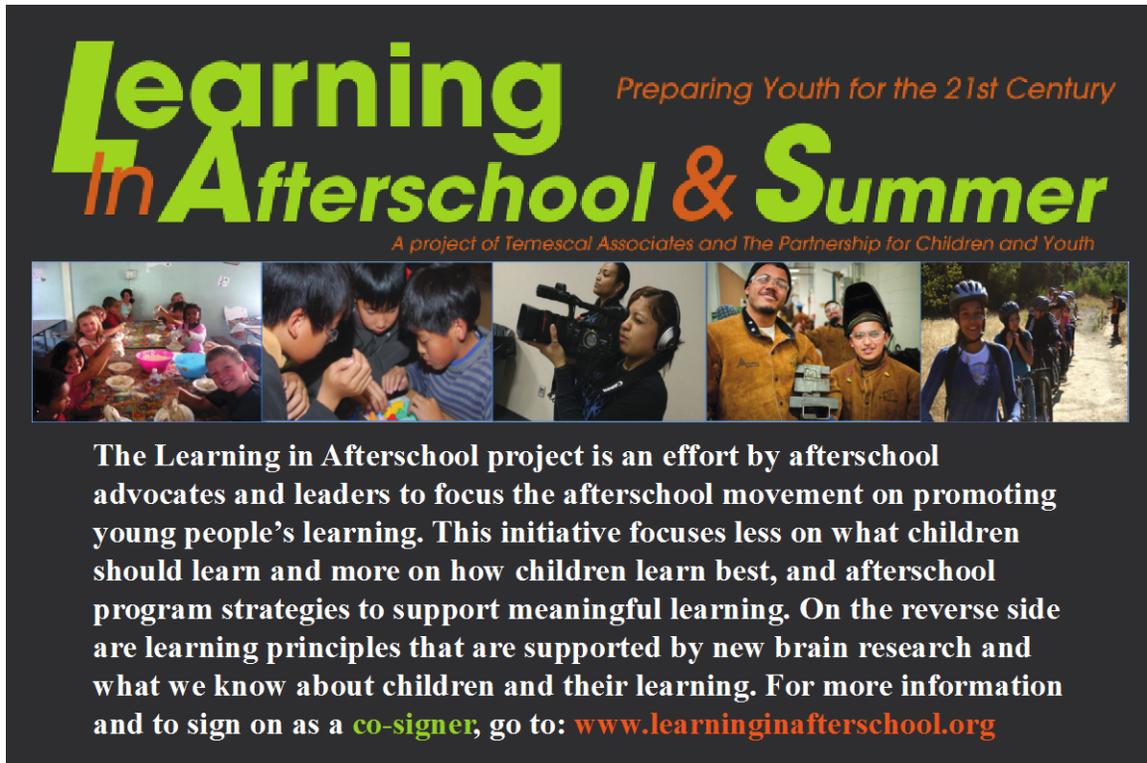
A student's motivation comes from within, when they are interested in and challenged by learning and engaged with caring staff. Youth and adults will benefit from establishing learning environments for their programs together. Ideally, they will create norms and expectations for how they will work together and hold each other accountable. This supports the idea that learning is something that students do actively as stewards in their own development, and staff members do with them as guides by their side. Attempts to provide positive youth development and consideration of compelling topics, connections to interests, personal relevance, and meaningful authentic experiences should include youth voice, choice, and action, as well as shared-decision making with adults. Based on the findings of this study, it seems likely that participation will increase and learning will be evident as youth develop skills through interaction with staff members and one another.

The time has come to pay closer attention to the middle grades. The field of afterschool in California has focused on programs at either end of the K–12 expanded learning continuum,

while middle school afterschool programs and participants have remained lost in the middle. There is too much at stake for youth and for the field of afterschool to delay fully addressing this age group. Students have a lot to say about why they come to these programs and ultimately what will keep them coming back. They are fully capable of making insightful and meaningful contributions to the dialogue regarding the middle school afterschool attendance crisis. These research findings point to possible paths and strategies to alleviate the middle school afterschool program attendance crisis. This breathes new life into finding solutions that are beneficial and rewarding to all.

## APPENDIX A

### LEARNING IN AFTERSCHOOL & SUMMER POSTCARD



**Learning** *Preparing Youth for the 21st Century*  
**In Afterschool & Summer**  
*A project of Temescal Associates and The Partnership for Children and Youth*



The Learning in Afterschool project is an effort by afterschool advocates and leaders to focus the afterschool movement on promoting young people's learning. This initiative focuses less on what children should learn and more on how children learn best, and afterschool program strategies to support meaningful learning. On the reverse side are learning principles that are supported by new brain research and what we know about children and their learning. For more information and to sign on as a **co-signer**, go to: [www.learninginafterschool.org](http://www.learninginafterschool.org)

### **1. Learning that is Active**

Learning and memory recall of new knowledge is strengthened through different exposures – seeing, hearing, touching, and doing. Afterschool activities should involve young people in “doing” – activities that allow them to be physically active, stimulate their innate curiosity, and that are hands-on and project-based.

### **2. Learning that is Collaborative**

Afterschool programs should help young people build team skills that include listening to others, supporting group learning goals, and resolving differences and conflicts. Collaborative learning happens when learners engage in a common task where each individual depends on and is accountable to each other.

### **3. Learning that is Meaningful**

Learning is meaningful when youth have some ownership over the learning topic, the means to assess their own progress, and when the learning is relevant to their own interests, experiences, and the real world in which they live. Community and cultural relevance is important to all youth.

### **4. Learning that Supports Mastery**

If young people are to learn the importance and joy of mastery, they need the opportunity to learn and practice a full sequence of skills that will allow them to become “really good at something.” Afterschool activities should be explicitly sequenced and designed to promote the layering of new skills.

### **5. Learning that Expands Horizons**

Afterschool programs should provide learning opportunities that take youth beyond their current experience and expand their horizons. They should go beyond the walls of their facilities to increase young people’s knowledge of their surrounding neighborhood and the larger global community.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **SITE DESCRIPTIONS**

#### **Site 1: Crusader Afterschool Program**

If one stands in the middle of Crusader Campus and looks to the south, the downtown high-rises are in striking contrast against the blue sky. There is a panorama of tough neighborhoods plagued by poverty and besieged by territorial gangs, well-known business districts amassing wealth unfamiliar to the families of youth attending Crusader, and communities named for the inhabiting immigrants that demarcate the surrounding areas within the visible three mile radius of this school located in the heart of Central Los Angeles. Gang graffiti is present on campus and just beyond the school's chain-link fence. Campus murals often need touching up, and an apartment building and church across the street continue to be tagged by gangs that stake the space nightly. Fresh paint covers the tags weekly. Safety is a top priority for this site. The campus remains closed to the public and is patrolled by school safety members until 6:00 p.m.

The afterschool program at Site 1 was operating 16 hours per week, and was staffed daily by one site coordinator and four frontline staff. Additional support was provided to the program by a traveling program supervisor and other administrative personnel within the MSA's off-site administrative office. The afterschool program also received onsite support from the school principal and designated teacher liaisons and support staff, including individuals from the janitorial, safety, and front office teams. The program was being overseen by the district's middle school agency.

On average, 90 students attended the afterschool program. Their ages ranged from 10 to 14 years of age. Approximately 18% were sixth graders, 29% were seventh graders, and 53%

were eighth graders. Across all grade levels, 55% of participants were boys and 45% girls. Student racial/ethnicity reflected the instructional day demographics: 99.7% Hispanic; 0.1% African American; 0.1 % White; 0.1% Asian.

As shown in Table 3.1, daily program activities at Site 1 included check-in, snack/meal time, program components activity time, and sign-out. Daily program activities included Math Lab, Learning Zone, sports, dance, and Student Leadership Committee (on Wednesdays only). Students at Site 1 did not have to participate daily in academic assistance, and the program activities schedule did not include rotations between components. Students who chose to begin in either enrichment activity were permitted to do so for the entire day. Most of these students did not identify themselves as being in need of academic assistance on a daily basis unless their grades were slipping. Students who began their time in the afterschool program in either academic assistance component were permitted to rotate to any other activity once they had achieved their homework demands for the day.

Table 3.1

*Site 1 Afterschool Program Schedule*

<b>Site 1: Afterschool Program Schedule</b>				
<b>Monday</b> 3:06 – 6:06	<b>Tuesday</b> 2:05 – 6:00	<b>Wednesday</b> 3:06 – 6:06	<b>Thursday</b> 3:06 – 6:06	<b>Friday</b> 3:06 – 6:06
<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 3:06 – 3:40	<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 2:05 – 2:40	<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 3:06 – 3:40	<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 3:06 – 3:40	<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 3:06 – 3:40
<u>Components</u> 3:40 – 5:56	<u>Components</u> 2:40 – 5:50	<u>Components</u> 3:40 – 5:56	<u>Components</u> 3:40 – 5:56	<u>Components</u> 3:40 – 5:56
<i>Academic Assistance</i> Math Lab Learning Zone	<i>Academic Assistance</i> Math Lab Learning Zone	<i>Academic Assistance</i> Math Lab Learning Zone	<i>Academic Assistance</i> Math Lab Learning Zone	<i>Academic Assistance</i> Math Lab Learning Zone
<i>Enrichment Clubs</i> Dance Sports	<i>Enrichment Clubs</i> Dance Sports	<i>Enrichment Clubs</i> Dance Sports Leadership	<i>Enrichment Clubs</i> Dance Sports	<i>Enrichment Clubs</i> Dance Sports
Sign-out 5:56 – 6:06	Sign-out 5:50 – 6:00	Sign-out 5:56 – 6:06	Sign-out 5:56 – 6:06	Sign-out 5:56 – 6:06

**Site 2: Olympian Afterschool Program**

Site 2 was located in the heart of East Los Angeles’s barrio, nestled in a densely populated area surrounded by traffic from four connecting freeways and set against a scene of rolling hills to the north and east. Atop higher ground within this predominately Hispanic immigrant working-class community, the site was located on a busy four-lane street separating local businesses from neighborhood homes. Colorful murals representative of the Hispanic heritage of the community were present. Narrow streets and fenced yards lined the surrounding neighborhood, where thick iron bars be found on windows for safety and security. The community has historically suffered from high gang activity, and gang graffiti was present just beyond the security of the school’s chain-link fence. Safety was a concern of Olympian youth and parents, although the afterschool program was very safe and located in a secure section of

the grounds. The campus was open after the bell rang, and while there were no security staff patrolling the grounds, all staff were alert to strangers and student safety.

