

Public Will and Constituency Engagement

The State of Cities

Reflecting on the factors that influence child poverty, James Traub of the *New York Times Magazine* wrote “School, at least as we understand it now, is not as powerful an institution as it seems And whom you hang out with, both during and after school, can matter more than what happens in the classroom.” His words match the tenor and tone of advocacy efforts around the country.¹ The media’s continued warnings about unsupervised youth, policy makers’ weariness with the pace of school reform, and families’ grow-

ing challenges in addressing the needs of their children for supervision and stimulation — these are the conditions that set the stage for a national after-school movement.

While none of the GRASP cities have access to local public opinion data, all anecdotal evidence corroborates the national trends: more than nine out of ten voters believe access to after-school programming is important, and 67 percent of all voters agreed that they would pay more taxes to support and provide after-school programs.² Stakeholders universally describe a new level of understanding and

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

What factors are critical in engaging the public in out-of-school issues?

Who should play a role in engaging the public, and how should they frame the issues?

The GRASP project is a time-limited, focused effort to help four cities — Chicago, Little Rock, Kansas City and Sacramento — document the opportunities and infrastructures that support young people in the out-of-school hours, and to develop “big picture” plans for better supporting children and youth. GRASP was initiated by the Forum for Youth Investment with the support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.



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Tolman, J., Pittman, K., Yohalem, N., Thomases, J., & Trammel, M. (2002). *Moving an Out-of-School Agenda: Lessons and Challenges Across Cities*. Takoma Park, MD: Forum for Youth Investment.

THE ROLE OF CHILD ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

For good reason, child advocates are taking on an increasingly important role in out-of-school time issues. In every one of the GRASP cities, child advocacy organizations have arrived at out-of-school as one of their top priorities. Many child advocates believe that if groups organize around out-of-school opportunities, they will directly or indirectly impact most of their other priority child and youth outcomes. Among the child advocacy organizations stepping into the after-school movement is Kansas City’s Partnership for Children.

The Partnership for Children brings a number of capacities to this emerging issue. As a convener, the Partnership has the clout to bring civic, community and business leaders to the table. As an entity with a research history, the Partnership has the credibility to put forth a believable account of the situation of young people. Finally, as a public advocacy organization, the Partnership made its reputation through a well-crafted “#1 Question” Campaign — challenging Kansas Citians at home and in businesses, schools, faith communities, health care institutions and neighborhoods, to ask themselves one question when making decisions: “Is it good for the children?” By Spring 2000, 85 percent of area residents who were surveyed reported that they supported the #1 Question Campaign and nearly 80 percent pledged to live up to its challenge.

By civic leaders’ own admission, Kansas City has not lived up to its 1992 claim to be the “Child Opportunity Capitol” — at least when it comes to the lives of older youth. For ten years the Partnership for Children has tracked the well-being of children and youth in an annual report card. Steadily for ten years, individual ratings have gone up — except for the yearly ratings for the teen years. For this population, substance abuse rates, murder rates, and other statistics continue to exceed state and national averages. Civic leaders and advocates alike trace these problems back to a lack of out-of-school opportunities for young people.

Responding to these conditions, the Partnership for Children is now stepping out of its decade-old role as the leading civic research organization and into a role as community catalyst. In July 2001, the Partnership hosted an initial meeting with leaders in each sector of the community to whom their challenge had been made: civic and business leaders, youth development agencies, city and county governments, faith communities, law enforcement officials, educators, philanthropic organizations and child advocates. Out of this meeting emerged an ongoing working group and a strategy for knitting opportunities available to young people. It appears that all the pieces are in place for genuine improvements in policy and programming.

¹ Traub, J. (2000, January 16). “What No School Can Do.” *New York Times Magazine*.

² Afterschool Alliance. (2001, July/August). *Afterschool Alert Poll Report Number 4: A Report on Findings of a Nationwide Poll of Registered Voters on Afterschool Programs*. Washington, DC: Afterschool Alliance.

commitment, and a new level of energy behind investments in the out-of-school hours. Candidates for public office are making it a campaign promise. In public forums in Sacramento, Little Rock and Kansas City, out-of-school programming consistently floats to the top of the priority list, whether the initial focus of the conversation is a children's report card, a citywide visioning process or juvenile delinquency. All roads lead to after school. The question is

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE?

One of the ways that communities and parents have organized on a grassroots level to support out-of-school programming is through collaborations with faith-based organizations. The Washington Interfaith Network (WIN) was founded in 1996 to organize faith-based institutions in D.C. around after-school programming for children. When asked why WIN chose to organize around after-school programs, a WIN minister responded, "We came to organize around the statistic that the hours of 3 P.M. to 6:30 P.M. are the most critical to youth. That is the time when youth crime is most prevalent. If you have programs for youth to participate in, you lessen the possibility for them to get in trouble."

