

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM TASC'S FIRST THREE YEARS?

Evaluation of the TASC After-School Program

Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

During its first three years of operation (school years 1998-99 through 2000-01), The After-School Corporation (TASC) increased the amount of after-school programming available in New York City and across the state. It also worked with public and private partners to improve the quality of school-based after-school services, attract public and private funding, and promote the long-term sustainability of after-school programming. Although diverse funding sources and program partners introduced new perspectives and considerations, TASC maintained the after-school service model established in its initial year. In school year 2000-01, TASC supported 192 projects serving 45,719 students statewide, including 143 projects serving 37,135 students in New York City. This summary describes the implementation and effects of TASC projects in the program's third year, focusing on an evaluation sample of 96 projects in New York City that received their initial TASC grants in either Years 1 or 2 of the program.

In general, these projects were characterized by growth and continuity over the three-year period, as described in a series of reports from this evaluation. With assistance from TASC and other partners, the after-school projects attracted and served large numbers of children, and they employed staff who brought skills and commitment to their work. Project leaders and staff worked hard to forge productive relationships with their host schools and their surrounding communities, and they applied varied resources as they sought to maintain and improve the quality and long-term viability of program services. Over the period, these projects gradually increased their focus on educational support and enrichment during the after-school hours. They also adopted strategies capable of promoting student engagement in academic learning and in other positive developmental experiences. After-school participants reacted to the growing quality of the TASC projects by increasing their rates of after-school attendance.

Analyses of the educational performance of participating students in grades K-8 showed that students who participated regularly in TASC after-school projects experienced educational gains when compared to similar but nonparticipating students enrolled in the same schools. In particular, active participants attending projects for two or more years increased their mathematics achievement, with the

The TASC Program and Evaluation

TASC awards grants and provides other support for private nonprofit organizations to deliver academic, arts-related, recreational, and support services to students after school, from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. every school day. Each TASC-supported project provides after-school services in a public school, collaborating with educators in that host school. Although TASC support is concentrated in New York City, TASC also assists after-school projects throughout New York State, through links with the state's own after-school and extended-day programs.

Policy Studies Associates, Inc., is conducting a comprehensive evaluation of TASC operations and results, focusing on the after-school projects initially funded by TASC in its first two years of operation. The evaluation has collected data on the first four years of program operations and will collect data for school year 2002-03. The evaluation is supported through grants from the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Atlantic Philanthropies, and the W.T. Grant Foundation.

greatest gains seen among students from the most disadvantaged circumstances. Active TASC participants also increased their rates of school attendance.

Student educational gains, coupled with high levels of satisfaction on the part of students, parents, and educators and very high levels of participant re-enrollment from one school year to the next, auger well for the likelihood that students, families, and public officials will continue to press for expansion of after-school programming using the TASC model. If so, it will be important for expansion efforts to retain the richness and diversity of the capacity-development resources that TASC makes available to projects.

These findings and conclusions are described in the pages that follow.

Who Participates in TASC After-School Projects?

TASC projects are located in the schools that serve the New York City school system's most disadvantaged children. Within these schools, the children who participate in TASC projects are very similar to children who do not choose to participate. That is, both participants and nonparticipants demonstrate high levels of educational risk, as measured by poverty, baseline achievement, and status as English Language Learners, recent immigrants, racial/ethnic minority-group members, and recipients of special education. The only major difference between participants and nonparticipants in the K-8 grade span is that participants tend to be drawn from grades 1-5, with fewer students drawn from kindergarten and grades 7-8, compared to the overall populations of their schools.

Other important features of the participant population include the following:

- After-school enrollment at the project level continued to average about a third of the children in the host schools. Factors limiting enrollment included school and classroom space, administrative and teaching capacity, and demand for services among students wanting to attend an after-school program every day.
- Over the first three years of program operations, TASC projects increased their inclusion of students with disabilities, especially in after-school projects serving older students. While students with disabilities were initially under-represented in TASC projects (based on a comparison of enrollments of these students in TASC projects and in the host schools), the projects are approaching their goal of serving representative subpopulations of their host schools.
- Although risky behavior remained prevalent in the lives of students outside of their school and after-school experiences, students reported that certain risk behaviors became less common in their lives, including (among high school participants) alcohol use and sexual activity.

