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The Trenton Afterschool Partnership: Expanding Learning Time Citywide Through Public/Private Collaboration

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Key Points

- High quality after-school programs have been demonstrated to have significant impact on student performance.
- Preceding the Trenton Afterschool Partnership (TAP) was a hodgepodge of programs that cost various contributors about \$9 million. These programs, of unequal quality, served about 1,500 students in 15 out of Trenton's 21 public schools.
- TAP (which includes the Princeton Area Community Foundation) was able to successfully implement programs in all of the Trenton schools.
- Budget cuts have forced the reduction of the programs, but about half of the schools have been able to maintain programs.
- Foundations are encouraged to support advocacy capacity and to provide general operating support to community based organizations that have an established record of successful service delivery and strong partnerships.

Introduction

A growing body of national research demonstrates how high-quality after-school programs expand learning time to improve student performance and promote positive youth development, and can be a powerful tool in closing achievement gaps (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). However, these programs often are not coordinated with other educational resources and lack consistent goals, particularly in large urban areas. In the end, such programs offer insufficient access, cost too much, and fail to support student learning.

In an effort to address these challenges, a national movement emanating from the out-of-school-time (OST) field advocates a focus on systems-building in cities. Field leaders, including funders like the Wallace and Charles S. Mott foundations and practitioners like The After-School Corporation and the Providence After School Alliance, have increasingly concentrated their efforts on piloting, assessing, and replicating citywide after-school systems. For example, the Wallace Foundation has funded a multiyear OST systems-building effort in five major cities and documented the process and outcomes (Bodilly et al., 2010). It recently expanded the scope of its data tracking and assessment with a study of 25 additional citywide systems, including Newark, N.J.

In 2009, New Jersey After 3 established the state's first nonprofit, citywide after-school system in Trenton, providing high-quality programs in every public K-12 school. This system expanded access for students, improved the quality of the programs, and reduced the cost of after-school programs by more than half.

Preceding the Trenton Afterschool Partnership (TAP) was a hodgepodge of programs that cost various contributors about \$9 million. These programs, of unequal quality, served about 1,500 students in 15 out of Trenton's 21 public schools. Through a direct relationship with the school district, New Jersey After 3 was able to build a coordinated network of programs, following the evidence-based New Jersey After 3 model, to

serve more than 2,400 students in all 21 schools for just over \$3 million. This was accomplished by combining private investment, parent fees, AmeriCorps funds, and school district, city, and state funds into one cohesive system. An independent evaluation documented the success of TAP and its popularity with parents, students, and administrators.

New Jersey's turbulent financial climate, however, jeopardized this successful partnership and highlighted the need for more diverse funding streams to sustain citywide systems. This article reflects on the process of establishing such a system, its independently verified results, and the lessons learned.

Background

Created in 2004, New Jersey After 3 is a statewide nonprofit organization that supports a network of evidence-based after-school programs. It funds community-based nonprofit agencies that partner with public schools to deliver a specific model of school-based after-school programming. New Jersey After 3 supports its programs with resources that include significant professional development, content, technical assistance, and monitoring and oversight. This model ensures the incorporation of local knowledge and resources under a statewide umbrella of support, consistency, and results.

New Jersey After 3 is the only statewide public/private after-school partnership of its kind, and independent evaluations show its positive affect on student achievement and behavior. A three-year independent evaluation of New Jersey After 3 by Policy Study Associates of Washington documented statistically significant gains in the language-arts skills of student participants, as well as benefits in students' classroom grades, math skills, study skills, computer skills, fitness levels, and overall enjoyment of school (Walking Eagle, Miller, Cooc, LaFleur, & Reisner, 2009).

New Jersey After 3's evaluation results contribute to numerous studies that point to OST-learning as critical to improving student achievement and keeping youth on track to graduate. In elementary

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and middle school, academic performance and student engagement measured by attendance levels and behavior serve as powerful indicators of whether a student will graduate high school (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). New Jersey After 3's network expands learning time each school day in order to provide students with critical academic enrichment and hands-on activities that exercise creative skills and inject relevance into learning. High-quality after-school programs not only offer students daily academic support, but also give them access to experiences and relationships that keep them engaged and invested in school. Programs that can cultivate regular student attendance, like those supported by New Jersey After 3, are critical tools in equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to graduate from high school and succeed in the 21st-century work force.

