

Critical Issues in After-School Programming

by Robert R. Halpern

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With only 6.5 million of the nation's youth in afterschool programs and another 14.3 million caring for themselves after school (Afterschool Alliance, 2004), afterschool education has emerged as a national issue in recent years.

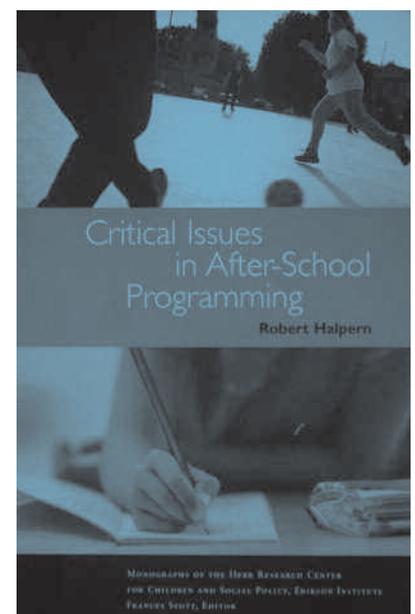
Robert Halpern's *Critical Issues in Afterschool Programming* presents four monographs that examine issues central to the development of the field: the role of after-school programs in supporting literacy development and fostering the physical well-being of children, the challenge of building a system of afterschool education, and the question of appropriate expectations.

The first two monographs focus on curricular issues: how to support literacy development in after-school programs and how to address the epidemic of inactivity among low- and moderate-income children.

In the first monograph, Halpern suggests that afterschool programs can be alternative settings for literacy practice and "are well-suited to fostering literacy through the visual and expressive arts and to activities that work simultaneously across different symbol systems—words, pictures, music, movement"

(p. 13). He argues that afterschool programs should not teach or remediate literacy problems that are tied to children's experiences in school. Instead, programs should create safe environments with their own goals and strategies for literacy development.

The alarming rate of obesity among American children, especially in low-income and minority communities, is now rising to the level of what many are calling a national crisis. As health care practitioners and policy experts search for answers to this health issue, physical inactivity emerges as one of the main causes. In his second monograph, Halpern explores the roots of the problem of physical inactivity. He points out how many urban environments have become increasingly



inhospitable for children's outdoor play. He argues that the non-school hours are an ideal time to engage young people in a range of physical activities and youth sports. He also examines some of the challenges afterschool programs face in making physical activity a part of their daily routines, such as a lack of space and the limited amount of time they have to accommodate a range of curricular needs.

Although the first two monographs provide insightful analyses on areas that affect the curricular options for afterschool programs, the last two monographs, which focus on systemic and policy issues in need of urgent attention, are more significant for building the field. The third study addresses the need for and efforts to create *systems* of afterschool education. Halpern presents case studies of multifaceted city-level efforts to build such systems and then analyzes their impact. For instance, MOST (Making the Most of Out of School Time), an initiative launched in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, provided practitioners in the field with an opportunity to come together, share, and learn from one another. As usual, successes are balanced by challenges; in the case of MOST, some large afterschool providers in those cities chose not to participate, which naturally hindered the effort toward building a comprehensive system and effecting systemic improvement.

At a time when there is enormous pressure on afterschool programs to help close the academic achievement gap among students of different backgrounds, Halpern examines the trend toward aligning afterschool programs with academic outcomes. He questions whether afterschool programs should be expected to concentrate on helping boost academic achievement, arguing that they are better positioned to focus on supporting developmental tasks. Pointing out that afterschool programs have proven to support the social and interpersonal dimensions of children's development, he argues that "afterschool programs have the flexibility to provide developmental experiences in a range of domains that schools lack time for and that low and moderate income families may lack resources to purchase in the marketplace" (p. 129). Halpern encourages evaluators, sponsors, and funders to identify the specific tasks that afterschool programs are well suited to address in order to redefine appropriate expectations, to measure program quality, and to consider the effects of the individual programs.

In this book, Halpern addresses some of the critical questions that the field of afterschool education must contend with in order to clarify its role. He also encour-

ages us to think about overall systemic organizations that can help support individual programs. The four essays spark a discussion on how to formulate and implement strategies for addressing common challenges facing the field. One of the advantages of the book is that the essays can be used individually in professional development efforts, whether staff groups choose to debate curricular issues relevant to specific afterschool settings or to tackle systemic issues that affect the field as a whole.

References

Afterschool Alliance. (2004). America after 3 pm. Retrieved on November 7, 2007, from http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/america_3pm.cfm.