What Are Students' Patterns of After-School Participation?

TASC's project structure and operations are premised on students in grades K-8 attending the program regularly, preferably five days a week. According to TASC's theory of change, it is only at high levels of exposure to the activities and relationships supported by the TASC projects that changes in the attitudes, behaviors, and school performance of participating students are likely to occur.

Analysis of TASC project data indicates that after-school attendance grew steadily over the program's first three years. The median days attended by students in each year rose from 80 days in 1998-99 to 99 days in 1999-2000 and 109 days in 2000-01. This pattern suggests that projects increased their attractiveness to students and their families as the projects matured, and that they also made more effective efforts to promote high attendance through administrative means. In school year 2000-01, 67 percent of TASC participants met the evaluation's threshold for "active participation" by attending at least 60 days during the school year and at least 60 percent of the days during their period of enrollment within the school year.

A substantial portion of students attended TASC projects for more than a single year. Among all students who attended a TASC program in 1998-99 or 1999-2000 and continued to attend the same school in the subsequent year, 64 percent continued to participate in the TASC project. Active TASC participants were especially likely to continue for another year, with 73 percent doing so.

Analysis of school transfer rates of active participants and nonparticipating students in the same schools indicates that TASC services were a factor holding students in their schools. This analysis examined the differing rates of school transfer of the two groups before and after participants' initial enrollment in TASC. Over the first two years of the four-year period (1997-98 through 2000-01), nonparticipants and students who would later become active participants transferred schools at a rate of 22 to 23 percent annually. While the transfer rate of nonparticipants continued unchanged in the second two years, the transfer rate of active TASC participants dropped to 14 percent after they began attending the TASC project.

Who Staffs the TASC Projects?

In school year 2000-01, the total TASC project workforce in New York City included about 4,400 regular staff, 290 subcontracted staff, and 140 AmeriCorps members. In addition to these paid staff, projects reported an increasing use of volunteers.

Within this workforce, most site coordinators (91 percent) were college graduates, almost half (45 percent) had a masters degree or higher, and most (91 percent) had at least three years of experience working in social services, youth services, community agencies, or educational organizations. About half had management experience in that type of organization. Overall, site coordinators were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs in Year 3 than in previous years (with 96 percent reporting that they are satisfied). Fewer site coordinators than in previous years said that they intended to leave their job in the next year.

Staff (other than site coordinators) who responded to the evaluation's survey had less education than was reported in previous years. A majority of staff (59 percent) were students themselves, either

in college, graduate school, or high school. Most staff earned less than \$16 an hour. About two-thirds of project staff said that they intend to return to their after-school job next year.

About a quarter of after-school staff also worked in the host school as teachers, paraprofessionals or other instructional assistants, school aides, or other staff. Most said that their dual roles benefited both the regular and after-school programs.

What Relationships Do Projects Establish with the School and Community?

TASC projects achieved fairly high degrees of partnership, coordination, and integration with their host schools. They typically solicited advice and information from teachers and principals on students' academic needs, used school administrators to advise and monitor activities, coordinated homework assistance with classroom teachers, and adopted school themes for special after-school projects. Site coordinators' representation on school-wide governing, coordinating, or advisory teams increased in Year 3, with over half of principals (54 percent) reporting TASC participation on such teams.

In surveys, principals of schools hosting these relatively mature projects indicated a belief that the projects did not require as much of their direct involvement as in previous years. This view was reflected in principals' reports of the amount of time spent on work related to the project, the frequency of their visits to the project, the frequency of their meetings with the site coordinator, and other indicators of the strength of the school/after-school partnerships.

Site coordinators used many methods to promote parent participation. According to survey data, projects achieved the highest levels of parent participation at special events hosted by the after-school project, with 54 percent of site coordinators reporting that at least half of the parents typically attended special events. Though more limited than contacts with parents, outreach to community members produced good results, including greater community awareness of the program and opportunities for students to volunteer in community activities.