New Jersey After 3 supported this type of program in Trenton for years, but never had the capacity to support more than a handful of programs. At the same time, the city was struggling with its poverty levels, crime rates, gang activity, and school-retention rates. Crime and poverty

affect students' resiliency and performance in school, leading to high dropout rates and therefore restricting upward mobility. According to school report card data from 2008, only about half of Trenton elementary school students tested proficient in language arts (51 percent) or math (55 percent), with rates declining dramatically in middle school (30 percent in language arts and 25 percent in math) (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008). A 2008 study by John Hopkins University researchers dubbed Trenton Central High School one of the nation's "dropout factories," where less than 60 percent of students who enroll in school as freshmen graduate as seniors (Balfanz, 2006). Youths who drop out are more likely to break the law, work low-wage jobs, and require public assistance – contributing to a cycle of poverty and community crime (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

Before TAP, Trenton had a multitude of after-school programs for students aimed at keeping kids safe after school and improving upon school-day lessons. Some programs were school-based and others were in community centers or churches; some were simply "after care," others an extension of the school day. Only some of those programs were evidence-based, youth-development programming.

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those programs were evidence-based, youth-development programming. These programs were funded by myriad sources, including the city, the school district, the federal government, parent fees, and nonprofits and churches. Limitations on discourse and the sharing of information allowed them to operate in silos and prohibited one program from knowing much about the other. As isolated entities, these programs cost too much, did not meet the needs of Trenton's population, and were deficient in access, coordination, consistent quality standards, funding, and shared data-collection systems.

"In an attempt to provide a safe, secure, enriching environment for Trenton Public School (TPS) students to prosper," the Trenton Board of Education in 2009 issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to organizations to manage after-school programs in all schools (Trenton Public School District, 2009). TPS identified gang activity and a number of other "unsupervised, unhealthy, unsafe pastimes" as leading concerns behind this push for after-school services. The RFP cited its purpose in coordinating and centralizing efforts in order to provide equitable programming across schools. Programs were required to offer academics, social/recreational, and athletic activities; providers were expected to have experience administering after-school programs. Beyond those, requirements were few, thus creating an opportunity for innovation.

Planning and Collaboration

New Jersey After 3 was awarded the competitive bid to partner with TPS as the district's sole after-school management organization. Planning included conversations with key district officials and participation from municipal partners, including representatives from Trenton's Department of Recreation, which was responsible for city coordination of after-school opportunities. In initial meetings, it was determined that the newly created Trenton Afterschool Partnership would employ New Jersey After 3's program model districtwide.

New Jersey After 3's structure is based upon public/private partnerships, in which New Jersey After 3, as a funder and after-school support,

pairs local community-based organizations with public schools to operate after-school services. The incorporation of this model within the school district is key for several reasons:

- *District-level buy-in.* The official involvement of the school district ensured after-school alignment with district goals and provided nonprofit program partners with the credibility necessary to ensure school-level engagement. Nonprofit program partners were considered full contributors to the education of Trenton's youth, with the endorsement of the superintendent and school board earning them the respect of and access to the school leaders, faculty, and staff.
- *School-day alignment.* Two New Jersey After 3 program officers were imbedded in the Trenton school district's Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. This structure provided the after-school programs with a direct link to all districtwide curriculum and assessment conversations, which allowed programs to incorporate district goals into day-to-day programming.
- *Shared data.* New Jersey After 3 provided all tracked program data, including attendance, participation, and financial records, to Trenton Public Schools, which measured quality, impact, and results and tracked individual students' participation in programs. In this vein, Policy Studies Associates was commissioned to perform an external evaluation of partnership programs and report the results to all vested partners.
- *Access to facilities.* As a true partner with the district, New Jersey After 3 was provided with free access to all necessary facilities, including district central offices for training and technical assistance.

