

Teen REACH

An Executive Summary of the FY04 Evaluation

The high demand for quality after-school programming in recent years is fueled by three main factors: the changing nature of the work force, evidence that young people are more likely to engage in negative high risk behaviors during the after-school hours, and the pressures being placed on schools to meet achievement standards (Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soule, Womer, & Lu, 2004; Sarampote, Bassett, & Winsler, 2004). Currently, 69% of all married-couple families with children ages 6-17 have both parents working outside the home. In 71% of single-mother families and 85% of single-father families with children ages 6-17, the custodial parent is working. With nearly four of every five mothers having jobs outside the home, children who leave school at 3 o'clock to find a parent waiting in the house have become the exception rather than the rule (Proscio & Whiting, 2004). The gap between parents' work schedules and their children's school schedules can amount to 20-25 hours per week (U.S. Department of Education and Justice, 2000). At the same time, the risks of unsupervised hours after school have worsened over time. Meanwhile, in-school hours are increasingly taken up with a focus on the basics--reading, math, and science. Schools, especially those in less affluent neighborhoods, have become increasingly eager for arts, athletics, and other enrichment programs outside the regular school day.

All in all, the research on after-school programming suggests that there are numerous benefits to youth participants, as well as to their parents and to the larger community. When youth participate in high quality after-school programs, they are likely to benefit in a myriad of ways: they receive personal attention from caring adults, explore new interests, receive academic support, develop a sense of belonging to a group, develop new friendships with their peers, take on challenging leadership roles, and build their sense of self esteem (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004).

In addition to the benefits of after-school programming on the youth served, there are a number of benefits for parents and communities. Working parents who know their children are in a safe, secure place supervised by adults during out-of-school time are able to be more productive, work more hours, and move into better jobs (Miller, 2003). Parents also report spending less money on child-care, missing less time at work, having more positive perceptions of their children's schools, and report lower levels of parental stress (Sarampote et al., 2004). Finally, after-school programs may also result in positive consequences for society in general, such as less money spent on later interventions for troubled youth, lower after-school crime rates, and better preparation for life after the school years (Sarampote et al., 2004; Miller, 2003).

Because young people spend only 20% of their time in school, how and where they spend the remaining 80% has profound implications for their well-being and their future (Miller, 2003). Quality after-school programs can provide engaging learning activities in a safe and supportive environment and can meet youth needs for personal attention from caring adults, inclusion in positive peer groups, and enjoyable activities and experiences that help to build self-esteem.

A Brief Overview of the Teen REACH Program and the Evaluation

In 1998, the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) created the Teen REACH Program in an effort to address the ever-increasing need for positive youth activities during non-school hours. In FY05, DHS funded 111 organizations, which oversee Teen REACH Programs at 257 program sites across Illinois. Teen REACH serves young people across the state in settings such as schools, park districts, faith-based organizations, YMCAs, and community agencies.

Through prevention-focused out-of-school time activities, Teen REACH Programs seek to expand the range of choices and opportunities that enable, empower, and encourage youth ages 6-17 to achieve positive growth and development, improve expectations and capacities for future

success, and avoid and/or reduce negative risk taking behavior. All Teen REACH Programs must incorporate programming to improve academic performance; life skills education; strategies to promote parent involvement; recreation, sports, and cultural and artistic activities; and positive adult mentors. Based on these core services, communities adapt the Teen REACH model to fit their local needs and resources.

While the core service areas are a constant across all programs participating in the Teen REACH Initiative, there are local variations in the programs based on community needs. This flexible Teen REACH model provides a unique opportunity to identify and examine overarching issues involved in providing after-school programming--issues that transcend local context and the specific elements of Teen REACH Programs.

In November 2000, the Center for Prevention Research and Development began an evaluation of the Teen REACH Initiative. A multi-method approach has been used to provide both an understanding of the breadth of programming and the ability to more deeply delve into particular issues. The evaluation has included site visits; focus group interviews with program staff, youth participants, and their parents; program staff surveys; youth surveys; and parent and teacher surveys. Each year, 30 program sites have been selected for intensive study. During FY04, the evaluation consisted of beginning- and end-of-year youth surveys, as well as surveys of parents and teachers.

