

Opening Doors for Boston's Children: Lessons Learned in Expanding School-Based After-School Programs

Executive Summary



Expand * Improve * Sustain

Boston's After-School for All Partnership
A Mid-Term Report on the School Sites Initiative
October 2004
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Executive Summary

Over the past decade, Boston has become a national leader in the field of after-school programming by forging a broad network of partnerships between the City, the public schools, private funders and community-based organizations.

Recognizing that school buildings provide a tremendous untapped resource during non-school hours, Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino and Boston Public Schools Superintendent Thomas Payzant made a seminal decision in 1998 to open school buildings to community-based organizations to provide programs between the hours of 2:00 and 6:00 PM. As a result a vast network of school-based after-school programs has emerged in the City of Boston.

In 2001, eleven members of Boston's After-School for All Partnership recognized the critical role school-based after-school programs were playing in the city and joined forces to help these programs expand to serve more students. Led by The Boston Foundation and Massachusetts 2020, these funders launched the School Sites Initiative (SSI), a four-year, \$2.6 million pooled funding initiative which seeks to expand existing school-based programs to serve over 600 additional students.

Just completing its second year, SSI has already helped programs serve 341 new students and is well on its way to reaching its target goal of adding 600 students. But perhaps more importantly, SSI has forged new ground for the after-school field by demonstrating what school-based sites can accomplish for Boston's youth and building a model for the successful expansion of these sites.

Key findings

First and foremost, SSI has demonstrated that ***significant expansion is possible at school-based after-school programs***. The eleven initial SSI grantees have grown by an average of 31 students achieving an average growth rate of 53%. While growth on this scale can be challenging for even the most sophisticated organizations, SSI grantees managed a phenomenal level of expansion with no major disruptions to their programs. Programs maintained the same quality activities, the same low student:teacher ratios, and the same strong gains in student progress despite their growth in size.

The experience of SSI grantees has also shown that ***expansion at existing school-based sites is cost-effective***. Programs demonstrated that increasing the number of students served can produce significant economies of scale. Analysis of grantee budgets before

and after one year of expansion, conducted by Technical Development Corporation, indicates that grantees reduced their average cost per child per hour from \$7.01 to \$4.80 through the course of expansion. This change represents a 32% drop in costs per child—a dramatic decrease that has powerful implications for the after-school sector regarding the advantages of expansion at school based-sites. At least three organizations that operate multiple school-based programs explained that because of these economies of scale, they are changing their organization's overall expansion strategy to expand existing programs rather than start programs at new sites.

SSI grantees also demonstrate that ***school-based after-school programs offer unique opportunities and tremendous potential to support student learning and development***. All SSI grantees report important gains in student progress over the past two years. For example,

students in one program showed dramatic improvements in their reading scores on the Stanford 9 diagnostic test with 100% of students who scored at the “failing” level and 79% of students who scored at the “needs improvement” level moving up and out of those levels to “proficient” or “advanced” after just one year. Similarly, in other programs students achieved higher passing rates on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and students showed significant progress in reading, math, behavior and homework completion as measured through teacher surveys.

These gains were only possible because ***schools and community-based after-school providers have been able to forge stronger partnerships.*** When schools and community-based organizations work closely together they can build an environment that is truly responsive to student needs and better supports student learning. Eight of the eleven initial SSI grantees indicate that their relationship with the school where they are located has improved significantly over the past year as evidenced through greater sharing and integration of activities, resources and curricula, increased use of school facilities, more referrals by teachers and stronger communication between school and after-school staff about learning goals and student progress. Some programs found that serving a larger percentage of the school’s students helped strengthen these partnerships because their larger presence in the school made it easier to secure cooperation from teachers, the principal and other school staff.

The experience of SSI grantees also underscores the fundamental role school principals, as the chief executives of their schools, must play in order for school-based programs to succeed. ***Principals with SSI funded after-school programs have embraced after-school programming and extended their own time and resources to support these programs.*** At varying levels, they have assisted in resource development, facilitated use of physical space, helped with student recruitment, and supported the overall management of the program. Their leadership and commitment indicates how valuable they believe after-school programming can be for their students and represents a marked change from several years ago when many Principals perceived after-school programs more as an extra burden than as a benefit to the school.



Overall, SSI has also generated an effective funding strategy for supporting the expansion of after-school programs. The SSI working group targeted funding to mature organizations serving on average 50 students. SSI also looked for programs that already had strong school partnerships and had secured strong buy-in and support from the principal. In structuring the grants, the working group also created an incentive for grantees to expand by making a portion of the grant contingent on reaching pre-determined growth targets. The early success of this strategy indicates that it may be a model for promoting further expansion in the sector.