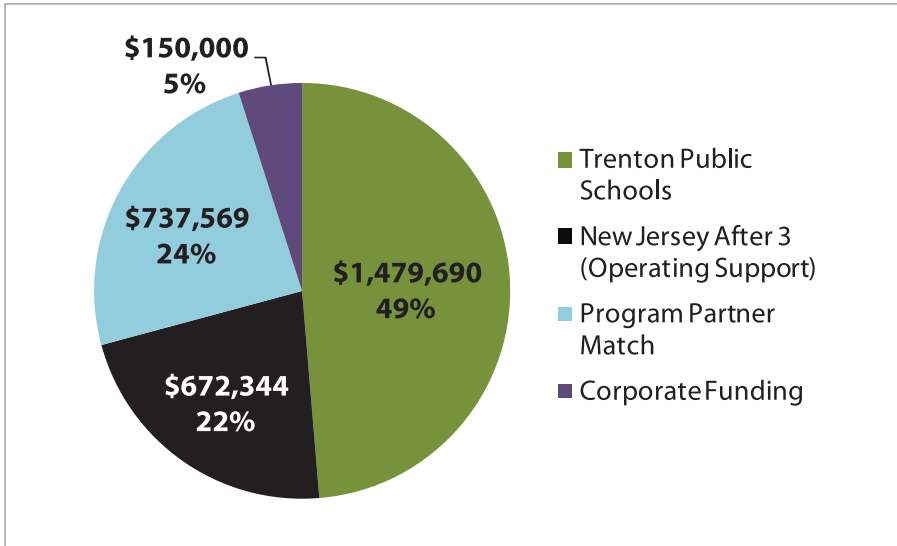
New Jersey After 3's first step in the planning process for TAP, beyond setting up lines of communication and establishing early infrastructure, was to issue its own RFP for community-based program partners to operate programming in each school. Five partners were chosen, each with deep ties to the Trenton community and extensive experience with youth-development programming. Through participation in TAP, their missions as individual agencies aligned.

These partners received extensive training and professional development in after-school management and programming. They also received on-site technical assistance from New Jersey After 3 program officers with starting up programs, including procuring child-care licenses, hiring staff and performing necessary background checks, and fleshing out program structures. Each program site manager met with his or her school's principal to align visions for the upcoming school year, identify school-day contacts for the after-school program and establish communication protocols, and detail program schedules and use of school facilities. Many of these collaborations built upon existing relationships between the program partner and school; a few started from scratch. The relationship between the individual school and after-school site manager, a full-time employee primarily responsible for after-school coordination with school-day learning, was a critical piece of the system that was strengthened by newfound district involvement.

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The second step in engaging partners was to attract additional investors. TAP convened locally invested foundations and corporations to discuss the initiative and determine funder roles in the project. In the end, a list of investors that included the Princeton Area Community Foundation, TD Bank, the United States Tennis Association (USTA), and the Harbourton Foundation contributed funding to the city's after-school services. New Jersey After 3, too, brought in some of its

FIGURE 1 Funding Breakdown of Trenton Afterschool Partnership



statewide support, including contributions from the federal Reading Is Fundamental literacy program, the New Jersey Department of Education, AmeriCorps, and Bank of America (Figure 1).

An example of how a nonprofit intermediary was able to maximize the impact of funding streams can be found in the program’s after-school tennis program. Both the city of Trenton and New Jersey After 3 initially received grant money through the USTA; the grant funds for Trenton totaled more than \$50,000, yet only five schools were being served. In conversations while setting up TAP, it was discovered that New Jersey After 3 and the city had been supporting tennis programs in the same school with no coordination. Through the new partnership, New Jersey After 3, the city, and USTA reconfigured funding so that all 18 elementary schools in the district were able to set up after-school tennis programs with instruction by USTA professionals. The citywide tennis program culminated in the Trenton Short-Court Championships, an end-of-the-year tournament among schools.