The statewide evaluation focuses on three key questions:

- ❖ What are the characteristics of youth who attend the Teen REACH Program?
- ❖ What benefits do youth seem to derive from Teen REACH participation?
- ❖ Are there characteristics of programs that seem to promote positive outcomes?

What Have We Learned?

Who are the participants in Teen REACH Programs?

The Teen REACH Initiative is serving the youth that the program is intended to serve. Nearly a third of the youth surveyed are from single-parent homes, and 77% are from low-income families. The Teen REACH Program is providing youth with a safe, supervised environment during the critical after school hours--a time that is considered "high risk" for those youth who might otherwise be left unsupervised. After-school opportunities are critical for this group of youth, and alternatives are probably limited for them. Indeed, for 70% of youth participants surveyed, if they were not in Teen REACH, they would not be in an after-school program. Either there are no other after-school programs available or other programs are not as appealing to the youth and their families as Teen REACH. In either case, *Teen REACH appears to be meeting a clear need of youth and families in the communities in which it is implemented.*

Early adolescence is a fragile period--one of fast-paced physical and emotional growth coupled with greater freedom, potentially leading some youth down difficult paths (Miller, 2003). While Teen REACH is designed to serve youth ages 6-17, many programs tend to serve primarily youth at the younger end of this continuum. The average age of Teen REACH youth surveyed is 12.2 years.

The potential benefits of after-school programs cannot be achieved if youth do not attend. Unfortunately, low attendance is the norm in many after-school programs (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004). *Youth attendance at Teen REACH Programs, however, is fairly high.* Most participants (76%) attend Teen REACH 4 or more days each week, and the majority of youth (60%) stay in the program from one year to the next, for an average of 2.2 years. This is no small accomplishment, as research has shown that it is the youth considered most at risk who are least likely to sign up for after-school programs and are significantly more likely than others to

drop out of programs (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; Miller, 2003). In study after study, however, participants who gained the most are those who face the greatest odds in our society—low-income youth, students from non-English speaking families, students who do not perform well in school, and those who live in chaotic, dangerous neighborhoods. In spite of recent growth in availability of after-school programming, studies find that those youth who are most in need continue to have very limited access to effective programs (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; Miller, 2003). *Having a positive impact on youth from high risk environments requires intensive, long-term programming, and Teen REACH appears to be providing such programming for high risk youth and their families.*

What are the academic benefits of Teen REACH?

The provision of homework assistance is cited by youth participants as one of the most basic building blocks of Teen REACH. According to the majority of youth participants, assistance with homework completion is a major benefit of Teen REACH programming. The overwhelming majority of parents believe that the Teen REACH Program has benefited their child in multiple academic areas. Many of the parents of the youth participants work outside the home and often do not have the time, energy, or educational background to help their children with sometimes complex homework assignments.

- ❖ *Academic assistance is a primary reason why parents enroll their child in Teen REACH:* 89% of parents enrolled their child to get help with homework, 88% of parents said improved school performance was a reason for enrolling their child in Teen REACH, and 82% of parents said assistance with reading and math was a reason for their child's Teen REACH enrollment.
- ❖ Teen REACH is helping youth with homework who would otherwise not receive such assistance, at home or from other sources: *42% of youth surveyed said they received homework assistance for the first time through Teen REACH.* Assistance would not be available to these youth were it not for Teen REACH.
- ❖ A primary benefit of Teen REACH, according to over half of the youth participants (57%), is assistance with homework completion. Other academic-focused benefits were highlighted by youth as well, with 52% indicating they had received help with specific school subjects and 48% saying they had learned about studying for tests.
- ❖ Over 90% of parents indicate their child is completing homework more often as a result of Teen REACH, and over 80% of parents say their child is more likely to prepare for school projects and tests, has improved their study skills, is more interested in school, is making better grades, and is a better reader as a result of Teen REACH.
- ❖ Teachers reported improvements over time in a substantial number of their students who were Teen REACH participants. Approximately half of the youth were rated by their teachers as having improved in the areas of classroom participation, satisfactory completion of homework, and timely completion of homework.
- ❖ During their first year of Teen REACH Program participation, significant change in many of the academic outcome variables under study did not tend to occur. However, *change over time in the academic outcome areas does occur for youth continuing in the program from the previous year, particularly for those youth attending the program at higher levels of dosage.*

What are the youth development benefits of Teen REACH?