Despite WIN's common goal to provide youth programming, the network was challenged by collaborating across races, classes and denominations. "D.C. can be a segregated city in terms of politics," according to the WIN minister. "Certain groups always receive funding from the city although they may not be doing anything constructive with the funding. Now these same groups have to work with other groups who never receive funding and want to do something more constructive. Because of these divisions, in the beginning, it was very hard for us to assemble and do something as a critical mass."

Another obstacle facing WIN was engaging schools. He stated, "many schools did not understand the steps needed to be taken to organize effective after-school programming. We wanted quality after-school programming."

"The methods we used to overcome our problems of leveraging with schools and collaborating across denominations were shared leadership and shared persistence," he went on. "We, as different faith groups, had to learn to develop relationships amongst each other. The problem is people don't build lasting, trusting relationships. We also had to learn to be more persistent in agitating government officials. People try to discourage you by canceling meetings or putting you off. However, when you have a broad base, enough members, you can keep coming back when people put you off. People want to get you out of their hair, so they give in and eventually give you what you want."

where to go once there. The answers are different depending on whether the trip toward an expanded after-school agenda was taken in the name of community safety, supervision, remediation, recreation, enrichment, skills building or engagement.

Cities are engaging in a range of efforts to support and capitalize on this growing level of public engagement. Yet, because out-of-school programming represents an emerging and composite field, engagement and advocacy efforts are coming from many directions, each bringing a unique perspective to the work. In some cases, emerging school-age care alliances place their attention squarely on elementary-aged children, and focus on staffing issues and on providing quality care. Child advocacy organizations re-tool their long-standing strategies — children's report cards, public service announcements (PSAs), large convenings — around this new "hot issue." Community organizing shops see this as a new hook for their efforts to build community power. Young people, armed with poll data about alienated peers and inadequate public investments, are launching their own advocacy efforts focused on out-of-school opportunities. The configuration of players and issues differs dramatically based on who is doing the engaging.

Critical Issues, Lessons Learned

Leading with a broad message is critical. In most conversations, the terms "after-school programs" and "out-of-school opportunities" are used interchangeably. But the language is important; the two terms carry very different connotations about who is engaged, when and with what goals. How much the public will get behind the broader agenda of out-of-school opportunities, and what it would take to make this shift, has simply not yet been tested. On the other hand, it is clear that a larger number of constituencies can come to the table when the issue is re-framed to include adolescents and older youth, a broader range of outcomes and a broader set of times. It is also clear that, to truly support all young people, moving this larger agenda is critical.

Advocacy can reform or reinforce negative perceptions of young people. Although there is much public support in favor of youth programs, the flip side of this coin is that youth are plagued by negative perceptions — viewed with "misgivings and trepidation" and as "lacking the capacity

to play meaningful roles in their communities.”³ Because of these views, the public is less receptive of supporting diverse programming for youth. Too often, efforts to build public support for out-of-school programming takes these negative perceptions as a starting point — arguing that after-school programs are necessary to keep young people out of trouble, or to make up for inadequate families and failing neighborhoods. Public will campaigns need not be framed in this way. Research by Susan Bales and her colleagues at the FrameWorks Institute indicates that shifting negative perceptions is challenging — but that there are ways to make progress. They suggest getting rid of the language associated with the negative images (e.g., “teenager”) enlisting knowledgeable adults and older Americans in dispelling myths, and offering adults prolonged exposure to young people in safe settings. A recent Afterschool Alliance/Mott Foundation PSA campaign offers one example of these principles at work, focusing attention on the young participants in after-school programs as emerging heroes, rather than as delinquents or potential delinquents.

ADVOCACY IN ACTION: COLEMAN ADVOCATES

San Francisco is known for its long-standing, high-level support of young people and out-of-school programming. Part of the credit for this commitment should go to the city's elected leadership and to the Department of Children, Youth and Their Families — the agency responsible for overseeing the city's investments.

But much of the credit should go to the city's leading child advocacy organization, Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, for the constant pressure it has applied to the city and its consistent efforts to rally the public. It was Coleman's four-year campaign — facilitating the development of a grassroots agenda for policy change, analyzing existing city commitments and proposing new funding through an annual Children's Budget, supporting youth-led advocacy efforts, doing broad-based outreach — which made San Francisco “the first city in the country to guarantee funding for children, each year, in its budget.” It is Coleman's concerted efforts that have led to innovative programs and investments in school-based health centers, a city youth commission and the like. And it was Coleman Advocates who once again led the campaign for the 2001 reauthorization of its landmark 1991 legislation, resulting in a larger tax set-aside, secure until 2016, and a citywide planning process around children and youth.

