Afterschool Programs Meet the Needs of Youth in Rural America

Afterschool programs in rural areas must not only educate and inspire students, but many must also contend with the challenges of poverty and geography that affect the success of the program and the success of the children it serves. For example, afterschool programs in isolated communities frequently contend with a lack of private partners, a limited tax base, high transportation costs and difficulty recruiting and retaining staff.\(^1\)

Plus, the children attending these programs are more likely to live in poverty and food insecurity; 18.9 percent of rural children live in poverty, and 20.6 percent don’t know where their next meal is coming from. Meanwhile, the poverty and food insecurity rates for non-rural kids are 15.4 percent and 17.4 percent, respectively. Not only does hunger affect a child’s ability to focus and learn, but high rates of poverty limit parents’ ability to augment their children's education with resources in the home, thereby making afterschool programming all the more critical for student achievement and success.\(^2\)

Many afterschool programs are overcoming these challenges every day in order to meet rural communities’ needs. Their successes illustrate the difference afterschool programs are making in kids’ lives.

**Changing Communities, Changing Lives**

Afterschool programs are able to meet the variety of needs encountered by youth and communities in rural areas. They can bring communities closer together by reaching out to local businesses and residents, allowing youth to build important relationships with caring adults and fostering their sense of civic responsibility. They can provide access to computers and technology to the 40 percent of rural kids who don’t have access to a computer at home. For youth ages 12-17, the highest level of drug abuse is in rural counties,\(^3\) but afterschool programs are an alternative that distract youth from risky behaviors and offer them quality, healthy and productive ways to spend their afternoons. Afterschool programs can also be a welcome haven to young people in isolated communities, where suicide rates are higher.\(^4\)

- The 4-H afterschool program “Bridging the Gap of Isolation” in Washtucna, Washington, helps youth develop relationships with responsible adults and benefits the entire community. A year after the program started, the local school called the county sheriff’s department for juvenile offenses only three times, down from 32 calls the year before.\(^5\)

- The Boys & Girls Club in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, provides approximately 350 children a day with a snack, homework assistance and a variety of recreational activities resulting in strong improvement in youths’ academic performance, self-esteem and social skills. The program also promotes family involvement by inviting parents to work with their children on the program’s computers one night a week.\(^6\)

- The tiny, remote Tyonek village in South Central Alaska was plagued by alcoholism and a terrible teenage suicide problem, averaging more than one such death every year. The problem was so bad that tribal elders constructed a Suicide Wall to list the names of the young victims. However, since the Boys & Girls Club launched an outreach program for Native youth in 1993, not one child has taken his or her own life, and the Suicide Wall is gone. Today, every youth in the village is a member of the Club, and
names are now being added to the Youth of the Month Wall, which recognizes positive contributions by the young people in the village.

We teach them that life and success are journeys, not destinations. If you do that, there is no room for thoughts of suicide.

--John Oates, chief executive officer for the Clubs'

Improving Student Success

A severe challenge among some rural schools is the persistently high rate of poverty and the complex set of issues that accompany it. Poverty reduces children’s opportunities to learn, both in the family and at school. 8 Afterschool programming has proven to be an effective strategy in alleviating some of the difficulties facing these underserved children.

- The After School On Track program serves an average of almost 400 students every day in rural Edmonton, Kentucky. This 21st Century Community Learning Centers grantee has seen tremendous academic improvements among the students who attend the program. Participants with a C+ average have moved to a B average, and recent testing data show that participants’ math scores increased by 5.7 percent, compared to a 4.3 percent increase among non-participants. 9 Part of the reason for the program’s success is its attendance rate, one of the highest in the state. Program Director Pamela Stearns credits this to the program’s ability to pay for transportation; since many families either do not drive or do not have access to a car, the program transports 300 to 350 students home each day.10

- The 5-year-old Sunflower County Freedom Project in rural Mississippi started as a summer-only program to promote educational excellence in students who were coming from schools where the average ACT score is a low 14.5 out of 36. Founded by two Teach for America alumni, the Freedom Project is now a full-year program for middle and high school students that offers intensive academic enrichment, mentoring, educational travel, and martial arts training, and demands “genuine achievement and performance.” Students appear to be meeting the program’s demands. During the 2002–2003 school year, the Freedom Project saw a 15 percent average increase in student grade point averages and an average increase in reading scores of 1.1 grade levels.

The thing I like the best [about the Freedom Project] is that the things I do here, now, help me in school. I’m not afraid to stand up in front of the class and tell them what I feel. I’m not afraid to ask the teacher a question when there is something I don’t understand.

--Christopher Perkins, fourth-year Fellow, Sunflower County Freedom Project11