The afterschool program at Site 2 operated 17 hours per week. The program was staffed daily by one site coordinator and seven frontline staff. A unique feature of this site was that the staff team was made up of the site coordinator, four frontline staff employed by the community based organization that oversaw the program, and three other frontline staff employed by the district's expanded learning branch (ELB). All staff worked together cohesively under the direction of the site coordinator. Additional support was provided to the program by a traveling program supervisor and other administrative personnel from the CBO off-site administrative office and the ELB team. The afterschool program also received onsite support from the school principal, designated teacher liaisons, and support staff, including individuals from janitorial, safety, and the front office.

Site 2 had an afterschool program daily attendance cap of 115 students. An average of 100 students attended this program each day. Their ages ranged from 10 to 14 years of age. Approximately 19% were sixth graders, 45% were seventh graders, and 36% were eighth graders. Across all grade levels, 38% of participants were boys and 62% were girls. Student racial/ethnicity reflected instructional day demographics: 99.8% Hispanic; 0.1% African American; 0.1 % White.

Daily program activities at Site 2 included check-in, snack/meal time, program components activity time, and sign-out. Daily program components included homework assistance and enrichment clubs, including sports, dance, band, music, cooking/baking, cheer, and anima (Fridays only). At Site 2, all students had to participate in academic assistance daily, and the program activities schedule did include rotations between components. Each day the

program began with a first rotation, including 60 minutes of academic assistance prior to the second rotation, into an enrichment activity for the remainder of the time.

Table 2

*Site 2 Afterschool Program Schedule*

<b>Site 2: Afterschool Program Schedule</b>				
<b>Monday</b> 2:49 – 6:00	<b>Tuesday</b> 1:43 – 6:00	<b>Wednesday</b> 2:49 – 6:00	<b>Thursday</b> 2:49 – 6:00	<b>Friday</b> 2:49 – 6:00
<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 2:49 – 3:20	<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 1:43 – 2:10	<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 2:49 – 3:20	<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 2:49 – 3:20	<i>Sign-in and Snack/Meal</i> 2:49 – 3:20
<u>Components</u>	<u>Components</u>	<u>Components</u>	<u>Components</u>	<u>Components</u>
Rotation 1 <i>Academic Assistance</i> 3:20 – 4:20	Rotation 1 <i>Academic Assistance</i> 2:10 – 3:10	Rotation 1 <i>Academic Assistance</i> 3:20 – 5:50	Rotation 1 <i>Academic Assistance</i> 3:20 – 5:50	Rotation 1 <i>Academic Assistance</i> 3:20 – 5:50
Rotation 2 <i>Enrichment Clubs</i> 4:20 – 5:50 Sports Dance Band Music Cooking Cheer Running	Rotation 2 <i>Enrichment Clubs</i> 3:10 – 5:50 Sports Dance Band Music Cooking Cheer Running	Rotation 2 <i>Enrichment Clubs</i> 4:20 – 5:50 Sports Dance Band Music Cooking Cheer Running	Rotation 2 <i>Enrichment Clubs</i> 4:20 – 5:50 Sports Dance Band Music Cooking Cheer Running	Rotation 2 <i>Enrichment Clubs</i> 4:20 – 5:50 Sports Dance Band Music Cooking Cheer Running Anima
<i>Sign-out</i> 5:50 – 6:00				

**Activity Components at Each Site**

Both program sites were supported through After School Education and Safety (ASES) funding. All state-funded ASES afterschool programs are required to offer a program with academic enrichment, physical/recreational activities, and a nutritious snack. Program components may be delivered internally by the district or they may be delivered by a collaborative partner, depending upon the identified needs and wishes of the specific school community. The district’s expanded learning branch (ELB) overarching program content

included: academic assistance, dance, student committee, recreation/sports/fitness, and a nutritious snack. As described above, both Site 1 and Site 2 provided these content components, and Site 2 provided additional offerings that fell within the requirements, including cheer, music, and other enrichment activities. Each of these component activities is described in greater detail in turn.

### **Academic Assistance**

Although the specific offerings can vary in each program, both research sites offered an academic component. The options ranged from general homework assistance to tutoring in one or more academic subjects. Operating under the goals of the district's superintendent, academic assistance was provided by trained personnel and designed to span the curriculum. Lesson plans were created for each day in order to support and promote academic achievement. These daily plans were designed to engage and educate students through age-appropriate support materials.

Site 1 fulfilled the academic assistance component by offering a "Learning Zone." This program was available during all program hours and provided library books, recreational reading materials, and literacy kits, along with other materials provided to enhance student performance in each academic subject. Also, an annual spelling bee and "battle of the books" were held to assist the school in meeting its yearly AYP benchmark. When competing in these events, students were engaged in vocabulary development while being exposed to state standards. Additionally, with a focus on achieving proficiency and above in math, Site 1 also collaborated with administrators and teachers to offer Math Club. The approach to learning could include tutoring, intervention, and support. The desired end result was for students to accomplish outstanding instructional-day required course assignments (RCAs) throughout the entirety of the program.

Site 2 offered a program called “Countdown.” All program participants began the afterschool program with 60 minutes of homework assistance, journal writing, and activities related to research skills, reading, study skills, literacy-based initiatives, and test preparation. Additionally, this site offered a reading club that exposed students to a wide variety of books. They tracked the number of books read, and engaged in story structure exercises, word games, journaling, and learning the art of storytelling. Ultimately, the goal was to improve reading comprehension and expand the vocabulary of the students.

### **Dance**

Dance programs at the two sites provided benefits beyond those related to physical activity. Students were given an outlet for expression that could help them get more in touch with themselves and the world. They were also exposed to different cultures and dance styles through this performing art. The varying styles included contemporary, hip hop, folk, modern, and jazz. Additional benefits of a dance program include personal development and leadership skills as students develop their creativity, self-discipline, and focus. Throughout the school year students were offered many opportunities to showcase their talents, incorporating all they had learned in the afterschool program. Competitions included citywide invitational events, dance team, a drill team, a talent show, a lip sync battle, an open house, and other special events.

### **Student Leadership**

Both program sites provided students the opportunity to become more involved and grow in their leadership skills. At Site 1, in student committee, some youth worked together to shape and facilitate afterschool special events (i.e., denim day and breast cancer awareness walk). Some students also had opportunities to become co-captains of either the dance or sports activities. Site 2 applied youth development principles in the design and delivery of programs,

events, and activities, which included youth participating in the activities that shaped their program experience.

### **Recreation/Sports/Health & Fitness**

Site 1 and Site 2 both collaborated with a prominent youth sports foundation in the area to run daily organized sports activities, including clinics, practices, league games, and tournaments. Each sport season was ten weeks long and consisted of two days of league play and three days of individual and team skill development per week. Concluding events included championship games, contests, and banquets. The goal of the middle school sports program was to give students opportunities to learn the values of responsibility, discipline, positive character, and life skills, and the importance of teamwork through sports. Students also increased dexterity, strength, and cardiovascular development. Afterschool athletes participated in flag football, basketball, softball, and soccer programs, and were invited to demonstrate their skills by competing in annual citywide invitational tournaments.

Both program sites partnered with other youth-serving agencies to offer additional opportunities, including a wrestling club, running club, and nutrition and cooking/baking club. Wrestling has become a popular choice for middle school boys and girls who are focused on staying in shape while honing their mental and physical skills. While participating in the running club, students practiced multiple times throughout the week to extend their mileage, increase their stamina, and get needed support from staff to finish what they started, which included preparation for and completion of the city's marathon. Site 2 also provided an alternative healthy option program with funding from corporate sponsors in the nutrition industry. The nutrition and cooking/baking club focused on helping young people make healthy nutrition and

lifestyle choices and gave participants the ability to prepare healthy and delicious meals using a research-based curriculum.

### **Cheer**

Ordinarily, cheer squad and drill team programs do not readily exist in inner-city communities. The costs associated with uniform fees, necessary footwear, competitions, and transportation generally prohibit low-income youth from participating in these types of sports activities. Site 2 offered students the programs at no cost, which was advantageous to the boys and girls who participated. With highly qualified coaches, youth trained for and focused on safety, progressions, stunts, competition choreography, etc. They competed at an annual culminating event, “The Challenge” cheer competition, where they had the opportunity to showcase their hard work and cultivated talents. Spirit squads performed routines, drills, and dances, and they competed annually for the coveted trophy in their pertinent category.

### **Music/Band**

Site 2 offered a music program within the afterschool program. Its goal was to teach the fundamentals of rock music and enable students to form bands, and to create, play, and perform the music they love. The program sought to help students develop positive self-esteem and outlooks on life, and to provide them with opportunities to grow as musicians and bring music to their community.

### **Nutritious Snack/Meal**

Afterschool programs can play an important role in improving the health and nutritional well-being of youth. A key strategy to reducing hunger and combating obesity includes providing youth with a daily nutritious snack or meal (or both) while participating in the afterschool program. Programs funded with ASES and/or 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funds must meet, at a

minimum, the California nutrition standards. Both research sites received nutritious meals through the district's food services division utilizing the federally reimbursable meals program, ensuring that the snack/meal items met the nutritional requirements set out in federal and state regulations. This food may be the only nourishment a young person receives between the afterschool program and the beginning of the next instructional day. And, if a young person does get food between the afterschool program and the instructional day breakfast, it is not likely to be healthy.

