



# can we talk?

## Creating Effective Partnerships between School and Afterschool Programs

by Lisa Sweet Dilles

Changing demographics and the No Child Left Behind Act have increased the need for instructional support for students. This need entails a change in the relationship between afterschool programs and schools. School districts, nonprofit organizations, and funders now require a focus on education support. The older recreational model of afterschool programming may have been admirably suited to older goals, but now the mission of afterschool has been expanded. Professionals entrusted

with supporting both the education and social development of our students cannot continue to operate from an old paradigm that no longer meets this new focus. A reasonable partnership between the world of afterschool and the school day is essential. In this essay, I use my own experience and that of professionals with whom I talked to explore how school and afterschool can create a new partnership—one that benefits children—by understanding the challenges each faces.

### Storm Clouds Ahead

When I was hired three years ago as the afterschool director in the Live Oak School District, I'd been a classroom teacher in the district for 12 years. I had a vision of what was needed, primarily from the schools' perspective. Afterschool time seemed to be a golden opportunity to boost students' academic skills. The superintendent told me to redirect the program's focus to emphasize academic support for students who were below grade level on standardized tests. I had eagerly used grant money to purchase mobile laptop carts for math and writing academies at each site. I was cheerfully ready to change the focus of the Live Oak afterschool programs from recreation to academic support.

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**LISA DILLES** was the assistant director of afterschool programs in Live Oak School District, Santa Cruz, California, for three years. She has worked in the district for 21 years, as a bilingual classroom teacher, resource specialist, and English language program coordinator. She recently became the principal of Green Acres Elementary School in Santa Cruz. This article is the culmination of her research in the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellowship in 2008; she presented this research at the ASM Roundtable at UC-Berkeley in fall 2009.

I had a lot to learn. Working with the current culture of afterschool programs, while adding academic support and aligning with the school day, would prove to be a bigger challenge than I could have imagined.

### **Schools and Afterschool Programs in Live Oak**

The Live Oak School District is located only a mile from the coast in Santa Cruz, California. It is a beautiful area, known for its beaches, balmy weather, and great surfing. Well-known nearby landmarks are the redwood forests and the University of California. The Live Oak neighborhood is an incongruous mixture of luxurious homes overlooking the water and crowded apartment complexes where families double up to save money. The area has a significant number of Spanish-speaking families.

The small district, consisting of three elementary schools and one middle school, feeds into the nearby unified school district for high school. Each elementary school has about 400 students. Up to 65 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, so the schools are eligible for federal Title I funds. Between 30 percent and 65 percent of the schools' populations are English language learners. One of the schools is in the second year of "program improvement" due to poor test scores for its Hispanic and low-income students.

For more than 25 years, the state has funded a fairly typical afterschool "Kid Care" program at the district's elementary schools. This program has historically focused on supporting working families with safe afterschool care on the school campus. Its guiding principles stress personal and social growth.

However, like many districts in California, Live Oak wants to achieve significant academic gains for its students. Reducing the achievement gap between various groups is a greater priority than ever, and afterschool programming is viewed as a strategic way to support struggling students. Two years ago, Live Oak was awarded an After School Education and Safety (ASES) grant for a new afterschool program. This grant, administered by the California Department of Education, requires ASES programs to have educational and literacy components and to provide tutoring and homework assistance. The ASES and Kid Care programs function side by side at two of the three school sites and share many activities.

### **Culture Shock**

As I began to coordinate the two afterschool programs, it became clear that the original afterschool staff members had their own strong ideas about the purpose of the program. The Kid Care program model with which they worked was originally designed and funded by the California Child Development Division. Student progress was measured only by rating scales that tracked children's personal and social development. The staff felt that afterschool should definitely *not* be like school. They believed that children who had been in school all day needed to run and climb, play checkers, bake, and dance. They saw themselves as leaders focusing on creativity and social development, rather than as teachers focusing on academic growth. They emphasized free play, arts and crafts, and time with peers. Homework time was scheduled, but not essential. Time for math facts and reading comprehension was not included.

The superintendent wanted both the established afterschool program and the new ASES program to increase support for schoolwork. He told me to imple-

ment a "much-needed expansion of academic time." He explained that he had selected me to run the programs primarily because my background included working with struggling students in our district. Although on the surface this seemed to be a simple enough task, it was far more complex than I expected.

The growing body of research on the changing vision and mission for out-of-school time includes case-study research by Harvard professor Gil Noam. Describing the process of planning a school-based afterschool program, he writes, "The primary tension involved disagreement on whether the program should be primarily academic—focused on raising test scores and providing homework supervision—or enrichment—targeting students' individual interests and providing kinesthetic and arts programming" (Noam, 2004, p. 11). When teachers, principals, afterschool program leaders, and parents at school sites have not discussed their differing priorities, the result is confusion about the program's mission. In Live Oak and elsewhere, teacher and administrator expectations of afterschool programs have shifted, while the training and experience of afterschool staff have not. Unrealistic expectations, disagreement about purpose, and underfunded state mandates such as ASES have created stress and at times animosity between the school and afterschool stakeholders.

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I conducted research to discover what stakeholders believed about the two afterschool programs in the district. Through interviews, focus groups, and surveys, I gathered information from teachers, principals, afterschool program staff, and students over a six-month period. I specifically asked the question, “What is the purpose of the Live Oak afterschool programs?” What I found not only clarified the complex issues at play, but also helped me understand what I needed to do to help move our programs forward.

### **What Stakeholders Thought**

Not surprisingly, stakeholders held conflicting opinions about the purposes of the afterschool programs. What amazed me was just how differently they still viewed the programs’ goals.