Source: Brodtkin, Margaret. (1994). From *Sand Boxes to Ballot Boxes*. San Francisco: Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth.

Historic areas of civic action and existing advocacy infrastructure are critical resources. In Chicago, a long history of community organizing and a strong school reform community have resulted in a community infrastructure with impressive capacity for engagement — local councils that provide citizens governance responsibilities for each of the city's schools, a myriad of small community organizing shops, youth-led mobilizing efforts. In Kansas City, the child advocacy organization has demonstrated its capacity to both bring civic leaders to the table and galvanize the community by making the city's first question “Is it good for the children?” In Sacramento, a faith-based organizing initiative, Sacramento Area Congregations Together, consistently turns out young people and adults — often with powerful data in hand — to make the case for increased investments. Other communities have a strong tradition of civil rights organizing or vibrant neighborhood associations. Out-of-school advocates can learn to engage these existing community infrastructures and link to the issues that a community historically cares about as they build a constituency for increased investments.

Inside and outside strategies should be in alignment. In some communities, a rich history of community organizing means that neighborhood residents, families and young people themselves are applying consistent pressure from the outside, forcing public institutions to invest in out-of-school opportunities. In other communities, the right mix of powerful players — government officials, business leaders, city agencies — lend their insider clout to an out-of-school agenda. Yet, in many cities, both sets of advocacy strategies do not exist simultaneously. Furthermore, the inside and outside strategies are seldom aligned in a way that ensures that they push in the same direction.

It is tempting — but risky — to sell out-of-school time as a solution to multiple community problems. It is easy to pitch out-of-school opportunities as the response to a huge range of problems — academic failure, youth crime, drug and alcohol abuse. Out-of-school programming has, in fact, been linked to reductions in most of these persistent problems. But describing the benefits in this way both under-sells and over-promises the potential impacts of out-of-school opportunities. First, it reinforces the focus on youth problems, rather than on the potentially positive outcomes that come of participation in quality programming.

³ Duffett, A., Johnson, J., & Forbes, S. (1997, 1999). *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think about the Next Generation*. Washington, DC: Public Agenda.

Second, it sets advocates and providers up for a fall — because, in reality, the benefits of programs are hard to measure and often not visible in the short term. It might be better for advocates to sell out-of-school programming on positive intermediate outcomes — increased school graduation rates or increased positive self-evaluations, for example — than promising fast returns on investments.

Young people are often the most effective advocates.

Young people are only occasionally recognized as a constituency to be organized or as a potential corps of policy advocates. But, as discussed in Task Brief #7: Youth Engagement, young people can be both. Youth organizing efforts in Chicago and Sacramento, described in that task brief, demonstrate that young people can move policy issues and build community power when other advocates would struggle to do so.

Compelling data make for compelling advocacy. When asked to describe the benefits of the GRASP planning process, participating cities discussed the power of having a sizeable, data-rich document that could ground their efforts to engage political leaders and other stakeholders. Just being able to put some numbers on the table, however rough and

incomplete, lent new credibility to their efforts. The GRASP experience points to the power of even a few hard facts (or the embarrassing lack thereof) to change minds and encourage new commitments of resources. The data collection process itself is also an organizing and engagement opportunity — either as an opportunity to bring together stakeholders to put their data on the same page, or as a chance to build citizen understanding of data and data collection. One example: in seeking a way to improve child care services and to involve the community, the city of Boston developed the Early Education Quality Improvement Project (EQUIP) to provide research on the city’s child care programs. Through EQUIP, a survey was sent to over 300 child care providers, head start centers, family day providers and kindergarten programs. The survey measured the supply and demand of child care in the city, program quality and the socio-economic status of families served. What was unique about EQUIP’s approach was that the collection of the data was not the end of the project but the beginning. By surveying so many different groups it brought stakeholders to the table that had not been previously there before — the beginning of an ongoing networking process among providers. Further, it allowed stakeholders to make use of the data to increase the capacity of their programs.

Contact Information for Local Efforts

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Contact Information for National Resources

The Afterschool Alliance is a coalition of organizations dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of after-school programs. The Alliance supports major public awareness efforts like Lights On! Afterschool and a Mott Foundation-supported PSA campaign, and has developed publications highlighting the growing public support for after-school programming. For more information, contact:

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The FrameWorks Institute designs, commissions, manages and publishes communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. The Institute has focused concerted energy on public perceptions of young people

and what it will take to change those perceptions. Many of the papers and publications that have resulted are available online. For more information, contact:

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The National Association of Child Advocates

(NACA) is the national membership organization for state and local child advocacy organizations. NACA provides technical assistance, publications, training and up-to-date information to its member advocacy organizations. For more information, contact:

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