Four Commentaries: The Policy Climate for After-School Programs

The Policy Climate for School-Age Child Care

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After-school programs have exploded into the nation’s consciousness, garnering fresh interest from the child advocacy community, the charitable giving world, and the public at large. Elected officials have declared the out-of-school time needs of children and youths as a top societal concern. On January 26, 1998, President Bill Clinton announced the administration’s $1 billion proposal to help communities create and expand high-quality after-school programs with the following statement: “Improving after-school care is integral to improving child care across our country. Through after-school programs we can bring parents the peace of mind that comes from knowing their children are safe. We can teach our children to say no to drugs, alcohol, and crime, and yes to reading, sports, and computers.” In June 1998, less than six months after the President’s declaration, $40 million was earmarked for use by local education agencies to develop after-school programs. In October 1998, with bipartisan support, the U.S. Congress approved a $200 million expenditure to expand the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, a school-based after-school program. By January 1999, the White House had increased its budget request to $600 million each year for this program, for a total of $26 billion over five years.

As the focus on after-school programs has heightened, there has been a shift in terminology away from the phrase “school-age child care.” That term has been used for more than 20 years to describe programs offering regular supervision, care, and activities to school-age children while they are neither in school nor with other caregivers. Recent polls find, however, that parents and guardians do not use the words “child care” when it comes to their school-age children, but prefer terms such as “after-school activities.” This broader term straddles the domains of child care, elementary education, and recreation. These fields offer programs that share many features (comfortable places, interesting activities, chances for children to be with peers and adults), but they differ sharply in emphases, in what they promise to parents and children, and in the policy context that structures their work.
Now it is time for policymakers, funders, and school-age professionals to reexamine this emerging field and search for a definition that can encompass the range of practices and theoretical beliefs that characterize the out-of-school time arena. A look into the evolution of policy surrounding the care of school-age children and youths offers insights into a number of tensions confronting the field now and underscores the need for further dialogue on the shape that policy should take as the twenty-first century begins.

The Evolution of School-Age Policy
For much of this century, the political assumption that the supervision and rearing of children should be the sole responsibility of the family—not of government or the private sector—has constrained public child care policies and funding. Historically, only special circumstances, such as a recognized national challenge or social agenda, have justified efforts by society to step in and assist families with school-age child care.

As early as 1894, private charities and day nurseries began providing care for school-age children. Their mission was typically to help immigrant children assimilate or to offer care for children from poor, troubled homes.\(^1\) Any broader movement that might supplant the mother’s role in child rearing met strong resistance. It was not until World War II, when there was an urgent need for female workers to take the place of men in the nation’s industries, that the government once again stepped in to fund child care services and opened programs for school-age children and preschoolers alike. After the war ended, however, federal funds for child care were eliminated.

An Emerging Issue
Not until the 1970s did the subject of before- and after-school child care emerge again in the public consciousness, as significant numbers of mothers again entered the workforce. For two decades, however, there was little government response to the explosive growth in the need for school-age programs. Despite urgent cries for action by parents, advocates, and community agencies, the federal government offered no comprehensive policies or targeted financial support to develop school-age child care.

In the absence of any national policy, the school-age field grew in an idiosyncratic manner, shaped by eligibility guidelines for public and private sources of funding. School-age care was implicitly included in government policies designed for the care of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Programs for children as old as 13 have been funded with child care dollars, and so they have been inspected and regulated using guidelines established by state and federal authorities to monitor early care and education programs. Disguised as an extension of care for younger children, the unique qualities of school-age care garnered little attention from policymakers or most educators.

Renewed Interest
Toward the end of the 1980s, the demand for school-age child care escalated, along with public concern about children’s safety and well-being. By then, three-fourths of children ages 6 to 13 had a mother who was employed outside the home.\(^2\) Responding to a widespread sense of urgency, public and private groups began to target funds explicitly toward school-age programs and to sponsor comprehensive school-age initiatives. The U.S. Army and Air Force invested funds to improve program quality and staff compensation in the school-age programs that serve military families. The American Business Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care (ABC), a child care initiative undertaken by 22 major corporations, fueled the school-age field with dollars to spawn exemplary projects improving quality, access, and the availability of programs in the communities where employees of ABC companies live.