How Do Projects Use Available Resources?

After-school access to school facilities and equipment improved slightly in Year 3 from the access reported in the previous two years. This improvement was especially noteworthy with regard to storage space, fax machines, and photocopiers. The school facilities that remained the most difficult for TASC projects to access were classroom computers, the library, and the computer lab.

Personnel costs were the largest expense for almost every site, with projects spending an average of 85 percent of their funds for personnel in 2000-01. In the same year, sites reported that they would raise an average of 34 percent of their overall budgeted spending from matching funds and offset credits. Based on projects' own spending reports (and excluding the costs of administration, facilities, and technical supports provided by TASC, the New York City Department of Education, and others) and the evaluation's student attendance database, projects' average actual cost for a day of service (defined as one student attending a TASC project for one day) was \$6.76. This cost level is consistent with expectations communicated to projects by TASC and reflects an efficient use of project resources.

Site coordinators and staff indicated high levels of approval for TASC-sponsored training and technical assistance. Moreover, they viewed the training and technical assistance more favorably in Year 3 than in previous years, especially the match between these services and their needs. Sixty-one percent of coordinators said they had implemented what they learned in training and that their projects had benefited as a result. TASC's reports on promising practices were an effective method of informing after-school sites about promising strategies and approaches used by their peers, according to survey responses.

What Activities and Services Do Projects Provide?

Academic enrichment continued to be a priority for principals and site coordinators in Year 3, and after-school activities reflected this focus to a greater extent than in prior years. Compared to Year 2, projects in Year 3 also involved more students more frequently in extended projects and group efforts. Observations in TASC projects suggest that these project activities promoted active learning and positive interactions and did so in contexts that students enjoyed.

Almost all of the evaluation's categories of academic and cognitive-development activity demonstrated higher levels of intensity (determined based on the activity's frequency, extent of involvement of all students, duration through the year) in Year 3 than in prior years. The increased levels of intensity of the varied academic and cognitive activities, coupled with site-visit observations, suggest that projects had adopted broader activity menus than before and hence had created a greater likelihood that activities were being matched to students' preferences and needs.

Among artistic development activities, the second most popular

How Do Adults and Students Describe the Opportunities Available through TASC Projects?

According to a high school principal: "The message has to go out that our [school's positive academic] results here have not come from a nine-to-three schedule [alone]... I more than partially attribute that to after-school... We've created a culture of a full-service organization. ... School is here from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. What does that mean? It means that all enrichment, remediation, and college prep activities are attached to or in collaboration with our after-school program... The outcome is not just for kids. After many years here, in a place that used to shut down at 3:00 pm, I now have a good percentage of the staff here after hours, working with kids."

According to a student: "Peer tutoring means I don't have to go home and do these things by myself."

According to a student: "Without after-school, there would be no unwinding - period!"

According to a student: "My parents want me to finish my homework before I get home, so I have free time."

According to an assistant principal of a high school: "Our kids were always well-prepared for college, but they weren't well rounded. When they applied to college, they were someone's poor cousin. Through the after-school we want to give them the experiences that the rich suburban kids have."

According to a special education teacher in a host elementary school: "I teach learning disabled [students]. A lot of them have language-processing problems. After-school activity puts them in the mainstream. No compartmentalizing. They are put in with everyone else. They made friends with children from regular ed."

According to a teacher of English as a Second Language: "For a lot of our kids, they only speak English in an English class. [After-school] increases their time interacting in English and using English for real communication."

According to a student: "Let's just say that some kids come to school just to be in the after-school program..."

According to a parent: "I can't figure out my life without it."

focus of after-school activities, art (visual arts and also arts and crafts) and dance/movement were offered at the highest intensity, and the intensity of both types of activities increased in Year 3 over levels in Year 2.

What Are the Reactions of the Host Schools to the TASC Projects?