Looking Forward

This fall a new set of six programs will join the School Sites Initiative. Together with the original grantees, these six programs will nearly double the expansion that has already taken place, growing to serve an additional 260 students and thereby reach SSI’s target goal of expanding the number of students served by 600. If they too are successful, SSI grantees will have helped increase the number of students in Boston participating in school-based after-school programs by over 15% in just four years.¹

The greater challenge of the next two years, however, will be to institutionalize the gains that have been made so far and identify a strategy to further support school-based after-school programs after this four-year initiative ends. In particular, public and private leaders must focus their attention on four key issues: sustainable funding, principal engagement, transportation, and staff development.

¹ This increase focuses only on programs that are enrollment-based, operate a minimum of 3 days per week and are in session throughout the school year. There is no definitive record of how many students were participating in such programs prior to SSI, therefore, this number is a rough estimate based on data from the Mayor’s 2:00-to-6:00 After-School Initiative that shows there were approximately 81 programs that met these criteria at the time. Data gathered through SSI shows these programs served on average 50 students – resulting in an estimate of 4,000 students participating in school-based programs before the launch of SSI.

Sustainable funding

Possibly the greatest on-going concern of SSI grantees is the need for sustainable sources of funding for after-school programming. Community-based organizations and principals alike expressed their high level of concern over the scarcity of public funding and concomitant challenges of fundraising. While all grantees have relatively sophisticated fundraising operations and are working hard to make use of all available resources, there are no guarantees that after SSI funding ends in 2006 they will be able to financially sustain these larger programs.

Principal engagement

Principals who embrace after-school programming and extend their own time and resources to make these programs successful need to be rewarded for their leadership and commitment. These principals, who see after-school programs as a key resource rather than an “intrusion” on their space, represent a new breed of school leaders. More principals throughout the Boston Public Schools need to be encouraged and supported to follow their lead.

Transportation

Because students in Boston often attend schools outside their neighborhoods, arranging transportation home from the program at the end of the day can often be difficult. Many SSI grantees indicated that they could serve many more students if transportation were not a barrier to participation. Boston is currently in the process of reassessing its school assignment policy and this plan could have a significant impact on student transportation needs. The Boston School Committee and the taskforce designing the school assignment policy should take into account the issue of after-school programming as it works to identify the right solution for the city. In the meantime, school and civic leaders should also consider creative and cost-effective solutions to overcome this obstacle.

Staff development for both teachers and after-school staff

For after-school staff to be effective in supporting student learning, they need to better understand the curricula being used during the school day. Similarly, teachers need to understand the distinct role of after-school and how after-school can assist student development through fun, hands-on approaches to learning. While some progress has been made in this area, a deeper and more systemic approach to staff development for teachers and after-school staff on learning in out-of-school time is still needed.

Conclusion

In working to address each of these issues, it will be essential to secure greater systemic support for after-school programming within the Boston Public School System. In fact, Boston faces a historic opportunity to strengthen learning after school by joining the efforts of private foundations, the City and the Boston Public Schools through the design of a more unified strategy. The Boston Public Schools can work in collaboration with funders to address common areas of interest relative to after-school programming such as: increasing access to after-school programming for more students, building stronger partnerships between schools and community-based organizations, working to enhance program quality and implement quality standards, and providing training and technical assistance on approaches to learning in out-of-school time.

In the era of standards-based school reform, when students are expected to make substantial gains in academic achievement, for many students the traditional school day is simply not long enough to achieve the required educational outcomes. After-school programming can extend the opportunity for learning beyond the limits of the traditional school day in order to help all students excel. Funders, policymakers, schools and after-school providers must continue to build on Boston's long tradition of collaboration in the out-of-school-time field by working together to reach a day when all students in Boston have the opportunity to participate in high-quality after-school programs.





About Boston's After-School for All Partnership

Launched in 2001, Boston's After-School for All Partnership is the largest public-private partnership devoted to children in Boston's history. Leaders of 15 major philanthropic, educational, business and government institutions have committed more than \$26 million over a five year period to strengthen and support Boston's after-school sector. The Partnership's goals are to expand, improve and sustain a wide variety of after-school programs for the children of Boston.

For more information about the School Sites Initiative please contact Jennifer Davis, Massachusetts 2020 or Richard Ward, The Boston Foundation.
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For more information about Boston's After-School for All Partnership and its activities, visit www.afterschoolforall.org or call 617-624-8133.

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