Recent private-sector initiatives to build school-age child care capacity in local communities have also been supported by foundations. The After-School Corporation was created in 1998 by The Open Society Institute to contract with community-based organizations in New York City to operate after-school programs in the public schools, at an initial price tag of $25 million. An initiative called “Making the Most of Out-of-School Time” (MOST), funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund and managed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, attempts to make sense of the after-school offerings in Boston, Seattle, and Chicago, and to develop a more responsive system of services there. (See also the article by Halpern in this journal issue.) The Mott Foundation intends to invest $55 million over five years in a partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, to provide training, technical assistance, and evaluation support to the efforts funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program mentioned at the start of this article.

At the same time, professional organizations such as the National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the National School-Age Care Alliance have spearheaded new efforts to raise program quality standards...
and promote professionalism in the field through a national program improvement and accreditation system. Efforts are also under way to design a professional credential for school-age staff, first launched by the U.S. Army.

Converging Reform Movements

At the end of the 1990s, educational goals and other social concerns are moving toward the center of school-age child care policy. The convergence of three reform movements—welfare reform, crime prevention, and educational reform—have led policymakers to discover after-school programming as a potential solution for a multitude of social challenges. A closer look at these three areas reveals their interconnections.

Welfare Reform

Mandatory work requirements imposed under welfare reform have moved poor single mothers into the labor force. Grave consequences may result for school-age children in welfare families if they receive lower priority for child care subsidies than children who have not yet entered school. Without access to child care while their mothers work, school-age children may lack supervision, constructive activities, and chances to develop positive relationships with adults and peers. Missing such supports can contribute to behavior problems, poor school adjustment, and limited social competence. (See the article by Vandell and Shumow in this journal issue.)

Crime Prevention

The most recent youth crime statistics reveal that the peak hours for violent juvenile crime and victimization are between 3:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. These hours coincide with the hours when parents are at work and children are out of school. Awareness of the risk children face during these hours has prompted efforts by local police departments and crime prevention groups to keep school-age children and youths occupied off the streets after school. Participation in positive, goal-directed activities may lessen young people's engagement in risky behaviors and reduce the likelihood that they will drop out of school. For younger children, school-age child care can have similar benefits. (See the article by Vandell and Shumow in this journal issue.)

Educational Reform

After-school programs have also come to be seen as a vehicle for promoting educational aims. A recent national opinion poll found that in addition to providing supervision and safety, voters see such programs as a way to help youths master new skills (including computer and technology skills), to provide tutoring, to create excitement about learning, and to prepare children for a productive future. Educators spurred by pressures to raise lagging academic achievement among schoolchildren, especially the poor, see school-based after-school programs as providing more time for academic instruction that can bolster student performance. Poor children now lack access to the varied learning opportunities available to middle-class children, but new funding for after-school programs could begin to address this need.

Future Directions: Do We Know Where We’re Heading?

The new public support for school-age programs comes at a time when the school-age field has achieved a new level of professionalism and purpose, but the new interest raises questions about how crucial choices and decisions will be made. Until now, after-school programs were operated largely by the private sector, while schools might provide space to the programs or bus children to them. Recent funding initiatives such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, however, have placed local school systems in the driver’s seat. Policy tensions are inevitable when the agendas of new stakeholders eager to solve a host of societal and educational problems clash with the beliefs long held by the school-age child care advocates who built the system of child development services that exists today.

What areas will need to be considered, and what questions will need to be asked, in developing the policies that will guide progress into the twenty-first century? The rest of this commentary identifies crucial policy issues in five areas: program goals and content, delivery systems, staffing, funding, and regulation.