Beyond the philanthropy community and youth-serving nonprofit agencies, TAP discussed with the larger community expansion of learning time for Trenton youth. New Jersey After 3’s chief ex-

ecutive officer presented the burgeoning citywide after-school system to many of the city’s community leaders and neighborhood associations, conversations that allowed community groups, religious institutions, and local businesses to understand the value of after-school programs and create an after-school constituency.

Finally, the TAP reached out to its most important stakeholders – parents. Through a series of schools’ Parent Nights held at the beginning of the school year and letters sent to all households by New Jersey After 3, parents learned about the basic model of programming, enrollment information, and school-year schedules. Throughout the project year, program staff worked diligently to engage parents in OST learning. After-school programs provide invaluable opportunities to foster parent participation in their children’s education, and their engagement is associated with positive student learning outcomes (Henderson & Burla, 1994). Parents are often more willing to engage in after-school activities than traditional school-day activities for a number of reasons, including more convenient hours, approachability of part-time youth development staff, familiarity with the community agencies that operate the programs, and the less formal environment. In this way, after-school programs provide a unique

and important bridge between the schools and community.

With each of these Trenton partners engaged – the school district, the city, youth-serving agencies, philanthropists, neighborhood associations, businesses, and families – the Trenton After-school Partnership opened its doors to students in September 2009. Programs operated every school day from about 3 to 6 p.m., with regular attendance expected from enrolled students and with programming that spanned academic assistance, art, fitness, service-learning, and more throughout the year.

Results

By pooling resources, establishing structures for communication, and leveraging combined assets to attract new investments, this partnership:

1. expanded learning time each school day in every district school by 40 percent,
2. served significantly more children than past years,
3. cost less than half of the previous year's programming, saving millions of dollars, and
4. ensured consistent, evidence-based programming across schools.

The accomplishments of TAP's pilot year can be summarized as follows:

Enrollment and Attendance

New Jersey After 3 enrolled 2,398 students in the district's 21 K-12 schools – nearly one quarter of the student body. In the previous year, by contrast, the city estimated that after-school services from municipal, district, and New Jersey After 3 programs combined reached just 1,500 students in 15 schools.

Student daily attendance of 80 percent exceeded expectations and was among the best rates in the country for voluntary OST programs (Woods, Sanzone, Miller, & Reisner, 2011); research shows attendance rates are important measures of

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program quality and positive outcomes (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008). High attendance rates are indicative of student engagement, and the more a student participates in program content, the more likely he or she is able to reap the benefits.