In Year 3, principals reported generally positive reactions to their schools' TASC projects, citing the choice and diversity of activities, the qualifications and leadership of the site coordinators, and projects' connections to the community and to parents as particular strengths. Most principals (90 percent) said that the projects enabled students to participate in activities not available during the regular school day. Most also said that the project enhanced the overall effectiveness of the school (93 percent) as well as students' motivation to learn (82 percent) and student attendance (81 percent). Principals in Year 3 were more likely than before to report that the TASC project made parents feel the school was a safe place for their children. Most principals (93 percent) said that the benefits of having the TASC after-school project outweighed the costs.

Reflecting an increasing recognition of the potential effectiveness of TASC-sponsored after-school services in enriching and reinforcing the regular school curriculum, more principals in Year 3 than in Year 2 said that the quality of homework assistance needed improvement (60 percent, compared to 51 percent). This reaction also reflects the increasing pressure on principals to improve their students' academic performance and their growing reliance on TASC projects as essential partners in improving achievement. Possibly reflecting the same pressures for after-school services to become more academic, students expressed somewhat less satisfaction with their after-school project in 2000-01 than in the past, when asked how much they liked the program overall.

How Do Students and Parents React to Project Opportunities?

In interviews, both students and parents reported that the TASC programming provided safe havens after school, where students felt secure, protected, and nurtured. These reactions, as reported in interviews, were echoed in the evaluation's surveys. In all three years of program operation, the evaluation surveyed samples of TASC participants in grades 4-12 about their personal characteristics and their reactions to their after-school participation. Key findings from these surveys include the following:

- Compared to responses in previous years, more elementary-grade participants in Year 3 (85 percent) believed that the TASC program provided them with academic benefits.
- Students generally reported strong connections to their after-school project. Most reported positive social interactions with peers (88 percent) and described the project as a place where people work together (77 percent).
- High school participants perceived a stronger sense of community within the TASC projects (with 85 percent responding this way) and were more trusting of after-school staff (83 percent) than participants at other grade levels.

- Many students said that the TASC program had given them new experiences (75 percent) and helped them develop life skills (77 percent). In questions addressed just to middle school students, many (73 percent) said that the TASC project had helped them master a performance skill, such as playing a musical instrument, singing, or speaking in front of a group. Many middle school students (60 percent) also said that the program had afforded them opportunities to contribute to the design or operation of the program itself.

Parents surveyed for the evaluation in Years 1 and 2 of the program expressed approval of the TASC-supported services. Most importantly, 97 percent in Year 2 said that “my child likes coming to the program.” Eighty-six percent of parents agreed that the project helps their children to get their homework done, do better in school, and get the academic help that they need. Half or more of the responding parents said that the program fit their needs, allowed them to miss less work than before, and helped them keep their job and also work more hours.

How Does TASC Participation Affect Achievement?

Students who were active participants in TASC projects for more than a year showed significantly greater gains on citywide math tests than did similar nonparticipating classmates. Students who participated in TASC after-school activities the most consistently and for the longest period of time experienced the greatest math gains, when compared to similar nonparticipants. Among students who participated actively in TASC projects in each year of their enrollment, students participating for two years gained an average of four scale-score points more on the city-wide standardized tests than similar nonparticipants. Among active participants, students participating for three years gained six points more than similar nonparticipants. Demonstrating the value of even higher levels of participation, students classified as “highly active” (participating 80 percent or more of the days they were enrolled in the year and at least 80 days) gained six scale-score points more than similar nonparticipants after only two years of TASC participation. The performance of TASC participants on the citywide tests of reading and English/language arts was not significantly different from that of similar nonparticipants.

Which Students Derive the Most Academic Benefit from TASC Participation?

In general, the TASC participants who were at greatest academic risk made the largest math gains, when compared to other students. (Reporting of subgroup analyses focuses here on math because of the consistent relationships with TASC participation, as found in the aggregate analyses of math achievement.) Math benefits were clearly evident for students who scored in the lowest of four proficiency levels in the year prior to TASC participation. The gains for these low-achieving students were evident for active participants regardless of their number of years of participation. Among students from low-income families, the evaluation also found evidence of after-school benefits in math after two or more years of active participation.