**APPENDIX C**

**RESEARCH QUESTION AND DATA SOURCE MATRIX**

<b>As of 1/13/15</b>		<b>Data Source</b>						<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Observation</b>
<b>Research Question and Data Source Matrix</b>	<i>Surveys</i>			<i>Interviews</i>					
	<b>Student Survey Questions</b>	<b>Site Coordinator Survey Questions</b>	<b>Frontline Staff Survey Questions</b>	<b>Student Interview Questions</b>	<b>Site Coordinator Interview Questions</b>	<b>Grant Manager Interview Questions</b>	<b>Frontline Staff Focus Group Questions</b>		
<b>Research Question</b>									
<b>1. What attracts middle school youth to attend afterschool programs, from the students' and staff members' perspectives?</b>	4,5,6,12	2,3,14	2,3,14	1,2,7,8,9	1,2,7	1,2,7	1,2,7	<b>Field Notes</b> Broad categorical headings to help frame but not prescribe observation	
<b>2. What activities do middle school youth choose to participate in during their afterschool programs and why?</b>	7,9	5,6,7	5,6,7	2,3	3	3	3		
2a). How do students make their participation choices?	7,8	4,5	4,5	2,3	3	3	3		
<b>3. In what ways are youth involved in planning activities and selecting materials within afterschool programs?</b>	10	8	8	4,5,6	4	4	4		
3a). Who (e.g., staff, students) makes those decisions?	10	8	8	4,5,6	4	4	4		
3b). To what extent are students involved in the decision-making and planning process?	10,11	8,9,10	8,9,10	4,5,6	5,6	5,6	5,6		
<b>4. What professional development and prior experiential learning does staff identify as most valuable in preparing them to work with middle school youth in afterschool programs?</b>	N/A	11,12,13	11,12,13	N/A	8,9,10	8,9,10,11	8,9,10		

## APPENDIX D

### SITE OBSERVATION TEMPLATE

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this template is to provide general categories for observation. The intent is not to create a prescriptive rubric or checklist for contextual happenings. Field notes should attempt to encompass all aspects of the learning context so as to uncover the ways in which relevant factors interact and consequently affect the social actors within the context itself. As such, this template consists of categorical headings/questions that are correlated to the research questions and that will help yield observational data that can contextualize survey, interview, and focus group findings. The headings and the bullets subsumed under them are not meant to be exhaustive, as new categories will emerge that are specific to the context.

NOTE: I will not be collecting names or any information that would make an individual identifiable as part of my observations.

---

#### **Program Entry:**

- What happens when students arrive?
- What do they do, whom are they talking to, what instructions are they given?

#### **What does the learning environment look like?**

- What is up on the walls?
- How is furniture arranged?
- What is the layout of the space?
- Is anything missing that would be helpful?

#### **What does learning look like?**

- How are activities organized—structure, content, etc.?
- What materials are being used and by whom?
- Does the learning context appear to be teacher- or student-centered?
  - When and in what ways?

#### **What are students doing?**

- Types of activities
- Ways of engaging in activities
- Ways of interacting with peers and staff
- How do they appear to be making choices about what they are doing—both activity type and tasks within an activity?

**What are the staff members doing?**

- How do the staff members interact with kids?
  - Do they ask questions? If so, what kind and in what circumstances?
- How do the staff members facilitate the activities?
- How are rules enforced?
- Do staff members demonstrate particular skill sets that appear effective for working with this age group?

**Other observations about student behavior:**

- Do students seem happy?
- Do students seem engaged in their activities?
- Do students seem to have close relationships with program staff?
- Do students interact with each other respectfully?

**SITE OBSERVATION**

**FIELD NOTES**

Site:	Date:
Activity:	Time:
Observing the Environment and Social Actors	
Rich and Thick Notes:	

**APPENDIX E**  
**STUDENT SURVEY**

**After School: Student Survey**

**Student Survey**

Please help me understand how you feel about your after school program. I would like to learn more about why you come and what you like to do once you're here. Please answer all of the questions- there are no right or wrong answers just your opinions.

**1. What grade are you in?**

6th grade

7th grade

8th grade

**2. Please identify your school site**

Site A

Site B

**3. Are you a boy or a girl?**

Girl

Boy

**4. Why do you come to this after school program? You can choose as many responses as apply.**

It is my parent's choice

I don't have anything else to do after school

My friends are here and I want to spend time with them

I like the kinds of activities that I get to do

I feel like coming here helps me learn new things

I feel like coming here helps me do better in school

I like to spend time with the program staff

Other (please specify)

**5. What about this after school program makes it feel like a place you want to go to?**

1

2

## After School: Student Survey

### 6. Please describe how you feel about the following statements

	Yes, I do	Sometimes, I do	No, I do not
I have fun in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like coming to this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel good about myself when I'm at this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel safe when I'm at this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like the staff care about me in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have friends in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like other students in the program treat me with respect	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think the rules are fair in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think this program looks and feels like a place for someone my age	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### 7. Do you get to choose what you do in the after school program?

- Yes, all the time       Some of the time       None of the time

## After School: Student Survey

### 8. Please describe how you decide what activities to participate in when you are at the after school program.

	I choose to do this because I'm interested in it	I choose to do this because I helped design it	I choose to do this because my friends do it	All students have to do this	My parents want me to do this	I don't do this
Homework Help	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Art	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cooking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drama	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jewelry making	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Band	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cheer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Science	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creative Writing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cultural Clubs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

### 9. Please describe how you participate in the activities that you choose to do. Select all that apply.

	This is important to me	It's kind of important to me	It's not important to me	It doesn't happen
I get to ask questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff ask me questions about my work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get to work on projects (activities that are longer than one day)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get to work with my friends on a project	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get to make decisions about my own work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff push me to think critically about what I'm doing or saying	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## After School: Student Survey

### 10. Please identify how you feel about the following statements

	Yes	Sometimes	No
I feel like I have a voice in what happens in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get to help decide what kinds of activities there are in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get to help choose the materials that are used for activities in the program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am asked my opinion about how activities are designed (what students get to do in an activity)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is important to me that I have a say in what happens in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### 11. Please identify the kinds of interactions that you have with program staff

	Yes, I do	Sometimes, I do	No, I do not
I talk to them about my life and personal stuff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I talk to them about what I want in the after school program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
They ask me how the after school program can be better	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
They ask me to work with my peers to come up with ideas for the program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### 12. Please describe what you think is most important for an after school program serving young people your age.

1

2

## APPENDIX F

### FRONTLINE STAFF SURVEY

#### After School: Front Line Staff Survey

##### Front Line Staff Survey

Please help me understand how students participate in your after school program. I would like to learn more about why they come and what they do once they're there. I'm also interested in how you prepare for your program. Your opinion matters so please complete all of the questions.

#### 1. How long have you been in your current position?

- Less than one year
- Between 1-3 years
- More than 3 years

#### 2. Why do you think your middle school students participate in your after school program? Please select all that apply.

- It is their parents' choice
- They don't have anything else to do after school
- Their friends attend and they want to spend time with them
- They like the content of the activities your program offers
- They like the structure of the activities your program offers
- They feel like they learn new things by participating in your program
- They feel like participating in your program helps them do better in school
- They like to spend time with you and your staff

Other (please specify)

## After School: Front Line Staff Survey

### 3. Please describe how you feel about the following statements.

	Yes, I do	Sometimes, I do	No, I do not
I think students have fun in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students like coming to this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel good about themselves in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel safe in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel cared about by the program staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think that students form positive peer relationships in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel respected by their peers in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel the rules are fair in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I develop close relationships with the students I work with	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### 4. Do students get to choose what they do in this after school program?

- Yes, all of the time       Some of the time       None of the time

## After School: Front Line Staff Survey

### 5. Please describe your perceptions about how students make decisions to participate in program activities.

	Because they are interested in it	Because they helped design it	Because their friends are doing it	Because staff encourage them	All students have to do this	Their parents want them to do it	They don't do this
Homework help	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Art	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cooking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drama	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jewelry making	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Band	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cheer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Science	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creative writing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cultural clubs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

### 6. Please identify the general nature of the learning activities offered in your program.

	All the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	None of the time
Teacher directed (e.g., adults deliver information to students and direct learning)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student-centered (e.g., students are involved in designing learning opportunities)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Project-based (e.g., activities span over the course of days/weeks with sequenced steps and culminating projects)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Activity-based (e.g., students engage in stand alone activities that last only one session)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## After School: Front Line Staff Survey

### 7. Please describe in general how you engage students in learning activities.

	All of the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	None of the time
I ask students open ended questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I ask students questions about their work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I provide longer term (more than one day) projects for students to work on	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I provide opportunities for students to work in groups with peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I encourage students to ask me questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I encourage students to ask their peers questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I encourage students to make their own decisions about their work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I push students to think critically about their ideas and their work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## After School: Front Line Staff Survey

### 8. Please describe how you design and implement program activities.

	All of the time	Some of the time	None of the time
I decide the content of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I decide the structure of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I decide what materials are needed for program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I work with my staff to decide the content of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I work with my staff to decide the structure of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I work with my staff to decide what materials are needed for program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I (or my staff) ask students for input on the content of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I (or my staff) ask students for input on the structure of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I (or my staff) ask students for input on what materials are needed for program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### 9. If students are involved in program design and implementation, please describe how this happens. Select all that apply.

- We survey all students
- We conduct focus groups with all students
- We have a student leadership team that provides input
- We have informal conversations with students

Other (please specify)

## After School: Front Line Staff Survey

**10. What kind of professional development have you found most valuable in preparing you to work with middle school youth in an after school program?**

**11. What kind of professional development do you feel you still need to be better prepared to work effectively with middle school youth in an after school program?**

**12. What kinds of life experiences have you had that have helped prepare you to work effectively with middle school students in an after school program? Please provide at least two examples.**

1

2

3

**13. Please describe what you feel are the most important components of an after school program serving middle school students.**

1

2

## APPENDIX G

### SITE COORDINATOR SURVEY

#### After School: Site Coordinator Survey

##### Site Coordinator Survey

Please help me understand how students participate in your after school program. I would like to learn more about why they come and what they do once they're there. I'm also interested in how you prepare for your program. Your opinion matters so please complete all of the questions.

#### 1. How long have you been in your current position?

- Less than one year
- Between 1-3 years
- More than 3 years

#### 2. Why do you think your middle school students participate in your after school program?

**Please select all that apply.**

- It is their parents' choice
- They don't have anything else to do after school
- Their friends attend and they want to spend time with them
- They like the content of the activities your program offers
- They like the structure of the activities your program offers
- They feel like they learn new things by participating in your program
- They feel like participating in your program helps them do better in school
- They like to spend time with you and your staff

Other (please specify)

## After School: Site Coordinator Survey

### 3. Please describe how you feel about the following statements.

	Yes, I do	Sometimes, I do	No, I do not
I think students have fun in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students like coming to this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel good about themselves in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel safe in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel cared about by the program staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think that students form positive peer relationships in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel respected by their peers in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think students feel the rules are fair in this program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I develop close relationships with the students I work with	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### 4. Do students get to choose what they do in this after school program?