Program Goals and Content

Research has demonstrated that out-of-school time programs have the potential to contribute to many societal goals. But will political agendas result in programs that are custodial in nature or in programs that emphasize academic achievement but not children’s emotional and social well-being? Will appropriate programs be developed for older school-age children and youths? How can programs meet the needs of children and youths with special needs or limited English proficiency? Reaching consensus on
the nature and quality of programs will be perhaps the most challenging and necessary task.

Over the past 20 years, expanded understanding and refined practices in the school-age field have led to programs that meet the unique out-of-school time needs of children—particularly children of elementary-school age. To succeed in school and in life, children need to learn and develop in many ways. They need a different pace after school. They need the chance to practice cognitive and academic skills gained through school in applied projects. They need to exercise their growing sense of identity and independence to develop self-motivation, discipline, responsibility, and direction in their lives. They need to learn how to get along with others, resolve conflicts without violence, and develop a sense of what it means to live within a community. They need contact with caring adults who can provide comfort and emotional support to help insulate them from stresses in their lives. They need a chance to develop healthy bodies, express their creativity, and simply play and unwind. The question is whether local school systems, as they design new programs, will draw upon this deep understanding and experience within the existing school-age field.

Delivery Systems

The out-of-school time field is currently populated by a myriad of program types, program locations, and administering agencies: nonprofit community-based child care programs, local public school systems, private or public recreation agencies, and others. An emerging facet of the field offers specialized school-age activities and supervision through for-profit agencies, many of which are national chains.

With funding programs like the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, school systems will have the responsibility for determining how, where, and by whom out-of-school time programs will be offered. Will school systems include the existing network of programs in delivering the new services? Many successful collaborative models exist that build on the respective strengths and resources of all partners to develop a communitywide system of out-of-school time services. Will schools finance and engage in such partnerships if they are not required to do so?

Staffing

An escalating crisis in hiring and retaining qualified personnel currently confronts the school-age field. Achieving a high-quality program requires skilled staff with training in child and adolescent development, program management, and family-focused programming, but even programs that can pay decent salaries and benefits struggle to overcome turnover rates among staff that may exceed 60% per year.

The increasing involvement of schools in delivering after-school programs will raise new challenges regarding staffing and could lead to an inequitable two-tiered system. Teachers’ unions have shown interest in after-school programs as an additional source of jobs for classroom teachers. To assume these positions, however, classroom teachers should be required to have the specialized expertise needed to plan and implement quality out-of-school time programming. A new set of professionally recognized roles and affiliated certifications in school-age programs could be established, opening a career path for both certified teachers and qualified after-school program staff.

Funding

A recent 12-state survey revealed after-school program weekly costs that ranged from $5 to $68 per child. The total cost per school year ranged between $2,652 and $2,925 per child. A national study conducted in 1991 found that the overwhelming majority of programs relied heavily on parent fees, and that 86% of parents paid the full fees for their enrolled children. Not surprisingly, given these figures, low-income children are the least likely to be enrolled.

A variety of funding streams exist that could be tapped to support programs directly or to help parents pay program fees. Examples include the Community Development Block Grant that local officials can now use to pay for after-school programs, the Child Care Development Block Grant, and assorted public and private financing schemes. To maximize the value of these resources, program guidelines should encourage collaborative financing efforts and should also support the infrastructure necessary to uphold a consistent, high-quality system.

Regulation and Accreditation

Researchers who have studied programs available in typical communities warn that not all programs are rewarding for children and that much more attention must be paid to program quality. (See the article by Vandell and Shumow in this journal issue.)

One element of an infrastructure to support program quality is regulation through child care licensing, but many of the providers entering the field are unaccustomed to
complying with these requirements. For instance, schools have traditionally been exempt from licensing, and for-profit firms that define their product as education rather than child care also avoid regulation. As a result, other tools for improving quality are also needed. Professional accreditation offers an alternative means of recognizing program quality and pressing providers to meet not just basic but also high-quality standards. Some form of oversight is necessary to assure parents that school-age programs are safe, accountable, and developmentally oriented.