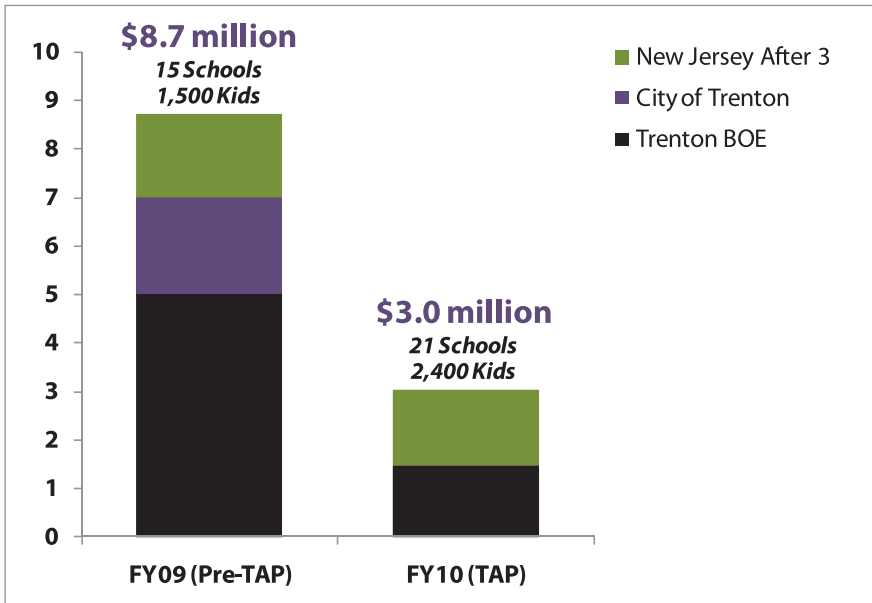
Strengthening Community Partners

Five community-based organizations partnered with 21 public schools to expand learning time using New Jersey After 3's model. All organizations received comprehensive support in their daily operation of programs from New Jersey After 3 in partnership with the Princeton Center for Leadership Training. Part-time after-school educators received three times the amount of training hours required under state licensing rules, and full-time program coordinators received twice the required amount of formal training. This training took the best practices in after-school delivery and youth development programming and applied them to the Trenton community's needs. In addition to this year-round training, New Jersey After 3 program officers worked daily with district administrators and provided more than 250 hours of on-site technical assistance to programs throughout the year.

Reducing Expenses

New Jersey After 3 leveraged more than \$1.5 million against the district's contracted investment.

FIGURE 2 Afterschool Expenses in the City of Trenton: FY09 (Pre-TAP) vs. FY10 (TAP)



Additional investment included contributions from Bank of America, TD Bank, Princeton Area Community Foundation, the U.S. Tennis Association, partner matching funds, and a blend of other sources. By consolidating funding sources into one management structure, partners saved an estimated \$5 million and served almost 1,000 more children than in the previous year. In the 2008-2009 school year, according to city of Trenton estimates, partners spent about \$8.7 million to serve 15 schools; through TAP, they spent just over \$3 million to serve 21 schools (S. Frisby, personal communication, January 10, 2011) (Figure 2). There are two key reasons for these significant savings:

- Before the partnership, distribution of funding was uncoordinated and inefficient. Some money went to nonprofits outside of the New Jersey After 3 network, to city Department of Recreation employees, and to public school staff and faculty. Under the partnership, however, all programs used New Jersey After 3’s specific cost model, in which the total cost per child ranges from \$1,000 to \$1,500. New Jersey After 3’s program officers and finance team help programs develop appropriate budgets and then monitor expenses throughout the

year to ensure fidelity to the model. In addition, New Jersey After 3’s model sets up programs of considerable scale (about 100 children per school) compared to many other after-school models, which helps to keep per-child costs down. The model also enabled New Jersey After 3 to leverage philanthropic dollars because of its citywide impact.

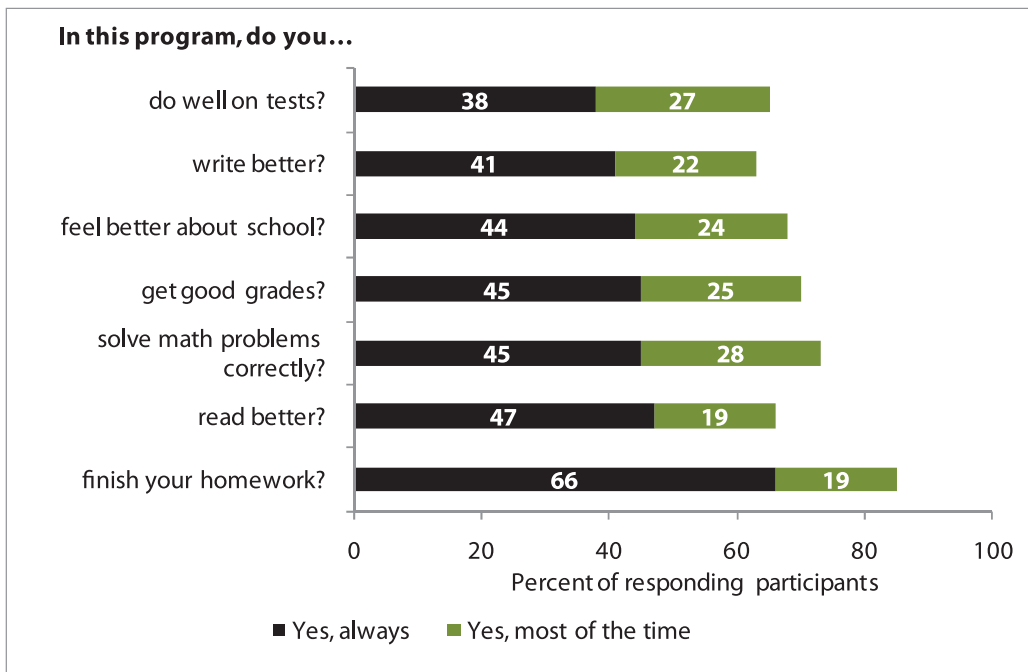
- Communication and coordination among partners eliminated redundancies in after-school services throughout the district. By centralizing management through a single, intermediary entity, programming was aligned instead of duplicated and administrative duties were consolidated.

