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Afterschool Matters is a national, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting professionalism, scholarship, and consciousness in the field of afterschool education. Published by the Robert Bowne Foundation and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, the journal serves those involved in developing and running programs for youth during the out-of-school hours, in addition to those engaged in research and shaping policy. For information on *Afterschool Matters* and the Afterschool Matters Initiative, contact

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WELCOME

“Youth Voice: The Right Choice.” That was the headline on a newsletter I recently received from a church-based afterschool program in Boston.

Several years of data from a broad range of out-of-school time (OST) programs across the country reach a similar finding. OST program participants—particularly middle school youth—are thirsty for opportunities to make choices, inform decisions, and take at least some responsibility for their activities and programs. Results from NIOST’s widely used Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (Youth Version) consistently show that, of all OST program features, youth rate their programs lowest in “opportunities for responsibility and leadership” and “choice and autonomy.”

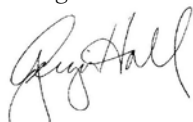
Investigation into these outcome domains shows what kinds of program practices youth want. They want to choose how to spend their time, spend time by themselves if they want, suggest new activities, help plan and lead activities, and make decisions about the program.

The resounding call for more youth voice and choice is lifted up in several of the papers in this issue of *Afterschool Matters*. Parsley and Ristvey’s article notes that one of the aspects of Cosmic Chemistry that youth reported liking best was “having the flexibility to choose projects that were personally interesting.” Ann Muno’s program, Powerful Voices, used the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) for self-evaluation. The top level of the YPQA hierarchy of program characteristics centers on opportunities for youth to plan, make choices, and learn from their experiences. Similarly, the adults who inspire success at Mighty Writers, Rachel Loeper’s program, do so by “giving students the freedom to choose genres, make process decisions, and decide when to share their work.”

Youth are sounding a clear call to action—to make learning experiences and programs more youth-centered and youth-controlled. This is a challenge for OST professionals and classroom teachers alike. Making space in the daily curriculum or activity schedule for youth to give feedback, make decisions, or take charge can be risky. However, ignoring the research that has established the deep connection between youth voice and engagement in learning can be more risky yet.

We are fortunate to have papers in this issue from two Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellows, Ann Muno and Rachel Loeper, and from the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), a partner with the NYC Afterschool Matters Fellowship. In “How to Build a Robot,” Meghan Groome and DYCD colleague Linda Rodríguez provide inspiration that applies to our challenge of allowing youth voice and choice: “You have to stick with it. It takes time, patience, trial and error, failure, and persistence. It is almost never perfect or finished, but, with a good team, you can build something that works.”

Let’s go build *that* robot.



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