- Yes, all of the time       Some of the time       None of the time

## After School: Site Coordinator Survey

### 5. Please describe your perceptions about how students make decisions to participate in program activities.

	Because they are interested in it	Because they helped design it	Because their friends are doing it	Because staff encourage them	All students have to do this	Their parents want them to do it	They don't do this
Homework help	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Art	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cooking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drama	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jewelry making	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Band	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cheer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Science	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creative writing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cultural clubs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

### 6. Please identify the general nature of the learning activities offered in your program.

	All the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	None of the time
Teacher directed (e.g., adults deliver information to students and direct learning)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student-centered (e.g., students are involved in designing learning opportunities)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Project-based (e.g., activities span over the course of days/weeks with sequenced steps and culminating projects)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Activity-based (e.g., students engage in stand alone activities that last only one session)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## After School: Site Coordinator Survey

### 7. Please describe in general how you engage students in learning activities.

	All of the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	None of the time
I ask students open ended questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I ask students questions about their work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I provide longer term (more than one day) projects for students to work on	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I provide opportunities for students to work in groups with peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I encourage students to ask me questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I encourage students to ask their peers questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I encourage students to make their own decisions about their work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I push students to think critically about their ideas and their work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## After School: Site Coordinator Survey

### 8. Please describe how you design and implement program activities.

	All of the time	Some of the time	None of the time
I decide the content of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I decide the structure of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I decide what materials are needed for program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I work with my staff to decide the content of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I work with my staff to decide the structure of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I work with my staff to decide what materials are needed for program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I (or my staff) ask students for input on the content of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I (or my staff) ask students for input on the structure of program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I (or my staff) ask students for input on what materials are needed for program activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### 9. If students are involved in program design and implementation, please describe how this happens. Select all that apply.

- We survey all students
- We conduct focus groups with all students
- We have a student leadership team that provides input
- We have informal conversations with students

Other (please specify)

## After School: Site Coordinator Survey

**10. What kind of professional development have you found most valuable in preparing you to work with middle school youth in an after school program?**

**11. What kind of professional development do you feel you still need to be better prepared to work effectively with middle school youth in an after school program?**

**12. What kinds of life experiences have you had that have helped prepare you to work effectively with middle school students in an after school program? Please provide at least two examples.**

1

2

3

**13. Please describe what you feel are the most important components of an after school program serving middle school students.**

1

2

## APPENDIX H

### STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Proposed Interviewees

A random sample of at least 10 students (final number per site to be determined) from each research site will be selected to participate in a brief interview. The purpose of the interview is to contextualize student survey responses. As such, this protocol contains broad thematic questions that will serve as a springboard for more targeted, probing questions. These emergent questions will then uncover the latent rationale and thought processes underlying student responses.

#### Interview: Opening/Confidentiality/Data Use

- Interviews will be anonymous and no student will be identified by name at any point. Only school site affiliation, age, and gender will be used to group student responses.
- The primary purpose of student interviews is to provide more descriptive data that help to expand upon and explain patterns identified in student survey analysis.
- The same instructions will be given to all students participating in the interviews:
  - This interview should take about 15 minutes and you are free to stop the conversation at any time. All of the information that you share will be confidential and your name will not be attached to anything you say. I would like to learn more about why you come to this afterschool program and also how you make choices about what to do once you're here. I would like to tape record our interview—is that ok? I will be the only person listening to the tape. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

#### Interview: Questions

1. Please describe why you come to this afterschool program.
  - a. What brought you here in the beginning?
  - b. What makes you want to keep coming back?
  - c. Does this program look and feel like a place for young people your age?
    - i. How so (or not)?
2. What do you think is most important about an afterschool program for young people your age?
3. What do you like to do when you're here? Why?
4. Do you get to choose what you do when you're here?
  - a. If yes, who allows you to choose and how do you make the choice, on a daily, weekly, monthly basis? How do you feel about this? Do other students have a choice also?
  - b. If no, who decides what you do? How do you feel about this?
5. Are you involved in planning the activities that happen in this program?
  - a. If yes, how? What is your role? How do you feel about your role? Are other students also involved?
  - b. If no, who plans the activities? How do you feel about this?
6. Are you involved in identifying what kinds of materials are used in program activities?
  - a. If yes, how? What is your role? How do you feel about your role? Are other students also involved?
  - b. If no, who plans the activities? How do you feel about this?

7. How do you feel about the rules in this program?
  - a. Who creates them?
8. How do you feel when you're at this program?
9. Tell me about the people in this program. Who do you spend the most time with and in what ways?
  - a. Peers?
  - b. Staff?

## APPENDIX I

### SITE COORDINATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Proposed Interviewees

Site coordinators from both sites (N=2) will be interviewed in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the rationale behind and context surrounding their survey responses. As such, this protocol contains broad thematic questions that will serve as a springboard for more targeted, probing questions. These emergent questions will then uncover the latent rationale and thought processes underlying site coordinator responses.

#### Interview: Opening/Confidentiality/Data Use

- Since there are only two research sites, it is possible that interview responses could be attributed to a particular site. Participants will be informed that their responses will be affiliated with their site and utilized to contextualize data collected from other stakeholders.
- The primary purpose of these interviews is to provide more descriptive data that help to expand upon and explain patterns identified in survey analysis.
- The same instructions will be given to all staff participating in the interviews:
  - This interview should take about 20 minutes and you are free to stop the conversation at any time. Your name will not be attached to anything you say but it is important that you understand that your comments will be affiliated with your school site data. As such, this interview cannot be truly anonymous. I would like to learn more about your perspectives on why middle school students attend your program and how they participate in program activities. I would like to tape record our interview—is that ok? I will be the only person listening to the tape. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

#### Interview: Questions

1. Please describe why you think middle school students come to this afterschool program.
  - a. What brings them here in the beginning?
  - b. What makes them want to keep coming back?
  - c. Does this program look and feel like a place for young people in middle school?
    - i. How so (or not)?
2. What do you think is most important about an afterschool program serving this age group (middle school)?
3. What do students typically do while they're at your program?
  - a. How do they make choices about what to do?
4. How are decisions made about program activities and materials?
  - a. Are students involved in this decision making process?
  - b. Do you feel it is important to involve students in making decisions about lesson planning and resource allocation?
5. If students are involved in program planning, then:
  - a. To what extent? By whom?
  - b. How often is student feedback solicited? How are student voices solicited?
6. Are students involved in deciding the rules in this program? If so, how?

7. In general, how would you describe the structure of learning activities in this program?
  - a. What are the students doing during an activity?
  - b. How are they engaged?
8. What kind of professional development have you found most valuable in preparing you to work with middle school youth in an afterschool program?
9. What kind of professional development do you feel you still need to be better prepared to work effectively with middle school youth in an afterschool program?
10. What kinds of life experiences have you had that have helped prepare you to work effectively with middle school students in an afterschool program?

## APPENDIX J

### GRANT MANAGER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Proposed Interviewees

The grant manager that oversees both sites (N=1) will be interviewed in order to gain an understanding of his/her perceptions about what motivates middle school students to attend and continue engaging in afterschool programs (both across sites and specifically for the site participating in this study). The grant manager will not complete a survey, which makes the interview the only data point for this stakeholder group. The interview data will help contextualize the interview and survey data provided by the site coordinator and site staff.

#### Interview: Opening/Confidentiality/Data Use

- This interview cannot be confidential because there is only one grant manager.
- The following instructions will be given to the grant manager participating in the interview:
  - This interview should take about 30 minutes and you are free to stop the conversation at any time. Your name will not be attached to anything you say but it is important that you understand that your comments will be affiliated with your program's data. As such, this interview cannot be truly anonymous. I would like to learn more about your perspectives on why middle school students attend your program and how they participate in program activities. I would like to tape record our interview—is that ok? I will be the only person listening to the tape. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

#### Interview: Questions

*\* Questions pertain to the program as a whole AND to the particular site involved in the research study.*

1. Please describe why you think middle school students come to your afterschool program—in general and specifically at the site participating in this study.
  - a. What brings them here in the beginning?
  - b. What makes them want to keep coming back?
  - c. Does this program look and feel like a place for young people in middle school?
    - i. How so (or not)?
2. What do you think is most important about an afterschool program serving this age group (middle school)?
3. What kinds of opportunities/activities exist for students in your program?
  - a. How do they make choices about what to do?
4. How are decisions made about program activities and materials?
  - a. Are students involved in this decision making process?
  - b. Do you feel it is important to involve students in making decisions about lesson planning and resource allocation?
5. If students are involved in program planning, then:
  - a. To what extent? By whom?
  - b. How often is student feedback solicited? How are student voices solicited?
6. Are students involved in deciding the rules in this program? If so, how?

7. In general, how would you describe the structure of learning activities in this program?  
That is, how is learning organized at the site?
  - a. What are the students doing during an activity?
  - b. How are they engaged?
8. What kind of professional development do you feel is most valuable in preparing your site staff to work with middle school youth in an afterschool program?
  - a. Have they participated in such professional development in the past year?
  - b. Do you have plans for them to participate in such professional development?
9. What kinds of life experiences do you think best prepare your site staff to work effectively with middle school students in an afterschool program?
10. What kinds of life experiences do you feel have informed your perspectives on middle school programming (e.g., design, content) in after school?
11. What (if any) professional development do you feel has informed your perspectives on middle school programming (e.g., design, content) in after school?

## APPENDIX K

### FRONTLINE STAFF FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

#### Proposed Participants

Two focus groups will be conducted with frontline staff from both research sites. There will be one group per site, with approximately 5–6 participants in each meeting. The purpose of these focus groups is to gain insight into the rationale behind and context surrounding their survey responses. As such, this protocol contains broad thematic questions that will serve as a springboard for more targeted, probing questions. These emergent questions will then uncover the latent rationale and thought processes underlying survey responses.

