



MADISON SCHOOL & COMMUNITY RECREATION

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Gay Straight Alliances

Best Practices in Youth Development and After -School Programs

After-school programming at the middle school level has seen a dramatic increase in funding, availability and research over the past 8 years. However, since this phenomenon is relatively new there is little information on the long term effects of after school programming and little data that supports actual best practices. Research that has been done is consistent with the following findings:

- 1) **Success of after-school programming is primarily dependent on the leader's ability to engage youth.** Research has shown the quality of the student – adult relationships is the key factor in students maintaining interest in an after-school program. Unlike the school day, it has also been shown that the educational background, certification of an adult does not prove or predict success in leading an after school programs. In other words, teachers, recreation leaders, volunteers, and community members all reported equal levels of success and failures. Important characteristics of a successful after-school program leader:
 - Creates a warm, friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
 - Maintains a consistent meeting schedule and program expectations.
 - Creates an environment that is supportive and challenging, pushing student's to achieve more than youth originally thought was possible.
 - Created an environment where praise for progress towards goals was common.

- 2) **Students feeling a sense of belonging to the after-school program is the second most important factor in maintaining student attendance.** Students need to feel welcomed and connected to the adult leader and their peers. Adult leaders play an important role in fostering this sense of belonging amongst participants. The role of the adult leader in developing this sense of connection is as follows:
 - Asserting themselves as a strong leader at the onset of the program by facilitating get to know each other activities, discussions about expectations, brainstorm sessions, etc.
 - From the onset the group leader needs to assist in providing the basic structure (format of meetings, get to know each games, snacks, ideas for projects and end goals).

- Once the group has formed and begun to develop their norms, formulated plans for the year, the group leader can begin to step back into a more supportive role allowing youth to take more leadership.

3) Meaningful content is the third most important factor for keeping students engaged.

After-school needs to look, feel and yes, even smell different from the school day in order to fully engage youth. Youth Development clubs that feel like school, often see a decline in enrollment. On the flip side, youth development clubs that the students perceive as “doing nothing” also see a decline in enrollment. In other words, middle school youth want their clubs to:

- Have a flexible but organized structure.
- Have a purpose and work towards an end goal in a collaborative, relaxed and fun manner.
- An environment where youth are encouraged to take on leadership roles and take on meaningful and *appropriate* responsibility.
- Be youth led (this looks very different at the middle school level vs. the high school level).

Resources:

Afterschool Alliance

www.afterschoolalliance.org

National School Board Association

www.nsba.org

Search Institute

www.search-institute.org

National Youth Development Information Center

www.nydic.org