Among the various subgroups examined, African-American students were especially likely to benefit from active participation in TASC projects, demonstrating gains in math over similar nonparticipants after one or more years of active participation. Hispanic students benefited in math after two years of participation.

Similarly, special-education students and English Language Learners who participated actively in TASC projects showed significant benefits over similar nonparticipants in math after a year of participation. (The evaluation had too few two- and three-year participants in these categories to permit results to be computed.)

How Does TASC Participation Affect School Attendance?

Students participating in TASC projects on an active basis improved their school attendance to a greater extent than did similar nonparticipants after one or two years of TASC participation. This benefit of TASC participation was apparent even though students in grades K-8 who attended TASC host schools demonstrated fairly high attendance rates overall, averaging 91.4 percent in 2000-01. Although TASC active participants demonstrated slightly higher baseline attendance in the year prior to TASC attendance than did nonparticipants (by 1.6 percentage points), the TASC active participants improved their attendance rates more than did nonparticipants. This finding is especially important because participants started closer to a practical “ceiling” on their attendance improvements.

TASC active participants also gained more in school attendance than did nonparticipants at each grade level, with patterns in grades 5-8 particularly noteworthy. At those grades, TASC participation significantly moderated the attendance decline that was seen among nonparticipants. Although the attendance of nonparticipants decreased consistently between grades 5 and 8, the attendance of active TASC participants rose at each grade level except for a decline between grades 6 and 7 after one year of active participation. Even there, the attendance decline of TASC active participants was less than a third of the decline for nonparticipants.

What Can We Conclude from These Results?

The preceding highlights suggest that the program, based on data collected in its first three years of operation, is on track to achieve its goals and is producing positive opportunities and experiences for participating schools, students, and families. Moreover, projects are working to produce positive experiences as they balance competing pressures for after-school programming to be integrated into the host schools, for students to benefit academically, and also for TASC programs to be appealing and fun. Students are reacting to these efforts with steadily rising rates of after-school attendance, which means that participating students are

Members of the TASC Evaluation Advisory Group are:

Alfred Blumstein
Michele Cahill
Newell Eaton
Eileen Foley
Norm Fruchter
Irving Hamer, Jr.
Adriana de Kanter
Janice Molnar
Pedro Pedraza
Eric Schaps
Michelle Seligson
Constancia Warren
Belinda Williams

Policy Studies Associates, Inc., conducts research and evaluation in education and youth services, specializing in the examination of initiatives that aim to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and youth.

Policy Studies Associates, Inc.
1718 Connecticut Avenue N.W.
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20009

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experiencing increasing levels of exposure to TASC activities and hence to the benefits that participation confers.

These results are consistent with findings from comprehensive evaluations of similar after-school programs. For example, the evaluation of LA's BEST, a large after-school program in Los Angeles, found that multi-year program participation was associated with significant student improvement in school attendance, which was in turn associated with participants' improved academic achievement. According to the evaluation of a national initiative supporting "extended service schools," the students who participated in the program's school-based after-school services experienced positive change in: staying out of trouble, improving school attitudes and behavior, strengthening social networks, learning new skills, seeing new possibilities, and improving their self-confidence. Similarly, the multi-year evaluation of the New York City Beacons program found very positive student reactions to features of the Beacons that are also characteristic features of TASC projects, especially the projects' safe and welcoming environment and the availability of homework-help activities. These findings from other evaluations suggest that TASC programming is producing results that are consistent with experiences of similar, carefully implemented programs elsewhere.

The findings from the TASC evaluation underscore the academic benefits of TASC participation at grades K-8, especially frequent, regular participation that extends for two years or more. Across grade levels and types of students, TASC projects are promoting improved achievement in math, with students at greatest academic risk deriving the greatest benefit from regular TASC participation. Moreover, TASC project participation is associated with significant gains in school attendance and hence greater exposure to the academic programs of the host schools. These findings constitute a compelling case for the student-level benefits of after-school projects such as those supported by TASC.