Conclusion

Establishing a comprehensive system of out-of-school time programs that meets the needs of children and youths and that accomplishes key social goals will be an important but complex task. Both school systems and community-based programs have offered school-age care, but quality has not been a given in either sector. Plagued by years of a policy vacuum, slow to come to consensus about its goals and purposes, and faced with a continuing lack of appropriate space, financing, and staff training, the school-age field stands to benefit greatly from new resources such as those promised in a bipartisan action by Congress in 1998.

The convergence of strong interests in out-of-school time also makes it likely that public attention and financial support for out-of-school time programs will be sustained. It is therefore critical that policymakers proceed carefully to design programs that will truly meet the needs of the children and youths they intend to serve, while building a system of high-quality out-of-school time programs that will endure.


Policymakers and the public have become increasingly concerned about how young people spend their out-of-school time.
time. Too much custodial day care inhibits preschool development and school readiness. Lack of after-school care sends too many young children with latchkeys to empty homes. For older youths with nothing to do after school, there is frequently mischief to be had with friends including drugs, casual sex, and petty crime. Worst of all, a lack of enriching and fun activities for kids of any age when they are out of school stifles the development of a range of competencies all children need to develop en route to adulthood. In this era of two-salary or single-headed families, challenges separate kids of any means from appropriate out-of-school experiences. But research has shown that these challenges are by far the greatest for children living in poverty.

At the same time, it is no secret that many of America’s students are performing poorly in basic subjects including reading, math, and science. It is also no secret that there is a significant relationship between low and mediocre academic achievement and a host of social and economic ills that plague many children and communities. It doesn’t take specialized expertise to figure out that students who are lagging behind in schools require accelerated and extended services to bring them to where they need to be. These services need to extend into the time that children currently spend out of school. It is that out-of-school time that those who are concerned about promoting youth development and reducing negative trends like teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and juvenile crime also want to fill productively.

It seems that youth workers, crime preventers, social service providers, and educators could easily find common cause, celebrate unity of purpose, and join forces. Unfortunately, while these groups are coming together more and more, the romance has been tentative and the marriages have been far from easy and sometimes downright stormy. Why is this? Conflicts arise about money, control, objectives, program design and focus, facility use and hours, union contracts, and cultural respect. Serious concerns about program quality and accountability for outcomes also generate heated debate. In low-income communities, there is suspicion, if not resentment, of schools that have continually failed children. For their part, teachers do not want added after-school responsibilities when they already carry overburdened class sizes and schedules.

As one who works in the education sector, let me elaborate on the schoolhouse perspective. Public education is under fire. Poll after poll has confirmed public distress over its quality. But the service provided by educators has not gotten worse; indeed there has been substantial progress in literacy and mathematics, high school graduation, and rates of college attendance. The gap between the test scores of minority and non-minority youths has been dramatically narrowed. But the demands for an expanded, well-educated workforce to feed the economy and maintain the present standard of living are outstripping the production capacity of the nation’s schools. And yesterday’s gains for minority students are evaporating, as the performance gap between minority and nonminority students again has begun to grow.

Standards-Based Education Reform

Fortunately, educational, business, and political leaders have developed a national consensus on a framework for improving the nation’s schools. It is called “standards-based reform.” While experts may differ in emphasis and analytical nuances, there is general agreement about the elements of standards-based reform. It begins with a fundamental belief that all students can and should be expected to learn at high levels. Building on that belief, the following steps (which must be undertaken simultaneously) should lead to higher achievement for all students:

- Set high expectations with content and student performance standards.
- Develop a challenging, coherent curriculum derived from the standards.
- Develop a variety of testing methods, including hands-on tasks or written answers beyond fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice questions.
- Hold everyone—students, administrators, parents, and teachers—accountable for meeting the standards.
- Provide help and support for schools that struggle to meet the standards.
- Reward schools and districts for success and penalize schools for continued failure.
- Equip all staff with intensive and sustained professional development and training.
- Involve parents in every key decision.
- Create access to community services and supports for children and families.
- Engage the public in shaping, understanding, supporting, and participating in school reform.
- Address all these priorities together and for the long term.

