



EVALUATION OF NEW JERSEY AFTER 3:

Reaching and Engaging New Jersey's Youth through Afterschool Programs, 2005 – 2008

Executive Summary

Karen P. Walking Eagle
Tiffany D. Miller
North Cooc
Jennifer LaFleur
Elizabeth R. Reisner

Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

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Executive Summary

New Jersey After 3 (NJ After 3) is a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to expand and improve afterschool opportunities for New Jersey's youth. Using both public and private resources, it supports a network of youth-service providers that deliver afterschool services based on NJ After 3's program model. The NJ After 3 model aims to increase the number of afterschool programs in New Jersey that provide a safe environment for children during afterschool hours, offer enriching academic activities and homework assistance, and expose children to nurturing individuals and meaningful experiences that promote intellectual, physical, social, and artistic development. Among the tools that NJ After 3 uses to achieve its mission, in addition to grantee selection and financial support, are professional development opportunities extended to site coordinators and program staff, special curricular modules to address high-priority youth needs (e.g., physical fitness, math problem-solving), technical assistance for program improvement, and specialized software for youth-level tracking of enrollment and attendance.

Under an agreement with NJ After 3, Policy Studies Associates, Inc., has conducted a longitudinal evaluation of the initiative's operations and outcomes. The evaluation has assessed the extent to which NJ After 3 has expanded the availability of afterschool services, facilitated the delivery of high-quality program content, produced positive outcomes for youth, and created sustainable systems for funding and program quality. Evaluators collected data over three program years, beginning in 2005-06, which was the second year of NJ After 3 service delivery.

As described in this report, NJ After 3 achieved significant success on the four measures at the heart of this study. With its partners, it expanded the availability of afterschool services, it facilitated the achievement of quality in both service delivery and program content, it produced positive outcomes for participating youth, and it built sustainable systems of program operations and financial support.

Program Availability

NJ After 3 increased overall enrollment in its afterschool program from approximately 4,000 participants in grades K-8 in the first year of the initiative to almost 15,000 participants in 2007-08, the evaluation's final year of data collection. The background characteristics of participants changed little during the period of the evaluation, with the program consistently attracting more participants from the early grades. Forty-five percent of participants in 2007-08 were in grades K-2, compared with 35 percent and 19 percent of participants in grades 3-5 and grades 6-8, respectively. Feedback from program staff, parents, and participants suggested that this difference is likely a result of two important factors. First, older participants often had opportunities to participate in team sports that are offered by other organizations but are not typically available at NJ After 3 programs. In addition, working parents needed the program to supervise their younger children after school, but parents tended to permit the older children to remain at home without adult supervision during the afternoon. Also, new programs initiated in Newark during the evaluation period concentrated services in the early grades. The percentage

of participants who were in grades K-2 increased over the three-year evaluation period. Compared with 2005-06, the evaluation's first year, the 2007-08 figures represent increases among participants in grades K-5, and a small decrease among participants in grades 6-8.

Not only did more youth attend NJ After 3 programs over time, but enrolled youth attended more often. A total of 107 programs reported participants' attendance data for 2007-08 and, overall, youth attended 115 days on average in that year, compared with 94 days in 2005-06. The average attendance rate increased at all grade levels by an average of 8 percentage points, from 73 percent to 81 percent over the evaluation's three years. The largest increase was among youth in grades 6-8. The attendance rate for youth in those grades increased by 9 percentage points (from 62 percent to 71 percent), compared with a 6 percentage-point increase among youth in lower grades. Thus, while the number of older youth enrolled in NJ After 3 decreased slightly over the three years, those who were enrolled in the evaluation's last year attended more frequently. Their increased attendance suggests that youth were interested in and engaged by the activities provided and that they had positive experiences with staff and peers in the programs.

The attendance rate of 115 day per year (81 percent) among NJ After 3 participants compares favorably with other afterschool programs. For example, the evaluation of the CORAL afterschool programs in California revealed that, on average, youth in those programs attended approximately 110 days (with an attendance rate of 73 percent) during the program year. The national evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers found that youth in the evaluation sample attended that federal program 58 days on average per year, with attendance rates of 37 percent in the elementary grades and 18 percent in the middle grades.