Today, a high school diploma and literacy skills are prerequisites for a decent job. However, these are only two of the basic skills needed for success. "Soft" skills--teamwork, problem solving, communication skills, leadership--are equally important and rank high on employers' lists of necessary qualifications, even for entry level jobs (Miller, 2003). At the same time, teachers are being forced to intensify their focus on the academic competencies as measured by standardized tests. This focus results in less time and fewer resources being devoted to the critically important "soft" skills. *Clearly, youth development and academic learning are complementary processes that must be addressed in concert to fully support youth success, and Teen REACH provides such a model.*

Teen REACH has a positive impact on youth participants in a number of these youth development areas:

- ❖ Overall, 35% of youth participants report increases in problem-solving skills, 34% report increases in peer group cohesion, and 33% of youth participants report increases in leadership skills over time.
- ❖ Parents also report youth improvements in these areas: 92% of parents say their child has a more positive self-concept, 91% say their child is better at making and keeping friends, 90% say their child is learning to make better decisions, and 87% of parents say their child is better at solving problems.
- ❖ Another area of Teen REACH impact in which the majority of youth reported benefits was learning about the dangers of drugs (68%) and the skills needed to avoid drugs (67%). Indeed, these two areas were those for which the largest percentage of youth reported benefits in FY04. Interestingly, in a study of the relationship between participation in an after-school program and delinquent behavior, researchers found that participation in after-school programming reduced delinquent behavior, but not by decreasing the amount of time spent unsupervised or by increasing involvement in prosocial activities. Rather, this reduction occurred as a result of increased intentions not to use drugs, as well as increased positive peer associations (Gottfredson et al., 2004).
- ❖ Teen REACH provides youth with experiences and opportunities that many youth might rarely have outside of the program--experiences ranging from community service to sports and recreation to visiting local museums. For example, 38% of participants were first exposed to community service through Teen REACH, 32% were first exposed to computers, 28% to sports and recreation, and 25% to museums, plays, and art exhibits. These experiences serve as important opportunities for youth to not only develop new interests but also to practice the new skills being learned in the program. The power of these experiences cannot be overestimated. Providing youth the chance to participate in engaging, challenging, and interesting activities promotes the whole range of personal resilience strengths (Benard, 2004).
- ❖ Compared to other grade levels, *the 7th-8th graders reported the lowest levels of functioning and the largest declines in functioning over time across multiple youth development outcome areas (problem-solving, leadership, self-concept).* These findings are supported by a large body of research describing the challenges faced by middle school youth (Miller, 2003) and may have implications for Teen REACH programming--specifically, how best to serve this particularly high risk age group.

The Key Importance of Caring Relationships

The term "caring relationships" conveys loving support--the message of "being there" for a youth, of trust, and of unconditional love. Caregivers who are interested in, actively listen to, and get to know the gifts of the young people they serve convey the message, "you are important in this world; you matter" (Benard, 2004). According to a report from the National Research Council and

the Institute of Medicine, “supportive relationships are critical ‘mediums’ of development. They provide an environment of reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback for physical, intellectual, psychological, and social growth.”

It is clear that the *positive caring relationships formed between Teen REACH Program staff and youth participants play a key role in the success of the program, and both youth participants and their parents view these relationships as a primary strength of the program.*

- ❖ Youth view program staff as individuals who genuinely care about them and encourage them. Youth also believe they can go to staff members with concerns and problems beyond the academic domain. The majority of youth indicate that their relationships with Teen REACH staff are very positive, reporting that staff are easy to talk to, listen to what they have to say, help them plan for and set higher goals for the future, and serve as a mentor.
- ❖ 33% of youth participants reported that “having an adult to talk to, someone who cares about me and my future” was something they first received through Teen REACH. These youth had no such adult in their lives before coming to Teen REACH.
- ❖ Half of the youth participants indicate that being at Teen REACH feels like being part of a family--perhaps the highest praise youth can give an after-school program.
- ❖ Parents also have very positive views of the program staff and the relationships formed with their children, including how well program staff get to know the youth. Nearly all parents (97%) see Teen REACH as a positive environment with caring staff.

What do we know about the quality of Teen REACH Programs?