Student and Family Outcomes

New Jersey After 3 commissioned Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to assess the pilot year of the Trenton Afterschool Partnership. The study examined program attendance and participation data, and surveyed parents and students. The evaluation explored the following questions:

- What was TAP’s reach and level of participation?
- What were students’ and parents’ perceptions of program benefits?

FIGURE 3 Youth Perceptions of Academic Benefit, in Percents, 2009-2010 (Source: Woods et al., 2011)



PSA evaluators found a wide range of reported benefits in Trenton students’ homework completion rates, literacy and problem-solving skills, classroom grades, and social behavior, and high levels of parent satisfaction and perceived benefits.

Students spent about half of program time on academic activities, one quarter on health and fitness, and a quarter on other nonenrichment activities (e.g., career development, arts and culture), in line with the school district’s original goals. The study found that the more time spent on academic activities in programs, the greater reported academic benefit from the program.

Research has demonstrated that benefits from youth engagement in high-quality after-school programs similar to New Jersey After 3’s translate to the regular school day (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008). Trenton youth reported that programs helped them finish their homework, read better, solve math problems better, get good grades, and feel better about school (Figure 3).

Students reported high attachment to programs, pro-social behavior, and positive relationships

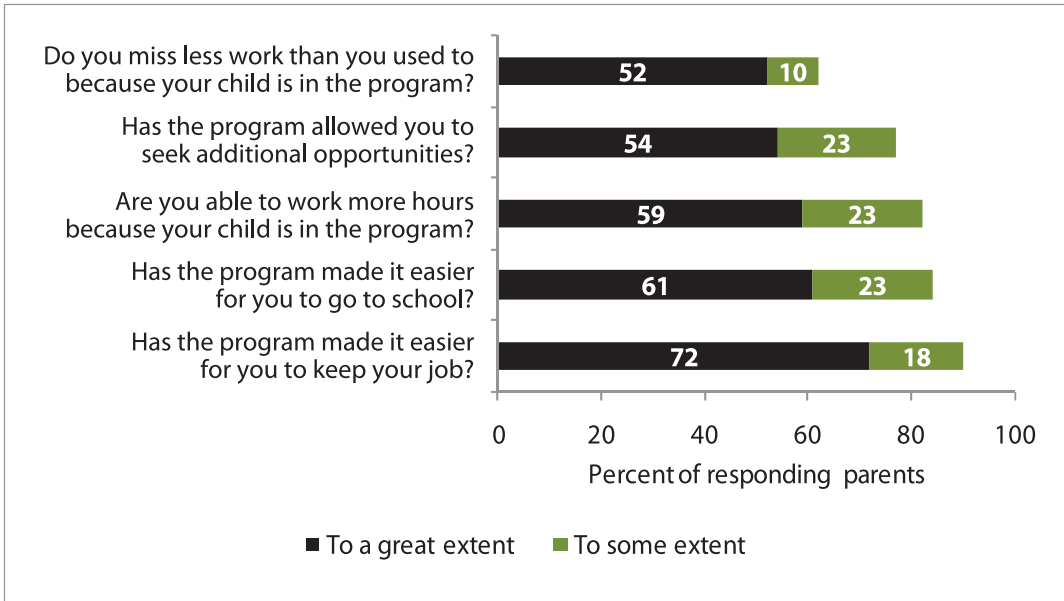
with after-school staff. More than 90 percent of youth surveyed said they felt like they belonged, felt happy in the program, and felt like adults in the program treated them with respect and listened to them. Middle-school students with high exposure to programs reported higher levels of pro-social behavior compared with students in middle-school grades who did not attend regularly.