Two of these points are especially relevant to a discussion of out-of-school time. First, the expectation for all students to learn to high
levels focuses attention on the need to use out-of-school time to help educationally disadvantaged students make gains in achievement. American educators and the public know that some kids start school with developmental shortcomings or disabilities, fall behind quickly, have a primary language other than English, and/or suffer the ravages of poverty and even abuse. While there are always some who seem to beat such odds, the vast majority of these students are educationally disadvantaged and need extra learning opportunities to meet the high expectations. With extra help and more time for learning, however, these students can and do meet challenging standards. For instance, dramatic progress is being made in Texas, where a majority of the public school students are Latino and African American. There, the test score gap is closing between Latino and white, African-American and white, and poor and nonpoor students. This is happening at the same time as all categories of students, including white children, are making achievement gains on state and national tests.²

Second, the accountability pressures on teachers and principals are greater than ever, especially now that schools with many low-income students, like those in Texas, have demonstrated achievement successes. If one school can do it, why not the neighboring school with the same demographics? Inner-city parents and state legislators alike are saying “no more” to reports that appear year after year documenting low student performance in any school. The political pressure for steady school improvement now cannot be overestimated, and there are no signs it will diminish. If public schools do not meet this challenge soon, the structure of the public education system is likely to change significantly, no doubt in some unpredictable ways. While they work on changing curricula and classroom practices, educators are also looking to after-school programs as a vehicle for improving student performance and enhancing learning.

Extended Learning Opportunities
The irony of the new attention by educators to after-school programs is that it has long been known that children learn both in and out of school. Students learn in their communities and homes. They learn with their peers in recreation and sports, bands and orchestras, clubs, and service activities. They learn in community institutions such as museums, libraries, and other historical treasures. They pursue individual skill development in many ways, from private lessons to academic tutoring to individual homework study. When they engage in these enrichment activities in a safe environment with assistance from skilled and caring adults, most young people develop the wonderful array of competencies that guarantee successful adulthood as citizens, parents, and employees. Such competencies include civic and social, cultural, physical health, emotional health, and employability skills as well as intellectual skills.⁴

But children in poverty too often lack the structured and well-supervised chances to develop these competencies fully throughout their childhood and youth. They do not have opportunities to take private music lessons, play in orchestras and bands, go to basketball camp, or study ballet. They rarely have CD-ROM computers in their homes or parents educationally prepared to oversee their homework. To make matters worse, children in poor communities frequently and unfairly attend inadequate schools that use watered-down or inappropriate curricula and are staffed by less prepared teachers working in a disorganized manner.

Indeed, the lack of extra learning opportunities, together with the unfair distribution of poorly prepared and unqualified teachers, may account for most achievement differentials between minority and nonminority and low- and middle-income students. New research has documented the effects of inferior teaching on students’ achievement⁵ but further research study is needed to measure the benefits of diverse enrichment activities for disadvantaged students.

This nation has historically expected and accepted that inequity in children’s outcomes and especially out-of-school opportunities is tied to the economic means of their parents. Tragically, as if to ensure unequal outcomes, most schools with large numbers of minority and low-income children have been victimized by discriminatory practices, such as the disproportionate assignment of unqualified teachers. America finally may be breaking away from this shameful history with the enforcement of civil rights laws and with the growing awareness that the economic futures of all Americans are interdependent. That awareness is prompting business leaders to join with committed educators, politicians, and community organizers in states such as Texas, in an effort to strengthen education.

In this era of standards-based reform and accountability for educational outcomes, many states and localities are seeking both to strengthen teaching and to provide extended...
learning opportunities for students who are behind or who need constructive developmental after-school care and activities. Increasingly, educators are looking to after-school programs to support these efforts. Many also realize that activities after school—whether they occur before school, on weekends, or during summers or intersessions—should not offer the same curriculum and instructional strategies used in school classrooms, no matter how excellent those are. Although some students need academic reinforcements, all kids deserve to develop a range of competencies through the pursuit of positive fun, sports, the arts, club or church projects, and service activities with peers, family, and community members. This is the common ground on which schools and youth-serving organizations can come together.