#### Focus Group: Opening/Confidentiality/Data Use

- Since there are only two research sites, it is possible that responses could be attributed to a particular site. Participants will be informed that their responses will be affiliated with their site and utilized to contextualize data collected from other stakeholders.
- The primary purpose of these focus groups is to provide more descriptive data that help to expand upon and explain patterns identified in survey analysis.
- The same instructions will be given to participants in both focus groups:
  - This focus group should take about 20–30 minutes and you are free to stop the conversation at any time. Your name will not be attached to anything you say but it is important that you understand that your comments will be affiliated with your school site data. As such, this focus group cannot be truly anonymous. I would like to learn more about your perspectives on why middle school students attend your program and how they participate in program activities. I would like to tape record our interview—is that ok? I will be the only person listening to the tape. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

#### Focus Group Questions

1. Please describe why you think middle school students come to this afterschool program.
  - a. What brings them here in the beginning?
  - b. What makes them want to keep coming back?
  - c. Does this program look and feel like a place for young people in middle school?
    - i. How so (or not)?
2. What do you think is most important about an afterschool program serving this age group (middle school)?
3. What do students typically do while they're at your program?
  - a. How do they make choices about what to do?
4. How are decisions made about program activities and materials?
  - a. Are students involved in this decision making process?
  - b. Do you feel it is important to involve students in making decisions about lesson planning and resource allocation?
5. If students are involved in program planning, then:
  - a. To what extent? By whom?
  - b. How often is student feedback solicited? How are student voices solicited?
6. Are students involved in deciding the rules in this program? If so, how?

7. In general, how would you describe the structure of learning activities in this program?
  - a. What are the students doing during an activity?
  - b. How are they engaged?
8. What kind of professional development have you found most valuable in preparing you to work with middle school youth in an afterschool program?
9. What kind of professional development do you feel you still need to be better prepared to work effectively with middle school youth in an afterschool program?
10. What kinds of life experiences have you had that have helped prepared you to work effectively with middle school students in an afterschool program?

## APPENDIX L

### ADULT STAFF PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

University of California, Los Angeles  
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

#### ADULT STAFF CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Understanding the Interests of Middle School Youth in Afterschool Programs:  
Youth and Practitioner Perceptions of the Conditions that Foster Young People's Desires to  
Attend and Participate

#### Afterschool Program

---

##### **Introduction**

My name is Michelle Perrenoud. I am a doctoral student at UCLA, and I would like to tell you more about a research study I will be conducting at the afterschool program in which you work.

The afterschool program was identified as a research site based on its high attendance by students. Based on recommendations from administrators, the program was also selected because of its diverse program activities, resources, and staffing.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you work within the afterschool program. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

##### **Why is this study being done?**

I am asking you to take part in a research study because I am trying to understand more about why middle school participants and their peers are interested to attend and how they participate in the afterschool program and activities. For example, I would like to know more about what attracts youth to come to the afterschool program or to choose a specific activity to participate in.

I am additionally interested to understand staff perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes about middle school youth interests and desires to attend and participate in afterschool programs. For example, I would like to know more about why you think middle school students come to the afterschool program and why they choose to participate in their chosen activities.

##### **What will happen if I take part in this research study?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, as the researcher I will ask you to participate in the following afterschool program study activities, depending on the position title you hold: participant survey (frontline staff and site coordinator); personal interview (site coordinator and grant manager); focus group (frontline staff). You will also be observed in your daily work activities and potentially asked verbal questions on occasion (frontline staff and site coordinator). You have the choice to participate in one, two, all, or none of the following activities (depending

on your position title) and acknowledge by agreeing to participate your responses may be audio recorded during verbal questions, personal interview, and focus group.

If you volunteer to be in this study, you will do what you usually do in the afterschool program: interact with youth and facilitate program activities. Participating in this research study does not mean that you will have to change anything you already do when you are working in the program. Participation in the survey, interview, and focus group components will be arranged to take place at a mutually determined time outside of your work hours.

### **Activities:**

1. **Participant Survey:** You will be asked to complete a participant survey because your opinion matters. The survey is short and will take no more than ten minutes to complete. You will be able to take the survey online or by paper before or after program time.
2. **Verbal Question(s):** As you do your work in the afterschool program, I will observe what you, your peers, and the youth attendees are doing. I might ask you questions about what you say or do during an activity. I will only ask you questions after the activity or during a break, and you can always choose not to answer. For example, when you select or lead an activity, ask a question, or make a comment, I might ask you later why you chose the activity, or ask you why you stated your comment, and what you think about it. This would only take about two minutes. This will include asking permission to digitally record your verbal response.
3. **Personal Interview:** You may be asked to participate in a personal interview to learn more about your perspective on why middle school students attend the afterschool program and how they participate in program activities. The interview will take place in a private space before or after program time and take approximately 20 minutes to complete. This will include asking permission to digitally record your verbal response.
4. **Focus Group:** I might ask you to participate in a focus group with some of your peers to learn more about your perspectives on why middle school students attend the afterschool program and how they participate in program activities. This will take place before or after program time and take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The detail and descriptions you share may help me better understand the context of site observations and youth interactions. This will include asking permission to digitally record your verbal response.

**Digital Audio Recording:** I will ask you if I can record our conversations to remember what you said. You can always tell me if you do not want me to record what you say and can ask that any part of a recording be erased. These recordings and all other information about you will only be available to me. I will also write field notes about what I observe in the afterschool program. You will never be identified by your real name in any notes or written

reports. I will always identify you and other participants by pseudonyms. I may include something you said in a report or presentation, but you would only be identified as a staff person, not by any name or by the school or organization in which you work.

If you decide you do not want to be in the study after you have started, you can tell me you do not want to be part of the research anymore. You can stop being in any or all parts of the project at any time. Remember, all aspects of this study are completely voluntary and participation can be discontinued at any time without repercussion. If you decide not to be in this study, I will observe your afterschool program, but I will not ask you any questions.

**How long will I be in the research study?**

Total participation in the survey, interview, and focus group components equals no more than a total of 60 minutes at a mutually determined time outside of your work hours. The research study will take place over a six-week period at the afterschool program. I will be conducting on-site observations at the afterschool program approximately two days per week for the duration of the research. Participation in the survey portion will take 10 minutes, the interview portion will take 20 minutes, and focus group portion will take 30 minutes.

**Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks for you by participating in this research study. Your participation in this study is confidential and pseudonyms will be used. Additionally, you are not required to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

**Are there any potential benefits if I participate?**

The potential benefits to society include the importance of knowledge gained from participants about how afterschool programs can be better designed for youth attendees. Additionally, there are potential increased opportunities for professional development to help better serve the needs of staff in the delivery of middle school afterschool programs.

**Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission, or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of providing a pseudonym for you. All data, digital recordings, and transcripts will be maintained on my personal password-protected laptop and backed up on my password-protected external hard drive. Any hard copies will be locked up in a fireproof filing cabinet at my office when not in my immediate possession.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?**

- **The Research Team:**

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, you can talk to the Researcher or Faculty Sponsor. Please contact:

Researcher

Michelle R. Perrenoud  
562-824-2625  
perrenoud\_michelle@lacoecoe.edu

Faculty Sponsor

Eugene Tucker, Ed.D.  
310-206-1879  
etucker@ucla.edu

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to:

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program  
11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694

**What are the next steps if I agree to participate in the study?**

Complete and Sign the ADULT STAFF CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH Form and return to Michelle Perrenoud.

**ADULT STAFF CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

**STEP 1: RESEARCH ACTIVITIES SELECTION**

**I agree to participate in the following portions of the study based on the position in which I work:**

Please *initial* next to the activity statement(s) to which you agree (based on your work position).

✓ <b>Frontline Staff</b>	✓ <b>Site Coordinator</b>	✓ <b>Grant Manager</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Participant Survey</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Participant Survey</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Personal Interview, including digital voice recording</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Verbal Questions during site observations, including digital voice recording</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Verbal Questions during site observations, including digital voice recording</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Focus Group, including digital voice recording</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Personal Interview, including digital voice recording</b>	

**STEP 2: SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Work Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**STEP 3: RETURN FORM to Michelle Perrenoud.**

**STEP 4: SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT**

Michelle R. Perrenoud  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent (print)

562-824-2625  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Contact Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX M

### PARENT PERMISSION FORM

University of California, Los Angeles  
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

#### PARENT PERMISSION FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Understanding the Interests of Middle School Youth in Afterschool Programs:  
Youth and Practitioner Perceptions of the Conditions that Foster Young People's Desires to  
Attend and Participate

#### Afterschool Program

---

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Michelle Perrenoud. I am a doctoral student at UCLA, and I would like to tell you more about a research study that I will be doing at the afterschool program your child attends.

Your child's afterschool program was identified as a research site based on its high attendance by students. Based on recommendations from administrators, the program was also selected because of its diverse program activities, resources, and staffing.

Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because he/she attends the afterschool program. Your child's participation in this research study is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

In California, there is a statewide attendance issue for middle school students in afterschool programs. Relatively little is known about middle school afterschool programs and why the students who participate choose to do so. The purpose of this study is to focus on understanding and meeting the needs of this age group as an essential component of supporting their attendance. Therefore, I am trying to understand more about how middle school youth and their peers are interested to attend and participate in the afterschool program and activities. I believe learning more from successful programs and the students and staff who are associated with these programs will help afterschool leaders know more about meeting the needs of middle school youth across the state.

#### **What will happen if my child takes part in this research study?**

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, I would ask him/her to continue to be their normal self and do what they usually do in the program: have fun and learn new things. Their participation is voluntary and will not impact their relationship with the afterschool program or the school. You have the choice to allow your child to participate in one, two, all, or

none of the following activities and acknowledge by allowing your child to participate their responses may be audio recorded during verbal questions and personal interview.

**Activities:**

1. **Participant Survey:** Your child will be asked to participate in a short participant survey because their opinion matters. The survey is short and will take no longer than 10 minutes to complete.
2. **Verbal Question(s):** During program observation, I might ask your child a quick verbal question as a follow-up to learn more about what he/she said or did in an activity. For example, when he/she chose an activity, asked a question, or made a comment, I might ask later, after the activity at break, why he/she chose what he/she did, or ask him/her why he/she said what he/she did, and what he/she thinks about it. This would take about a minute. This will include asking permission to digitally record his/her verbal response.
3. **Personal Interview:** Your child may be asked to participate in a personal interview to learn more about his/her perspective on why middle school students attend the afterschool program and how they participate in program activities. The detail and descriptions your child shares may help me better understand the context of site observations and youth interactions. The interview will take place in a public space within the program and take about 15 minutes to complete. This will include asking permission to digitally record his/her verbal response.