Parents who were surveyed said their top reasons for enrolling their child in these programs were safety, affordability, academic benefit, and exposure to new activities. These needs and more were met, the survey found; the vast majority said that because of TAP after-school programs, their child was:

- doing better in school (94 percent);
- safer during after-school hours (93 percent);
- talking to them more about school (93 percent); and
- able to participate in activities they would otherwise be unable to do (92 percent).

Along with perceived benefits for their children, working parents reported that programs made

FIGURE 4 Benefits of Programming for Parents, in Percents, 2009-2010 (Source: Woods et al., 2011)



it easier for them to keep their jobs, miss less work, and work more hours. Beyond the positive impact that after-school programs have on children, Figure 4 illustrates how these programs benefit workplace productivity and, therefore, the financial well-being of families. These evaluation results corroborate that after-school programs provide essential supports to communities.

Overall, TAP’s students and their families reported high levels of satisfaction and perceived benefits from programs. According to PSA, TAP provided “access to quality after-school programming that provides [Trenton] youth in grades K-12 with enriching learning opportunities, nurturing relationships with peers and adults, and opportunities to develop important life skills and social skills.” These findings complement a larger body of literature that demonstrates the positive effects of high-quality after-school programs on student achievement and social and emotional development, as well as workplace productivity (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007; Reisner, 2004). These types of programs, especially at high levels of participation, can help to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve more, graduate on time, and succeed in the 21st-century work force.

Challenges

The Trenton Afterschool Partnership’s pilot year was deemed successful by both Trenton Public Schools and New Jersey After 3. Initial challenges that partners faced were expected for a startup citywide after-school initiative. For example, the number of new relationships with New Jersey After 3, program partners, and the 21 public schools presented staff members with a challenge in balancing quality interactions with school principals with the sheer volume of meetings and work involved in launching TAP. Therefore, a lesson learned over time included the balance of communications between program officers, site managers, and school-day staff. Other challenges included relationships with new program partners who were unused to some of the after-school model requirements, leading to significant administrative and programmatic challenges; program officers delivered significant technical assistance to these programs as they adjusted to New Jersey After 3 program requirements. Finally, school-level buy-in proved challenging in one of the two high schools. High school was a new programming area for New Jersey After 3, but the challenge derived from the fact that the principal’s priorities did not include after-school services, leading to difficulties in scheduling meetings with

school leaders. This type of relationship building and priority shifting takes time as partners worked to shape a common vision, even with district leadership support.

While collaborators considered TAP a successful enterprise, the state's economic troubles precluded the possibility of fully maintaining this partnership for the 2010-11 school year. State budget cuts proved especially devastating in Trenton – a city heavily dependent on state dollars – and forced school closures, staff elimination, and program cuts. The school district saw massive turnover, including a new superintendent and administrative officials. Despite these challenges, the TAP was able to partially continue in half – eight – of the city's remaining elementary schools, with significantly less district financial support. With the lack of available district and municipal support, programs sprang up throughout the city supported by community agencies and parents' contributions, in much of the sporadic and incongruent fashion of before.

Recommendations

Research and practitioner experience continue to point to citywide systems and public/private partnerships as the key to expanding and improving access to after-school programs. The participation of – and more importantly, coordination of – multiple partners can enrich after-school programming in a cost-efficient manner while contributing to system sustainability. However, these systems require long-term investment and are still vulnerable to funding issues; fluctuations in state budgets, which in turn affect district budgets, often dictate direction. Therefore, sustainability depends on public policy and requires education philanthropists to rethink their relationship to the legislative process.

While New Jersey After 3 continues to fund programs in Trenton and bring multiple partners to the table, these labors have less impact without consistent district buy-in. These systems require a dedicated revenue stream developed through policy work; this revenue will be garnered by capitalizing on policies that exist and advocating for policies that do not.

