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COMMENTARY

Effects of an Out-of-School Program on Urban High School Youth's Academic Performance

AUTHOR

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There is substantial interest in increasing high school graduations rates, yet youth from low-income families and communities experience greater academic challenges and the achievement gap between children from low- and high- income families has been growing. Students who live in poverty are significantly more likely to have lower grades, standardized test scores, and high school completion rates than their more affluent peers. It has been suggested that out-of-school programs can contribute to better educational outcomes but few evaluations at the high school level have been completed.

In a recent study, Julie O'Donnell and Sandra L. Kirkner investigated the impact of the YMCA High School Youth Institute (YI), a comprehensive out-of-school program for low-income, urban, and culturally-diverse youth, on grades, test scores, and school attendance of high school youth using a randomly-selected, matched comparison group. The YI is a year-round, community-based program that uses technology as a mechanism for promoting positive youth development and enhancing the academic success and career readiness of low-income, culturally-diverse high school students. Those involved in the program had significantly higher English Language Arts and Math standardized test scores and somewhat fewer absences than the comparison group. Active program participants had significantly higher academic grade point averages and Math standardized test scores, as well as somewhat higher total grade point averages. In more practical terms, 31% of Active YI youth improved their academic GPA to a higher grade level, while only 20% of comparison youth did the same. Findings on standardized test scores showed similar results, with 17% of YI youth showing improvement (moving from "basic" to "proficient" or from "proficient" to "advanced") in ELA scores compared to only 6% of comparison youth, and 4% of YI youth showing improvement in Math scores compared to only 2% of comparison youth.

There are specific aspects of the Youth Institute (YI) that likely contributed to these outcomes and the inclusion of these components in out-of-school programs for this population may prove valuable. First, programs are more likely to be effective if they are comprehensive and guided by a conceptual framework with clearly articulated program components and hypothesized outcomes. Second, programs must incorporate a positive youth development framework into all components, providing safety, supportive relationships, meaningful youth involvement, skill-building, community involvement, and allowing the high school youth to have a voice in all aspects of the program. Third, staff need the skills to create a positive environment and be capable of establishing positive relationships and bonding with and among youth.

Academic support strategies must also be multifaceted. Potential supports could include daily homework assistance, college readiness programs which help youth to understand how their high school performance is associated with long-term success, access to state-of-the-art digital media technology for schoolwork, and internship opportunities that are contingent upon maintaining an acceptable grade point average. It is also important for programs to link curriculum to state content standards and utilize project-based learning to complete enrichment activities. Projects in out-of-school programs are useful because they can

creatively engage youth in more participatory, hands-on and community-focused learning as opposed to the type of learning that typically happens during the school day. Linking these creative learning opportunities with school learning expectations may be even more effective in developing the skills needed to improve grades and test scores. Out-of-school programs designed for youth who are low-income should also help youth develop their technology skills, promote access to information, and assist in their development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Programs that are designed with these aspects will likely be more effective in attracting, retaining and positively influencing the academic achievement of high school youth.

The full study can be found in Julie O'Donnell, Sandra L. Kirkner, "Effects of an out-of-school program on urban high school youth's academic performance," Journal of Community Psychology, Volume 42, Issue 2, pages 176–190, March 2014.

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PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org