**Digital Audio Recording:**

With your approval, I will ask your child if I can record our conversations so that I can remember what he/she said. Your child can always tell me that he/she does not want me to record what he/she says and can ask that any part of the recording be erased. These recordings and all other information about your child will only be available to me. I will also write field notes about what I observe in the afterschool program. Your child will never be identified by his/her real name in any notes or written reports. I will always identify him/her and other participants by pseudonym. Sometimes I might want to include something he/she said in a report or presentation, but he/she would only be identified as a participant, not any name or the school or organization in which he/she participates.

If you decide you do not want your child to be in the study after he/she has started, you can tell me. You, on behalf of your child, or your child can decide to stop being in any or all parts of the project at any time. Remember, all aspects of this study are completely voluntary and participation can be discontinued at any time without repercussion. If you decide for your child, or your child decides, to no longer participate in the study I will observe the afterschool program but I will not ask your child any questions.

**How long will my child be in the research study?**

Total participation in the survey and interview components equals no more than a total of 20 minutes during program time. The research study will take place over a six-week period at the

afterschool program. I will be conducting on-site observations at the afterschool program approximately two days per week for the duration of the research. Participation in the survey portion will take 10 minutes and the interview portion will take an additional 10 minutes.

**Are there potential risks or discomforts that my child can expect from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks for your child in participating in this research study. Your child's participation in this study is confidential and pseudonyms will be used. Additionally, your child is not required to answer questions that make him/her feel uncomfortable.

**Are there any potential benefits to my child if he or she participates?**

Your child will not directly benefit from their participation in the study, however having their voice heard may be beneficial to them. The potential benefits to society include the importance of knowledge gained from participants about how afterschool programs can be better designed and of staff being provided professional development to better serve the needs of middle school students in the delivery of future afterschool programs.

**Will information about my child's participation be kept confidential?**

All information that is collected in connection with this study that could potentially be associated with your child will remain confidential and will be used only for the purposes of this study. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of providing a pseudonym for your child. All data, digital recordings, and transcripts will be maintained on a password-protected laptop and backed up on a password-protected external drive. Any hard copies will be locked up in a fireproof filing cabinet at my office when not in my immediate possession.

**What are my child's rights if he or she takes part in the study?**

- You can choose whether or not you want your child to be in this study, and you may withdraw your permission and discontinue your child's participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you or your child, and no loss of benefits to which you or your child were otherwise entitled.
- Your child may refuse to answer any questions that he/she does not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?**

• **The Research Team:**

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, you can talk to the Researcher or Faculty Sponsor. Please contact:

Researcher

Michelle R. Perrenoud  
562-824-2625  
perrenoud\_michelle@lacoed.edu

Faculty Sponsor

Eugene Tucker, Ed. D.  
310-206-1879  
etucker@ucla.edu

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to:

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program  
11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694

**What are the next steps if I agree my child may participate in the study?**

I understand the information described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree that my child may participate in this study. I have a copy of this information for my records.

**BOTH of the following forms must be signed and returned in order for your child to participate in the project:** the Parent/Guardian Permission form and the Youth Assent form. Thank you for your consideration to support this research project.

**PARENT PERMISSION FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

**STEP 1: RESEARCH ACTIVITIES SELECTION**

I agree my child may participate in the following portions of the study:

Please *initial* next to the activity statement(s) to which you agree:

<b>Parent/Guardian INITIALS Required</b>	<b>Youth Participation Component</b>
	<b>Participant Survey</b>
	<b>Verbal Question</b> during site observations, including digital voice recording
	<b>Personal Interview,</b> including digital voice recording

**STEP 2: SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR LEGAL GARDIAN**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Child (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent or Guardian (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**STEP 3: RETURN FORM(S)** to the Afterschool Program Site Coordinator or Michelle Perrenoud. Remember, both the Parent/Guardian Permission form and Youth Assent form must be completed, signed, and returned for your child to participate.

**STEP 4: SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Contact Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX N

### YOUTH ASSENT FORM

University of California, Los Angeles  
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

#### YOUTH ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Understanding the Interests of Middle School Youth in Afterschool Programs:  
Youth and Practitioner Perceptions of the Conditions that Foster Young People's Desires to  
Attend and Participate

#### After School Program

---

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

My name is Michelle Perrenoud. I am a doctoral student at UCLA, and I would like to tell you more about a research study that I will be doing at your afterschool program.

#### 2. WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

I am asking you to take part in a research study because I am trying to understand more about why middle school students are interested in attending and how you participate in the afterschool program and activities. For example, I would like to know more about what attracts you to come to the afterschool program or to choose a specific activity to participate in.

#### 3. WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

If you agree to be in this study, you will do what you usually do in your afterschool program: have fun and learn new things. As you participate in afterschool program activities, I will observe what you, your classmates, and your teacher are doing. Your participation is voluntary and will not impact your relationship with the afterschool program or the school. You have the choice to participate in one, two, all, or none of the following activities, and you acknowledge by agreeing to participate your responses may be audio recorded during verbal questions and personal interview.

#### Activities:

4. You will be asked to participate in a **participant survey** because your opinion matters. The survey is short and will take no longer than 10 minutes to complete.
5. During program observation, I might ask you a quick **verbal question** as a follow-up to learn more about what you say or do in an activity. For example, when you choose an activity, ask a question, or make a comment, I might ask you later, after the activity at break, why you chose what you did, or ask you why you

said what you did and what you think about it. This would take about a minute. This will include asking permission to digitally record your verbal response.

6. You may be asked to participate in a **personal interview** to learn more about your perspective on why middle school students attend the afterschool program and how they participate in program activities. The interview will take place in a public space within the program and will take about 15 minutes to complete. This will include asking permission to digitally record your verbal response.

#### **Digital Audio Recording:**

I might ask you if I can record our conversations so that I can remember what you said. You can always tell me that you do not want me to record what you say and can ask that any part of a recording be erased. These recordings and all other information about you will only be available to me. I will also write field notes about what I observe in the afterschool program. You will never be identified by your real name in any notes or written reports. I will always identify you and other students by made-up names (pseudonyms). Sometimes I might want to include something you said in a report or presentation, but you would only be identified as a student, not by name or the school you attend.

#### **4. RISKS**

There are no anticipated risks for you in participating in this research study. Your participation in this study is confidential and pseudonyms will be used. Additionally, you are not required to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

#### **5. BENEFITS**

You will not directly benefit from your participation in the study, however having your voice heard may be beneficial to you. The potential benefits to society include the importance of knowledge gained from youth about how afterschool programs can be better designed, and of staff being provided professional development to help better serve the needs of middle school students in the delivery of future afterschool programs.

#### **6. PARENT/GUARDIAN ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Please talk this over with your parents or guardian before you decide whether or not to participate. I will also ask your parents or guardian to give their permission for you to take part in the study. But even if your parents or guardian say “yes,” you can still decide not to do this. **Note:** In order for you to participate in this study I need both a completed and signed Parent/Guardian Permission form and your completed and signed Youth Assent form.

#### **7. YOUR PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

If you do not want to be in the study, you do not have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don’t want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop. If you decide not to be in this study, I will observe your afterschool program but I will not ask you any questions.

**8. QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY**

You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me at 562-922-6799 or ask me next time. You can also email me at [perrenoud\\_michelle@lacoed.edu](mailto:perrenoud_michelle@lacoed.edu).

**9. YOUR AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

Signing your name at the bottom means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you have completed and signed it.

**BOTH of the forms listed here must be signed and returned in order for you to participate in the project:** the Parent/Guardian Permission form and the Youth Assent form. Thank you for your consideration to support this research project.

## YOUTH ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.**

### **STEP 1: RESEARCH ACTIVITIES SELECTION**

**I agree to participate in the following portions of the study:**

Please *initial* next to the activity statement(s) to which you agree:

<b>Youth INITIALS Required</b>	<b>Youth Participation Component</b>
	<b>Participant Survey</b>
	<b>Verbal Questions</b> during site observations, including digital voice recording
	<b>Personal Interview,</b> including digital voice recording

### **STEP 2: SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Youth Participant (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Youth Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**STEP 3: RETURN FORM(S)** to the Afterschool Program Site Coordinator or Michelle Perrenoud. Remember, both the Parent/Guardian Permission form and Youth Assent form must be completed, signed, and returned for you to participate.

**APPENDIX O**

**FACTORS THAT MOST AFFECTED APPEAL OF AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS –  
DETAILS FOR EACH OF SEVEN CATEGORIES  
(SITE 1 AND 2 COMBINED)**

Students describe why they come to the afterschool program: “I Like The Activities I Get To Go To”

<b>Variable: Please describe why you come to this afterschool program: “I Like The Activities I Get To Go To”</b>	<b>Really Matters</b>	<b>Kind Of Matters</b>	<b>Does Not Matter</b>	<b>Total</b>
All	71% (129)	23% (41)	6% (11)	100% (181)
Site 1: Students	69% (57)	24% (20)	7% (6)	100% (83)
Site 2: Students	74% (72)	21% (21)	5% (5)	100% (98)

*Note. This table reflects student survey responses regarding “liking the activities they get to go to” matters as a reason why they like to come to the program.*

*Students’ Perspectives*

Overall, the majority of students (71%) regardless of site, reported that really liking the activities is a major factor in the appeal of attending the afterschool program. Again, this was consistent across sites and when coupled with the students (23%) reporting this “kind of matters” indicates nearly all students (96%) reported liking the program activities is important. For those students where activities are not ranked as important (11%), it may be they are in the program because of parental directives rather than by their own choice as seen in response from Student A4 at Site 1.