Although more youth enrolled in NJ After 3 programs and attended more often over time, their retention rate (i.e., the percentage who attended a NJ After 3 program in one year, were eligible to return to the same program the next year, and actually did so) declined slightly over time. In 2006-07, the retention rate was 51 percent, and in 2007-08 it was 46 percent. Although lower than the previous year's rate, the 2007-08 retention rate exceeded the 36 percent retention level of a similar large-scale afterschool initiative in New York City. It is unclear whether the two-year decline in the NJ After 3 retention rate is the result of increased mobility among the families of participants, limited enrollment capacity within individual programs, or some other reason.

Encouragement of Youth Outcomes

Teachers identified important academic outcomes among students who participated in NJ After 3 in academic engagement and interpersonal skills, study habits, reading and language arts, and technology-related skills during each year of the evaluation. This cluster of skills is commonly believed to constitute essential cognitive abilities needed to navigate the career and citizenship demands of the 21st Century. Teachers reported in 2007-08 that over three-quarters of program participants were at grade level or above in their ability to draw conclusions from written materials, spell, identify the main idea in a passage of reading, and to communicate orally. Teachers also reported that most participants "almost always" or "often" demonstrated the key study skills listed in the evaluation's survey. Similarly, they reported that most

participants' technology skills were good or excellent in comparison to other students at their school, particularly in using word processing programs, spreadsheet programs, and the Internet. Older students in particular reported that they had benefited from access to technology in the afterschool program.

In order to assess change over time in the academic skills of program participants whose skills had been rated by their teachers over a two-year period, evaluators identified 86 NJ After 3 participants who had been rated by a teacher in any two consecutive years of the three-year evaluation period. Ratings of these students' reading and language arts skills rose from a scale score of 2.79 (on a five-point scale) in the first year to a scale score of 3.14 in the second year, which represents a significant learning gain (effect size=.24).

Most participants believe that participation in NJ After 3 has helped them academically. In 2007-08, they reported that they "agreed" or "agreed a lot" that the program helped them to finish their homework more often, get better grades in school, read and understand better, solve math problems better, write better, and use computers to do schoolwork better.

A large majority of participants reported that they generally enjoyed their experiences in the afterschool program. They reported, for example, that in the program they felt safe and that they felt that the program was a good place to spend their afternoons. In addition, they believed that staff think they can do things well, treat them with respect, try to be fair, think they can learn new things, and care about them. Participants also indicated that they enjoyed positive relationships with peers in the program. A majority reported that they had many friends in the program, they had a good time playing with other youth in the program, and, in the program, they get to work with others as part of a team.

All of the parents interviewed in the evaluation (n=64) were satisfied with their children's NJ After 3 experiences and outcomes. Many indicated that their children were introduced to new activities and classes that they could not otherwise have experienced, due to the family's financial constraints, and that their children were given increased opportunities to socialize and play with their peers through the program. Several also said that their children began to demonstrate new or improved skills in reading and math as well as improvements in social skills and attitudes toward school after they enrolled in NJ After 3.

Program Content and Quality

Evaluators examined the content and quality of program services from many vantage points and produced descriptive findings across the initiative as a whole and at the level of individual programs. Looking most broadly, analyses revealed that NJ After 3 programs provided a wide range of activities to address the academic, social, cultural, and recreational interests and needs of participants. During 2007-08, according to data recorded in the initiative's central data collection and reporting system, the average NJ After 3 participant experienced the following hours of programming, as reported by programs and using the activity categories established by NJ After 3:

- 54 hours of health and sports activities (e.g., nutrition, basketball, cooperative games)
- 41 hours of visual arts and performing arts activities (e.g., drawing, dance, drama)
- 38 hours of community service/character education activities (e.g., violence prevention, instruction in resisting peer pressure, food drives)
- 33 hours of literacy learning and practice (e.g., reading groups, spelling bees, journal reflections)
- 32 hours of study skills and college exploration (e.g., test preparation, tutoring, trips to colleges)
- 25 hours of math activities, including math applications (e.g., financial literacy, KidzMath)
- 19 hours of technology and science-related activities (e.g., computer and video projects, earth science)
- 19 hours of cultural activities (e.g., politics, community exploration)
- 18 hours of “New Jersey” (e.g., New Jersey history, culture, geography)

Evaluators conducted detailed observations of 78 activities at 10 programs in 2007-08. The observation ratings yielded scale scores that were then aligned with key features of effective afterschool programs, as Durlak and Weissberg in their meta-analysis of 73 afterschool programs (2007). The scale scores ranged from 1 (indicator is not evident) to 7 (indicator is highly evident and consistent) The analysis revealed that, in general, activities observed in 2007-08 were rated 3.64 for “sequenced” practices that built skills and content knowledge to achieve goals; 1.83 for “active” practices that offered opportunities to actively participate in learning; 4.40 for “focused” practices that developed positive relationships among youth and with staff; and 5.21 for “explicit” practices that targeted specific learning goals and or developmental goals.

All activities scored high on the “focused” and “explicit” scales, indicating that activities were often structured to develop personal and social skills in youth and featured specific learning goals. They tended, however, to score relatively low on the “active” scale, suggesting that programs provided few opportunities for hands-on practice and the application of skills.

Analyses revealed statistically significant relationships in three areas that may warrant further consideration:

- The extent to which participants reported that they benefited academically by participating in the program was positively associated with the availability of community service projects ($r=0.86$, effect size= 0.73) and art activities ($r=0.57$, effect size= 0.32).

- The extent to which participants reported that the program provided them with exposure to new opportunities was positively associated with the availability of activities that supported literacy skills development, cognitive development, and academic achievement, as reported by site coordinators ($r=0.50$, effect size=0.25).

Evaluators created a study skills scale that included teachers' assessments of how well or how often students prepared for tests, took notes in class, completed homework, corrected their own work, and paid attention in class. Participants who attended the program regularly (i.e., those who attended at least 80 days a year and attended at least 80 percent of the days they were enrolled) were rated on the scale at 3.8, out of a possible 5.0. This score was significantly higher than the mean scale score of 3.5 for participants who attended less frequently (i.e., those who attended fewer than 60 days or less than 60 percent of the time in which they were enrolled) (effect size=0.15). This relationship between NJ After 3 participation level and teacher-rated study skills suggests the possibility that learning experiences in the NJ After 3 program positively influenced students' study skills.

A majority of parents and youth reported that the afterschool programs provided by NJ After 3 met their needs. Services were in demand within participating schools, with some NJ After 3 sites maintaining waiting lists.

All or nearly all of the observed activities met basic quality thresholds, including the maintenance of adequate staff/student ratios and the provision of adequate space and materials. A subset of programs, however, offered activities and classes that didn't fully meet other important goals and objectives, such as actively engaging youth in learning or providing intellectually challenging content. Site coordinators described several factors that limited program quality. These included poorly qualified staff in some sites. In addition, some site coordinators reported limited success in gaining access to sufficient resources from host schools, the community, and other potential donors to provide the full range of experiences, classes, and activities that they believed were important for well-rounded development.

Program Sustainability

Staff at several programs indicated that they were challenged to sustain current levels of service. Reduced funding from NJ After 3 (based on program parameters set when NJ After 3 was established) had resulted in increased program fees and or a reduction in programming at some sites. Although programs knew that funding from NJ After 3 would be gradually reduced over time, some programs reported that they had not developed strategies for securing new revenue. In the evaluation's surveys, 41 percent of site coordinators identified insufficient funds as a major challenge, and 40 percent identified it as a minor challenge.

NJ After 3 currently provides many professional-development, curricular, and technical assistance supports to programs, including information and training regarding available resources and funding opportunities. Feedback from programs suggested that even more assistance is needed to help sites develop new means of generating revenue.