A major strength of Teen REACH is the program’s adaptability to local needs and resources. The program’s core areas are the same across the state, but local community needs and resources are reflected in each program. While a key strength of the Teen REACH model, this diversity across local programs also makes understanding program quality a bit of a challenge.

Certainly, the high rates of youth program attendance and the reported benefits of Teen REACH in nearly all areas assessed are indications that youth view the Teen REACH Program very favorably. In addition, the overwhelming majority of parents (79% or more) believe that the Teen REACH Program had benefited their child, and 97% of parents surveyed indicated that overall they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the Teen REACH Program. While important, these broad indicators of the program’s quality do not provide the necessary detail to inform program development and refinement.

Research on after-school programs is only just beginning to explore the connection between program quality characteristics and outcomes for youth. Questions such as “Just what are the indicators of after-school quality?” and “Do specific aspects of program quality impact youth outcomes?” are a major focus of the latest research in the after-school field.

It seems likely that multiple program and youth characteristics interact to influence the probability of youth within any Teen REACH Program achieving positive academic and developmental outcomes. Exploratory analyses using the basic program-level data collected by DHS revealed the following:

- ❖ The percent of program time allocated to adult mentoring was found to be associated with positive changes in homework completion for first year participants, and to improvements in self-reported grades for continuing participants. The amount of focus on other core program areas was not found to be related to any of the other youth outcomes assessed.

- ❖ Various indicators of program size (e.g., program capacity, enrollment, average daily attendance) were found to be related to improvements in self-reported grades, homework completion, and decreased intent to engage in negative delinquent behaviors. Specifically, the larger the program, the more positive the outcome. However, the amount of funding was also found to be highly related to both the number of program sites and the average daily program attendance, both indicators of program size. Thus, program funding may be the more relevant characteristic in the relationship to youth outcomes. Additionally, there may be other factors associated with program size that are not currently part of the analysis.

Clearly, some after-school programming approaches are more promising than others. Yet the major message from long-term studies is that programs per se are not the answer--it's "how we do what we do" that counts (Benard, 2004). No program design can compensate for program staff who are not caring and respectful. Similarly, a service-learning project that gives youth token roles and fails to recognize them as decision-making partners can do more harm than good. For these reasons, program evaluation research must look more at the quality of the program environment, and at the organization in which the program is embedded. The quality of the program environment tells a much more important story than does any particular program approach (Benard, 2004).

Next Steps: Where Do We Go From Here?

In the upcoming year, the evaluation of Teen REACH will be expanded in several key ways. First, youth and parent survey data collection will move closer to a *statewide system of evaluation*. Virtually all Teen REACH programs will potentially be involved in the survey data collection process, as the new e-cornerstone system will be used to randomly select youth participants who will be asked to complete surveys. The random selection process will allow us to draw much stronger conclusions from the survey data.

Second, the youth and parent survey data can be linked to data being gathered by all Teen REACH Programs through the new e-cornerstone system for Teen REACH program management. The specific variables of interest to the statewide evaluation are those pertaining to individual-level youth program attendance and academic performance based on report cards. Up to this point in time, the statewide evaluation of Teen REACH has relied upon youth self-report of these variables. Clearly, measuring program attendance based on program records and academic outcomes based on school report cards represents a dramatic improvement over self-report in our ability to assess these variables.

Finally, to better understand program quality, a comprehensive set of benchmarks or clear indicators of program quality have been established for the Teen REACH Program. To begin to fully explore the relationships between quality and outcomes, the Teen REACH benchmarks will be distributed to all programs in the upcoming year, and a self-assessment process will be piloted at approximately 30 Teen REACH Programs across the state. The Teen REACH benchmark assessment system will provide a valuable source of information on a number of quality indicators within Teen REACH Programs. This information linked with youth outcomes data will provide a rich resource as DHS develops a greater understanding of the relationship between program quality and the impacts on youth served by Teen REACH.

Given the challenges of children's lives and the increasingly complex set of skills and abilities that are required for success in life, after-school programs are a wise investment in our state's children and youth. Teen REACH after-school programs appear to help participants work on many of the competencies they will need for their future. It is, therefore, essential to continue to expand our understanding of the specific benefits of after-school programs so the Teen REACH Initiative, as well as the after-school field as a whole, can continue to move forward.

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