Students describe why they come to the afterschool program: “I Feel Like Coming Here Helps Me Learn New Things”

<b>Variable: Please describe why you come to this afterschool program: “I Feel Like Coming Here Helps Me Learn New Things”</b>	<b>Really Matters</b>	<b>Kind Of Matters</b>	<b>Does Not Matter</b>	<b>Total</b>
All	68% (122)	23% (42)	9% (16)	100% (180)
Site 1: Students	65% (53)	24% (20)	11% (9)	100% (82)
Site 2: Students	70% (69)	23% (22)	7% (7)	100% (98)

*Note. This table reflects student survey responses regarding “feeling like coming here helps me learn new things” matters as a reason why they like to come to the program.*

### *Students’ Perspectives*

Overall, the majority of student (68%) regardless of site, reported that their feeling like coming to the afterschool program helped them to learn new things is a major factor in appeal of attending the afterschool program. Again, this was consistent across sites and when coupled with the students who reported this “kind of matters” (23%) across sites, the majority of students overall (91%) feel like coming to the afterschool program helps them to learn new things. For those students reporting “feeling like coming to the afterschool program helps them to learn new things” are not given importance (9%), it may be that they are coming to the program because of their friends being there and they want to spend more time with them.

Students describe why they come to the afterschool program: “I Feel Like Coming Here Helps Me Do Better In School”

<b>Variable: Please describe why you come to this afterschool program: “I Feel Like Coming Here Helps Me Do Better In School”</b>	<b>Really Matters</b>	<b>Kind Of Matters</b>	<b>Does Not Matter</b>	<b>Total</b>
All	47% (85)	36% (66)	17% (30)	100% (181)
Site 1: Students	55% (46)	35% (29)	10% (8)	100% (83)
Site 2: Students	39% (39)	38% (37)	23% (22)	100% (98)

*Note. This table reflects student survey responses regarding “feeling like coming here helps them to do better in school” matters as a reason why they like to come to the program.*

### *Students’ Perspectives*

Overall, more (47%) of students responded that feeling like coming to the afterschool program helps them to do better in school “really matters” as they consider the factors that attract them to attend an afterschool program. In fact, when coupled with the response “kind of matters” (36%), for the majority of these students (83%), report feeling like coming to the afterschool program helps them to do better in school is an important element in choosing whether to attend either of these two afterschool program.

Students describe why they come to the afterschool program: “I Like To Spend Time With Program Staff”

<b>Variable: Please describe why you come to this afterschool program: “I Like To Spend Time With Program Staff”</b>	<b>Really Matters</b>	<b>Kind Of Matters</b>	<b>Does Not Matter</b>	<b>Total</b>
All	48% (87)	36% (64)	16% (29)	100% (180)
Site 1: Students	48% (40)	39% (32)	13% (11)	100% (82)
Site 2: Students	48% (47)	33% (32)	19% (18)	100% (97)

*Note. This table reflects student survey responses regarding “spending time with program staff” matters as a reason why they like to come to the program.*

### *Students’ Perspectives*

Overall, more (48%) of students responded that liking to spend time with program staff “really matters” to them as they consider the factors that drive them to enroll in an afterschool program. In fact, when coupled with the response “kind of matters”, for the majority of students (84%) across both sites, spending time with program staff is an important element in choosing whether to attend either of these two afterschool program.

Students describe why they come to the afterschool program: My Friends Are Here And I Want To Spend Time With Them

<b>Variable: Please describe why you come to this afterschool program: “My Friends Are Here And I Want To Spend Time With Them”</b>	<b>Really Matters</b>	<b>Kind Of Matters</b>	<b>Does Not Matter</b>	<b>Total</b>
All	27.5% (50)	45% (81)	27.5% (50)	100% (180)
Site 1: Students	37% (31)	34% (28)	29% (24)	100% (82)
Site 2: Students	19% (19)	54% (53)	27% (26)	100% (98)

*Note. This table reflects student survey responses regarding “my friends are here and I want to spend time with them” matters as a reason why they like to come to the program.*

### *Students’ Perspectives*

Overall (45%), students report attending the afterschool program because they want to spend time with their friends, only “kind of matters”. The remaining 55% of students are split equally (27.5%) as to whether “it really matters” or “does not matter”. There is some difference by site to the varying degree of which “really matters” and “kind of matters”, still notable the majority of students at each site (71% at Site A and 73% at Site B) do report that spending time with friends does matter.

Students describe why they come to the afterschool program: I Don't Have Anything Else To Do Afterschool

<b>Variable: Please describe why you come to this afterschool program: “I Don’t Have Anything Else To Do After School”</b>	<b>Really Matters</b>	<b>Kind Of Matters</b>	<b>Does Not Matter</b>	<b>Total</b>
All	28% (51)	36% (65)	36% (65)	100% (181)
Site 1: Students	28% (23)	39% (32)	34% (28)	100% (83)
Site 2: Students	29% (28)	34% (33)	38% (37)	100% (98)

*Note. This table reflects student survey responses regarding “not having anything else to do after school” matters as a reason why they like to come to the program.*

*Students’ Perspectives*

Overall, not having anything else to do after school is not among the important choices for whether students attend either of these two programs. Note: the majority (72%) selected that not having anything else to do “does not matter” or “kind of matters”. This factor “really matters” to only a bit more than one in four students, (28%).

Students describe why they come to the afterschool program: It's My Parents Choice

<b>Variable: Please describe why you come to this afterschool program: “It’s My Parent’s Choice”</b>	<b>Really Matters</b>	<b>Kind Of Matters</b>	<b>Does Not Matter</b>	<b>Total</b>
All	26% (47)	34% (62)	40% (71)	100% (180)
Site 1: Students	30% (25)	40% (34)	30% (25)	100% (84)
Site 2: Students	23% (22)	29% (28)	48% (46)	100% (96)

*Note. This table reflects student survey responses regarding “it is my parent’s choice” matters as a reason why they come to the program.*

### *Students’ Perspectives*

Overall, more (40%) of students responded that parental choice does not matter to them as they consider the factors that drive them to enroll in either of these afterschool programs. In fact, when coupled with the response “kind of matters”, for the majority (74%) of these students, parental choice is not an important element in choosing whether to attend either of these afterschool programs. There is some difference by site. At Site 1, for most students (40%), there was some consideration of parent’s approval for them to stay and participate while at Site 2, this was the case for less than one-third (29%).

## DESCRIPTIVE DETAIL

### FACTORS THAT MOST AFFECTED APPEAL OF AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS –

#### “I LIKE THE ACTIVITIES I GET TO GO TO”

(SITE 1 AND 2 COMBINED)

Students describe why they come to the afterschool program: “I Like The Activities I Get To Go To”

<b>Variable: Please describe why you come to this afterschool program: “I Like The Activities I Get To Go To”</b>	<b>Really Matters</b>	<b>Kind Of Matters</b>	<b>Does Not Matter</b>	<b>Total</b>
All	71% (129)	23% (41)	6% (11)	100% (181)
Site 1: Students	69% (57)	24% (20)	7% (6)	100% (83)
Site 2: Students	74% (72)	21% (21)	5% (5)	100% (98)

*Note. This table reflects student survey responses regarding “liking the activities they get to go to” matters as a reason why they like to come to the program.*

#### *Students’ Perspectives*

The majority of students overall (71%) regardless of site, reported that really liking the activities is a major factor in the appeal of attending the afterschool program. Again, this was consistent across sites and when coupled with the students (23%) reporting this “kind of matters” indicates nearly all students (96%) reported liking the program activities is important. For those students where activities are not ranked as important (11%), it may be they are in the program because of parental directives rather than by their own choice as seen in response from Student A4 at Site 1.

Students’ perspectives were explored further during individual interviews. At Site 1, 10/10 students and at Site B, 12/12 students stated “activities they get to go to” as an important reason for choosing to attend the program. When asked about what attracted them to the

program in the beginning, the answer provided by Student B-9 encapsulated the overwhelming response given by students, “There’s so many activities we can do, so if we jump out of one, we can have a backup to do.” I explored specifically what about the activities and attraction to participate was supported by something the program was doing. There was a range of responses: “the flyers caught my eye, they showed how active the program was”, “the activities were what I was looking for”, “my friends were there”, “staff encouraged me”, “it looked like fun”, and “I wanted to learn new things”. At Site 1, a seventh grade female, age twelve, Student A-8 stated:

When I was younger, I used to think that afterschool was for nerds and things for people who wanted to be in school all day. I thought it was like detention. But now that I’m here, it’s like the only place I want to be. I really look forward to it every day. Because the kids, the first time I came and I watched them, I saw them dancing and everything [participating in the other components], and they were enjoying it. And so then I thought, it’s athletic and it’s fun. I like dancing, so I belong.

At Site 2, Student B-7 shared:

When I first saw it [the afterschool program], I thought it was cool. I didn’t exactly know what it would be like. I just thought it would be cool to be able to do what those kids [I saw] are doing, because it seemed like it would be a lot of fun, so I just thought, ‘Yeah, I’m doing that!’ Cuz, I knew it would be really great to be able to be as confident as those kids and have a good outcome of all the practices. They were just able to produce and show people what they’d been working on. It was really cool knowing I would be able to show it too.

At Site 1, two Students A-1 and A-2, mentioned specifically how the use of flyers raised their awareness of the academic support offered in the program. Student A-1 reported he was getting bad grades in Math class so he decided to try out the tutoring component of the afterschool program. “The papers on the walls caught my eye. They said in big, bold letters ‘NEED HELP? We’ve Got Tutoring!’ It was a simple decision for me, I needed the help.” For

Student A-2, also struggling in Math, and failing seventh grade for the second year in a row, remembered when his Mom saw the marketing materials in the school office after a meeting with the Principal and Math teacher: “Basically I was failing because I always get my RCA’s (Required Course Assignments) wrong because it was different Math for me. My Mom said to me, I was going to try staying here after school and go to the Math Lab.” So his Mom signed him up and he started going and he learned how to deal with his RCA’s and started getting better at Math. With pride, he shared:

Going to the afterschool program has made me progress on my Math works. The staff person, Miss Alyssa, she helps me learn in a way that works for me. The more I learn here, the better I become with my RCA’s and the better I am doing in school now. I hope to promote to the eighth grade finally.

All students interviewed expressed it was the variety of activities the program offered to everyone that made it so appealing, “because kids our age have so many interests and needs.” At Site 1, Student A-10 expresses the perspectives of the majority of students when she shared, “Oh, you get to choose what component you want to go to. It will be in dance, sports, learning zone and math lab. They’re all great because they all help you in their way.” Student A-5 also expressed, “It’s a really safe environment here where you can improve yourself as a person, as a student, learning new things [through the components and working with the staff], having a great time, spending time with your friends.”