**Hopeful Signs**

New initiatives like the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program and the $50 million California After-School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program, as well as more established ones like the Beacons and Children's Aid Society programs in New York City, are pushing schools to partner with youth-serving organizations and community groups to provide tutoring and homework assistance together with a broader array of positive, engaging activities. One of the most promising is the Project Learn: Educational Enhancement Program of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, which offers high-yield leisure and constructive learning activities. Many such initiatives are turning into comprehensive community schools that serve families and other adults as well as neighborhood kids with an array of services. (See the article by Dryfoos in this journal issue.)

While these partnerships are new, uneasy, and often initially imperfect, they should continue and grow. The partners need one another. For their part, youth-serving organizations that care deeply about disadvantaged youngsters should become aggressive advocates for the in-school academic success of the kids they serve. They should help and support local teachers and principals who are striving to improve practices within the school. In today's economy, the strongest after-school program can very rarely make up for in-school failure.

Similarly, as more and more educators come to understand the importance of out-of-school experiences and learning to their students' in-school success, they should appreciate, welcome, and share control over programs with their community partners. Hopefully, school officials will recognize that it is appropriate for teachers to be consumed with the effort to strengthen their classroom practice, and so, in most instances, community partners should assume primary responsibility for working with kids after school. Teachers in the United States spend more time in contact with students than do teachers in most industrialized countries. They have too little time for team discussion of school and individual student learning challenges and their own individual preparation. If we are ever to give teachers the time away from students they so desperately need to ratchet up the quality and productivity of their time with students, we must provide more high-quality, alternative learning venues for America's students.

Educators, however, will want after-school programs to be tied to the schools' learning goals, broadly defined, and they will expect the providers to be held accountable for achieving outcomes through high-quality programming. To meet this obligation, after-school programs will probably need to employ some certified teachers or engage the support of the higher education community with its teacher educators and their students. Expanded community learning experiences in museums, libraries, workplaces, and youth-serving organizations can provide rich, alternative learning opportunities for youths whose teachers are engaged in their own professional development and classroom planning activities. America's students should not continue to be sent home early to empty households of working parents.

The goal of providing extended learning opportunities to help students meet challenging academic standards joins a major learning goal of educators with the developmental objectives of youth-serving organizations and other social service providers. The challenges to smooth partnerships do not seem insurmountable. Indeed, many organizations, governmental jurisdictions, schools, and communities around the nation are working hard at resolving them and quickly growing many new programs for kids and their families during out-of-school time.

For instance, the Council of Chief State School Officers is committed to this endeavor. The Council membership and current president, Missouri Commissioner of Education Robert Bartman, set as the 1999 priority Students: Continually Learning. President Bartman stated last November that making time to learn is a pivotal goal: "The dual challenge of the education system is to make sure students have time and opportunity to learn and to provide encouragement and..."
Incentives needed to maximize their learning and willingness to demonstrate what they have learned.\(^6\)

Excellent, enriching after-school programs offer learning opportunities to all kids, and most especially to those with extra needs. Many educators are committed to expanding these programs. They are ready to join with other community members to tackle the capacity-building challenges on the road to providing a variety of high-quality programs. They are ready to view excellence in learning and development as continual, holistic, and the right of every child in America.

1. The views expressed in this article are the author’s alone and not necessarily those of the Council of Chief State School Officers.


4. Pittman, K., and Irby, M. Preventing problems or promoting development: Competing priorities or inseparable goals? Baltimore, MD: International Youth Foundation, September 1996.


Young adolescence is a time of change and transition that is filled with feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and anxiety for both the child and the parents. It is a time when children still need and respond to nurturing and guidance from adults, although the influence of their peers is growing, and many have already begun to explore risky behaviors. It is also a time when youngsters are acquiring skills, values, and a sense of self that they will carry into adulthood.