#### **Principals**

Principals said that they wanted the afterschool programs to boost student achievement. However, while they believed that children benefit from supervised activities and homework help, they were leery of managing more responsibility. “I can accommodate your program and let you use our rooms, as long as it doesn’t put more work on my plate,” said one. Another, who “in theory” supported academics in afterschool, was not interested in adding to an already long administrative work day. Principals who responded to my survey wanted someone else to be responsible for students receiving the academic support that would boost their test scores. The survey showed that principals viewed the afterschool program as separate from the core school-day program. Although they wanted the afterschool programs to help raise state test scores, they did not want to be involved in planning the process.

#### **Teachers**

Teachers overwhelmingly wanted the afterschool programs to help students academically. Of the 65 teachers surveyed, fully 92 percent agreed with the statement that afterschool programs should reinforce what was taught during the school day. However, their beliefs about the afterschool programs made them skeptical about the feasibility of a real academic boost. Most teachers felt that the current purpose of the afterschool programs was basically childcare. They mentioned low staff skills, lack of “real” homework help, and high employee turnover. To be fair, in interviews I also heard positive comments about art and sports activities. Some teachers also noted the value of unstructured play. In response to a question

about how to improve the afterschool program, teachers did not suggest increasing communication with afterschool staff about student needs. Though many teachers said they would prefer that the afterschool programs provide high-quality academic help for students, they offered no assistance or suggestions about how to improve the quality of that support.

#### **Afterschool Program Staff**

Afterschool program staff saw the primary purpose of their program to be developing children’s socialization skills and keeping them safe. Many felt that, since the children had been in school all day, they now needed to unwind. “Mostly they need chill time and not to be told what to do and where to be,” said one leader. Another commented that children felt more comfortable talking to the afterschool staff than to the classroom teachers. Afterschool staff felt that they were more interested in “the child as a person.” Staff from both programs felt that children were tired in the afternoon. Even the new staff in the ASES program indicated that they believed that doing academic tasks beyond homework might be too much to expect.

Many afterschool staff members said they enjoyed working in a setting that offered more freedom than did the classroom. In commenting on the gulf between school and afterschool, they had a generally cautious view of the relationship. Many felt that the afterschool program was blamed for problems ranging from messy bathrooms to lack of homework completion or issues with supervision. As a result, the afterschool staff tended to feel “stressed” when they saw teachers approaching. Overall, while afterschool staff members were committed to keeping children safe and happy during the afternoon, they felt that afterschool was not, and probably couldn’t be, converted into an academic intervention program while staffed by the existing group leaders.

#### **Children**

Elementary school children generally attend afterschool because their parents have decided they should. When asked what the purpose of afterschool was, most children mentioned homework time. A fourth grader said, “It helps me with homework, like if I don’t know a question sometimes they will introduce me to the word or question.” Several felt it didn’t help them with school at all and simply wrote “No” on the survey. Another said, “It helps a little, and it just makes afterschool time more fun.” One second grader commented, “I like it because they do fun stuff, and when it’s sunset they take care of

you.” Children thus seemed to value the social and safety aspects of afterschool programming as well as the academic support.

### Steps in the Right Direction

We have been working to take steps in the right direction in Live Oak. I have knocked on many doors, listened to many members of the school community, and planted many seeds. This work is paying off: Positive shifts are beginning to occur. At one school, the principal asked teachers to teach in afterschool several times a week, and several volunteered. These teachers are leading popular groups including readers’ theater, Math Marathon, and a gardening group with a science focus. The afterschool program pays a fifth-grade teacher to run a tech club on Fridays, where she teaches students to create such products as slideshows, videos, and podcasts. One principal is considering flexing the reading teacher’s hours so she begins her day at 10:00 a.m. and teaches well into afterschool hours. The school secretaries talk to parents about afterschool openings and refer them to me directly. As afterschool director, I have been asked to attend faculty meetings once a month. These are small steps toward a real partnership. Feedback from district staff, teachers, and parents has been positive on the program changes they see this year.

Moving forward, in Live Oak and elsewhere, we need to shift from the current model of disparate programs to one of shared purpose. As school districts design or modify their afterschool programs, they should approach the task as a team effort. Ongoing shared planning and purposeful communication between school and afterschool staff are absolutely essential in order to improve educational outcomes for children. This shift to a collaborative model is a significant one that will require diligence, energy, and goodwill to implement effectively.

Three important steps can help to ensure that a district’s afterschool programs are serving students’ needs:

- All stakeholders must develop in advance a clear vision for the afterschool program. The vision should include important components for boosting both academic and social competencies.
- Afterschool staff must include both academic teachers and leaders with youth development and recreational expertise. All need to have the requisite skills for their

defined roles in the afterschool program.

- The afterschool program must be considered a part of the school community. There should be a steady two-way flow of information between the teachers and the afterschool staff. Respectful collaboration will create stronger programs with better results for students.

The shift to a more academic focus is a major change in the afterschool culture. It can be accomplished only through well-designed partnerships between afterschool staff and school educators. Afterschool programs have something the schools crave: more time with students. Schools have something that afterschool programs need: trained teachers. Pretending that the existing staff and structure of afterschool can suddenly offer effective academic support is unrealistic, but blending the edges of school and afterschool can be part of a dynamic plan for increasing student achievement and providing

valuable enrichment. If the schools can provide the instructional boost and afterschool can offer the engaging enrichment, students will have what they deserve: the best of both worlds.

### Work Cited

Noam, G., with Barry, S., Moellman, L. W., van Dyken, L., Palinski, C, Fiore, N., & McCouch, R. (2004, Fall/Winter). The four Cs of afterschool programming: A new case method for a new field. *Afterschool Matters Occasional Paper Series*, 3, 1–19.

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