For example, New Jersey lawmakers passed legislation (NJ Public Law 80) in July 2009 that mandates that approximately 25 largely low-income districts develop a comprehensive, citywide plan for an after-school program and sponsor a referendum – at each city's discretion – to fund that plan up to \$2 million per year. The funds would be exempt from city/school district spending caps, resulting in a committed stream of revenue to keep children safe, improve student achievement, and support working families (State of New Jersey, 2009). To capitalize upon this legislation and cultivate the partnerships necessary to implement such reforms, partners would have to analyze specific community needs; build broad public support among families and the legislature; drive the proposal and passage of local referenda; and plan, implement, and measure the resulting partnerships.

Funders should support organizational capacity to advocate for changes in public policy. This support can include staffing, training, increasing research capacity, publishing reports, and providing other ways for grantees or intermediaries to gain the ears of key decisionmakers.

Funders can facilitate nonprofits in their efforts to capitalize upon this type of legislation by considering the following recommendations:

- Funders should support organizational capacity to advocate for changes in public policy. This support can include staffing, training, increasing research capacity, publishing reports, and providing other ways for grantees or intermediaries to gain the ears of key decisionmakers. It is a myth that nonprofits cannot advocate. Funders might also consider taking charge of

some of their own advocacy by presenting research and data to key leaders directly. Funders could also invite public policymakers to city, regional, or statewide grantmaker networks for conversations on specific policy topics. This could be the first step in a process of building a longer-term relationship between policymakers and philanthropy.

- Since effective partnerships require strong partners, philanthropists should prioritize funding general operating support for community-based organizations that have a track record of engaging in partnerships that eliminate redundancies, enabling the streamlining of services, and engaging parents.

In order to make a sustained and long-term impact on communities, simply writing a check and waiting for the grant report is insufficient. Funders must be active participants in each step of the process, right alongside community partners, public officials, parents, and other stakeholders.

- Funders should familiarize themselves with the realistic range of cost per client for the programs they are funding. They should also understand the factors that contribute to program costs. For high-quality after-school programs, those factors include program size, grade levels served, the variety of focus areas, and the type of provider and setting. The impact of such factors is described in Public/Private Venture's "Cost of Quality Out-of-School Time Programs" (Baldwin Grossman, Lind, Hayes, McMaken, & Gersick, 2009) and the Wallace Foundation's cost calculator. These are extremely helpful tools that help both grantmakers and grant seekers determine appropriate cost levels.
- Lack of a dedicated funding stream means

advocacy work must often to be absorbed into the overall work of a nonprofit. New Jersey After 3 encourages funders to support organizations trying to build their capacity for advocacy. Dedicated support will facilitate the partnership-building necessary to promote a cause as good public policy. Early in its history New Jersey After 3 developed a program rationale based on existing literature and research in the after-school field. New Jersey After 3 then invested significant time and resources to telling this story to legislators, mayors, school boards, and other decision makers. In this way, advocacy became integral to the agency's long-term fund-development strategy, and the concept of high-quality after-school programs was encouraged as good public policy. New Jersey After 3 also invested in external evaluation and assessment to ensure that in addition to national research there was data specifically supporting its program model. The agency utilized all the resources at its disposal to plant the seed of supporting this model with key decision makers in Trenton; these efforts bore fruit with the Trenton Afterschool Partnership.

Capitalizing on legislation involves long-term investment in the capacity of partner organizations to mobilize community support, build political will, and develop a shared vision on the part of stakeholders. In order to make a sustained and long-term impact on communities, simply writing a check and waiting for the grant report is insufficient. Funders must be active participants in each step of the process, right alongside community partners, public officials, parents, and other stakeholders. Funders must also adopt a long-term perspective, knowing that city and district leadership can change with the next election. These challenges may be daunting to the funding community, but the end result of expanded access, improved quality, and coordinated funding streams will help to ensure greater student success, safer communities, and a stronger work force. Few investments can yield such impressive returns.

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