Most public policy efforts to address youth problems—from substance abuse to academic failure to teen pregnancy—target teenagers. In doing so, however, they may miss important opportunities to keep younger age groups on a positive trajectory. As one example, the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, released in 1997, examined health and risky behavior in youths in grades 7 through 12, and documented risk and protective factors that had already shaped outcomes for the seventh graders in the study.\(^1\) This research is a reminder that efforts to protect young people from poor outcomes should begin early, during the critical transition years leading up to adolescence.

Federal efforts on behalf of youths typically focus on specific problem behaviors
such as teen pregnancy or violent juvenile crime, which are viewed as crises that must be addressed. Little attention goes to preventing the onset of those behaviors. Alongside an extensive list of “must do” interventions, youth development and prevention are viewed as optional enhancements.

For instance, recent efforts in the U.S. Congress to reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (JJDPA) were dominated by attempts to include provisions requiring states to handle more and younger juveniles accused of delinquent acts in the adult courts, to distribute juvenile fingerprints, photographs, and records among law enforcement agencies as freely as those of adult offenders, and to increase the capacity of juvenile correctional facilities. Congress failed to reauthorize the JJDPA in 1996 and 1998 because an acceptable middle ground could not be found in the debate between prevention and punishment. Even so, funding has continued, with significant increases since 1996 earmarked for activities to make juveniles more accountable for their crimes. In contrast, legislative efforts to prevent juvenile crime have received little attention and even less money.

Recent research lends weight to the prevention side of debates pitting positive approaches against treatment and punishment, but evidence that prevention programs are effective is hard to come by. It is more difficult to isolate factors that kept something from happening than it is to demonstrate that an existing behavior has been stopped. It takes time to learn whether prevention efforts have reduced overall rates of teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and crime. Prevention is a long-term strategy struggling for support in a political world that responds to the crisis of the day.

Federal Policy: Setting a Direction

A federal policy on youth development and young adolescents serves the nation best by identifying the direction in which the nation needs to travel, and then by helping the communities obtain the supplies needed to make the voyage. This concept is contrary to the traditional federal response to the needs of youths, which has been to provide narrowly targeted, categorical “treatment” programs. The book Reinventing Government differentiates between steering and rowing the boat, using the following quote from E.S. Savas: “The word government is from a Greek word, which means ‘to steer.’ The job of government is to steer, not to row the boat. Delivering services is rowing, and government is not very good at rowing.”

Government, particularly at the federal level, is most effective in identifying a mission and facilitating efforts to achieve that mission.

In any policy area, a key way the government steers the nation is through the congressional passage of bills that authorize programs and appropriate money for them. The authorization process establishes goals, identifies a level of funding that is needed to meet those goals, and sets parameters for the use of federal funds. The federal government’s best opportunity to demonstrate leadership on an issue is by ensuring that authorizing legislation incorporates the most recent research findings, supports the most effective practices, and embraces the highest achievable goals.

Authorizing legislation is the beginning, not the end, of the federal policy process. Unless a program or initiative is supported during the congressional appropriations process that allocates funds to specific programs and agencies, even the best-crafted laws will lie dormant. The appropriations process is a study in competing interests and priority setting. In the area of juvenile justice, for instance, prevention efforts compete for limited funds against community policing, adult corrections, domestic violence, drug interdiction, child pornography, rape crisis services, and scores of other important programs. The competition for human-service funds is equally daunting, involving a myriad of vitally needed services such as public health, welfare, medical research, education, and child welfare programs. Government’s investment in youth development programs increases only when a compelling case is made for reallocation of government spending away from programs like these.

The process of authorizing and appropriating funds for youth development also requires that policymakers determine how the federal funds will be administered. They must grapple with the question of which level of government can most effectively make the decisions required to implement programs for America’s young people.

