

High-Quality After-School Programs Tied to Test-Score Gains

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Disadvantaged students who regularly attend top-notch after-school programs end up, after two years, academically far ahead of peers who spend more out-of-school time in unsupervised activities, according to findings from an eight-state study of those programs.

Focus on Quality

In the new study, researchers divided students into three groups: a “program only” group of students who attended their after-school program two to three days a week and did nothing else outside of school; a “program plus” group who visited the after-school programs two to three days a week and also took part in sports, church programs, music lessons, or other extracurricular activities; and a “low supervision” group who dropped in on a mix of after-school activities from one to three days a week.

The researchers found, over the course of the three year project, that the more engaged students were in supervised after-school activities, the better they did on a range of academic, social, and behavioral outcomes.

For instance, 3rd and 4th graders in the “program plus” group tallied gains on standardized mathematics tests that were 20 percentile points higher than those of the children who rarely went. The frequent attenders also made more progress in developing sound work habits, task persistence, and better social skills, and in reducing negative behaviors, such as skipping school or fighting.

The findings from the new study are in keeping with a growing body of research linking after-school programs to gains in social and emotional outcomes for students in organized activities after school.

For instance, a review of 73 studies published this year by the Chicago-based Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning looked specifically at programs aimed at developing youth’s personal and social skills and found that such programs could be linked to a wide range of improvement in students.

Compared with their control-group counterparts, that analysis concluded, program participants experienced greater increases in self-esteem and self-confidence, more decreases in problem behaviors, and improved grades and test scores.

But the sizes of the effects in the Promising Practices study are especially dramatic. The 20-percentile-point gain that “program plus” elementary students made, relative to the “low supervision” group, works out to an effect size of .73. That’s more than three times the learning boost that educators get by reducing an elementary school class by eight students, according to Ms. Vandell’s research.