At Site 2, Student B-2 summarized the sentiments of the majority of students when he stated, “It’s really a great environment here, you get to choose what you want to do.” When I asked him to tell me more about what makes the environment really great, he shared “You can choose music, art, and sports like football, basketball, and soccer, and get homework help too.

It's really fun here. You will be safe. It's great all around." Student B-6 elaborated further, "You could join music, cheer, or dance, and even cooking. You will have fun, meet new friends and you can see what your most likable component is, that *you* like, and do it." Additionally, all students interviewed across both sites alluded to safety, both physical and emotional, as a very important factor for coming and staying in the program.

Notable: for one student at Site 1, Student A-4, whose mother makes him attend the afterschool program and only allows him to participate in homework assistance activities, revealed during his interview that although the homework activity he participates in does not matter to him-- because he would rather be doing something different (like drawing or working with technology), the academic support he gets from the staff person and his increased academic performance in math does really matter to him (and his mother) so it is important for him to continue to do as his mother wants him to do.

### *Staffs' Perspectives*

At Site 1, the site coordinator shared, "I have a strong opinion that really they [the students] do not have much to do outside of school, other than to go home, do chores and be bored." He further shared that in some ways kids are trying to stay away from those empty opportunities and instead see the great activity components offered through the afterschool program and stay to participate with their friends and spend time with staff.

At Site 1, the program used flyers to get the word out about activities, however the site coordinator elaborated, "It takes more than flyers, I mean that is a good start, however we [staff] have to get out and really talk with kids." He shared that meeting young people where they are, in their groups, around the school and at lunch time is necessary. He felt it was important to

make personal contact with students, to look them in their eye and put out his hand to shake theirs. “I always share my name and ask theirs. I ask them ‘Do you want to stay with us? There’s a lot to do here.’” He shared some kids tell him that they go home after school and he asks them, “What do you go home to do?” Some kids respond that they play video games. He said, “I always quip back, ‘*Video Games. Really?!?* Come on man there is a lot more to do than just play video games. Do you like sports? We have teams. Dance? We have competitions. Do you need help with your homework? We have tutors. It’s fun here and you can be active.’”

The site coordinator reflected for a brief moment and then shared, “Some kids just need to be approached. The next thing they [the kids] say to me, ‘I need to ask my parents.’ And I’m like, ‘Well that’s no problem. Ask your parents, and if they have any concerns, have them call me on my cell phone. I will go ahead and talk with them to see if you can stay.’” And then he hands them an application to join the program and shares he looks forward to getting it back within a couple of days so the young person can start.

As explained to me by the site coordinator, he believed it was the personal promotion of the program and the components (activities) offered that helped to spur student’s interest to know more. This promotion, combined with staff making a personal connection with the students, and also making the program exciting, was the key. Beyond those, it was really about making sure students could see that they fit in here and staff care about them being here.

Frontline staff echoed that promotion really helps, although they believe it is more effective when it is by word-of-mouth of the students already participating in the program. “Our participants can talk with their friends about the “chemistry” of being a part of the afterschool program. They know what we are like as coaches, they know the components we offer.” Staff

shared during the focus group, students come to the program and “scope it out” and see what’s going on in the activities. If their friends are having a good time, they end up joining.

The dance coach shared in the beginning he always felt it was much easier to bring kids in, because of their interest in the activity, than to keep them. “Once I realized I had to keep them engaged in the activity and learning new things, it got easier.” His peers agreed, it is promotion and activities that bring the kids in, but it is the relationships and connections that keep them coming back. “They [the students] recognize the help they get from us, but it is the experience they have with each of us as coaches that make them come back or leave. If it goes well, then they open up to you and stay after that.”

A common thread from the frontline staff focus group participants was that “Students should feel welcomed, not just like it is a friendly environment but that is family here, like we are their second home.” Staff at both programs intentionally created a positive and friendly environment for students to come to. In addition, they offered activities that are appealing to middle school youth and make sure they are challenging and fun.

At Site 2, the site coordinator shared that students come partly because of the lack of resources families have to afford for-fee activities elsewhere, and, parents are still at work when their student is in the program. She shared, “Students come here to continue to be with their friends in an atmosphere where they can do something that they enjoy doing.” Site 2 also uses flyers to recruit students, however, in addition to using staff to recruit young people the site coordinator revealed they also ask current participants to spread the word during lunch because “the students will pay more attention to their peers than to us [adults], although our age is an important factor.” The site coordinator went on to elaborate, “We are younger than their

teachers and were in the student's shoes not too long ago. I think our staff is able to understand the kids, and the kids are able to connect to the staff." She also felt by establishing an appropriate, yet somewhat loose relationship and having program rules is what makes them want to come back.

After a moment of reflection, the site coordinator added, "And we ask for their input, listen to them, and use it. Our program is based on what they want to do, what they want to accomplish." By participating in the afterschool program, students get an experience they would not get at home. She went on to offer,

I can give you an example of a girl who was actually not allowed to be in the program for a while, because of her behavior issues. She came back and she said, "Miss, I'm so bored at home. I feel like I have gained five pounds. I just watch TV and do nothing." I feel that might be the idea of, 'I have something to do here in the afterschool program. I have a purpose. I'm here with my friends and I'm creating something rather than I'm sitting at home.'

I think that is incredible that a middle school kid can come to the idea that, 'I'm being much more productive with my life here in the afterschool program practicing even though sometimes I'm mad and I hate it rather than, I'm just home doing nothing and watching TV.'

### *Administrators' Perspectives*

A common thread across each of the interviews was, 'Middle school students are the hardest population we work with.' There was consensus among administrators that these young people come to the afterschool program for a variety of reasons. All also agreed activities were an obvious important reason youth would choose to attend the program. The agency director from Site 1 shared, "We know we have to commit to three elements of the program: academics, enrichment including recreation, and snack. More notably, is not that this is only what we do, but how and why we do which makes a difference." The agency director at Site 2 mentioned,

“They come to us for different reasons, but ultimately they stay with us because they find value.” Both agree, marketing and promotion are central to drawing students in. Furthermore, it is essential to provide consistency between what was promised in print and delivering actual engaging experiences was essential to keep students returning.

The grant manager advanced this idea, “If you have done it right, they [the kids] show up. However, no matter how well you have planned the perfect program, if the customer doesn’t show up and stay then you don’t really understand or know your customer.” He has adopted the idea of “doing it right” from Tom Peter’s definition of quality, “...that which satisfies and exceeds customers’ needs and wants” (p.16), and has applied it to his work in providing afterschool expanded learning programs. “Quality is defined by the customer, and in this case the young people who attend our programs are our customers. We must listen to them and meet their needs and expectations as they perceive a quality afterschool experience to be.” This statement validating student survey responses that young people identify activities as most important while also hinting there is much more his team must do with intentionality and behind-the-scene planning to be fully prepared to execute delivery of activities at the site level.

## APPENDIX P

### STAFF - DEMOGRAPHICS DATA

#### Site 1: Staff - Demographics and Code Key

<b>Staff Members - Demographics and Code Key SITE 1</b>				
<b>Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Activities</b>
X1	Female	28	Program Director - PP	Off-Site: Program Management
X2	Male	25	Site Coordinator - PP	On-Site: Site Supervision
X3	Female	21	Frontline Staff - PP	Learning Zone
X4	Female	24	Frontline Staff - PP	Math Lab
X5	Male	26	Frontline Staff - PP	Dance
X6	Male	23	Frontline Staff - PP	Sports

#### Site 2: Staff - Demographics and Code Key

<b>Staff Members - Demographics and Code Key SITE 1</b>				
<b>Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Y1	Female	31	Program Director - PP	Off-Site: Program Management
Y2	Female	22	Site Coordinator - PP	On-Site: Site Supervision
Y3	Male	28	Frontline Staff - PP	YS Supervision and YS Boys Basketball
Y4	Male	24	Frontline Staff - PP	Homework and YS Boys Basketball
Y5	Male	20	Frontline Staff - PP	Homework and YS Soccer
Y6	Female	20	Frontline Staff - PP	Homework and YS Girls Basketball
Y7	Female	19	Frontline Staff - PP	Homework and Dance
Y8	Male	19	Frontline Staff - PP	Homework and Cheer
Y9	Male	31	Frontline Staff - PP	Homework and Music
Y10	Female	21	Frontline Staff - PP	Homework and Baking and Cooking
Y11	Female	40	Frontline Staff - ID	All Band and Drumline

*Note: This table represents demographic data and individual code keys for all staff working in the afterschool program at Site 1 and Site 2.*

## APPENDIX Q

### STUDENT INTERVIEWS - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

#### SITE 1: Student Interviews - Demographics and Code Key

<b>Student Interviews - Demographics and Code Key SITE 1</b>				
<b>Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Activities</b>
1-A	Male	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Math Lab - RCAs
1-B	Male	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Math Lab - RCAs
1-C	Male	14	8 <sup>th</sup>	Dance and Leadership
1-D	Female	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Dance and Leadership
1-E	Female	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	Football and Dance
1-F	Female	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Dance, Football, and Wrestling
1-G	Male	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	Learning Zone
1-H	Female	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	Dance
1-I	Female	14	8 <sup>th</sup>	Football, Sports and Learning Zone
1-J	Female	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	Soccer, Basketball and Football

#### SITE 2: Student Interviews - Demographics and Code Key

<b>Student Interviews - Demographics and Code Key SITE 2</b>				
<b>Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Activities</b>
2-A	Female	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Homework, Dance and Theatre
2-B	Male	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Homework, Sports, and Basketball
2-C	Male	12	7 <sup>th</sup>	Homework, Anima and Music
2-D	Female	13	7 <sup>th</sup>	Homework, Baking and Cooking
2-E	Female	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Homework, Music and Band
2-F	Male	11	6 <sup>th</sup>	Homework and Soccer
2-G	Female	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Homework and All-Girl Band
2-H	Female	11	6 <sup>th</sup>	Homework, Dance, Theatre and Music
2-I	Male	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Homework and Basketball
2-J	Female	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Homework and Cheer
2-K	Female	13	8 <sup>th</sup>	Homework and Cheer
2-L	Female	11	6 <sup>th</sup>	Homework, Dance, and Theatre

*Note: This table represents demographic data and individual code keys for student interviews at Site 1 and Site 2.*

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