The two predominant funding mechanisms are (1) targeted, categorical programs governed by federal regulations, and (2) block grants that give states flexibility in the use of funds. The federal government can ensure greater consistency in program implementation across state lines by creating targeted programs. But to achieve that consistency, federal regulations must be imposed that restrict the boundaries within which the program can operate. The funding mechanism of block grants to states side-
steps elaborate federal regulations, permitting more state-level innovation and facilitating adaptations in response to changes in state conditions that affect children and families. However, many worry about whether the states have the capacity and the political will to operate the program in the way envisioned by the authorizing legislation, and whether each of the states shares the goals of the federal government.

For the past several decades, the federal government’s youth policy has emphasized targeted, restrictive programs. Because it has also proved difficult to end these targeted programs after they begin, the result has been a jigsaw puzzle of programs serving different purposes that defies efforts to create a cohesive federal policy or a coordinated system of services that can respond to the needs of young people and their families. Moreover, in most communities, one or more of the pieces is missing: Few youth efforts receive sufficient federal funding to ensure that programs are available in every state, much less in every community. The federal government has been rowing the boat by designing services, not steering the nation by defining a mission and providing flexible funds.

Funding for Youth Initiatives: The Illusion of Enough

The consequences of this approach to funding are evident in testimony provided on November 5, 1997 by Cornelia M. Blanchette, Associate Director of the Education and Employment Issues, in the Health and Human, Education, and Human Service Division of the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) before the Subcommittee on Youth Violence, U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary. In her testimony, Ms. Blanchette reported that “the federal government continues to fund a wide array of programs dedicated to at-risk and delinquent youth. More specifically, 15 federal departments and agencies administered 127 at-risk and delinquent youth programs in fiscal year 1996. The Departments of Health and Human Services, Justice, Labor, and Education administered 98 programs—about 77% of all programs. In 1996, some 110 of these programs received funding dedicated to youth totaling more than $4 billion.”

The GAO listed programs that receive funding that “can be used to serve this population” yet that very phrase often exaggerates the applicability of each program. The groups that are eligible to participate in the program or receive the government-funded services are often sharply defined. Some programs are limited to a specific geographic area, such as an inner-city or rural area. Because most youth programs are developed to alleviate or prevent specific behaviors, criteria related to that behavior are often identified. Participation in the program is limited to youths whose age, behavior, residence, and family income fit into the criteria delineated in the legislation. The fact is, however, that many of the funding programs identified in Ms. Blanchette’s testimony for the General Accounting Office are, in reality, unavailable for youth-development services for young adolescents because they target older youths or focus narrowly on a specific problem.

Unfortunately, this vast array of narrowly defined, categorical programs gives the illusion that there are sufficient programs and adequate funding to meet the needs of young people. The majority of the federally funded programs for at-risk and delinquent youths receive annual appropriations of less than $5 million a year, and fewer than half receive more than $15 million a year. Once distributed among 50 states, as well as to the District of Columbia, the territories, and Native Americans, these funds are spread very thin. However, from a political viewpoint, it is hard to argue that programs for young adolescents are severely underfunded when there are 127 programs totaling more than $4 billion that can be used to serve this population.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Two critical political hurdles lie ahead in federal youth policy. The first is that of shifting the focus of the debate from preventing specific problems to promoting youth development. The second is designing appropriate roles in youth policy for federal, state, and local governments.

The Goal of Youth Development

A cohesive federal policy for young adolescents that embraces a youth development approach can be crafted only when the problem and goals are stated persuasively to policymakers and the voting public and when the right choices are made in the decision-making processes delineated above. The idea of youth development goes beyond the prevention of risky or bad behavior to the goal of helping young people acquire the skills and expertise that they will need to cope with the challenges of life and make a successful transition to adulthood. Youth development is not a new program but a new way of thinking about youths that is directed...
The opportunity for building the necessary public consensus around youth development began in January 1998, and the momentum has grown steadily since then.

When President Clinton announced his child care initiative in 1998, the mention of the need for after-school care resonated loudly with the American public. Parents, teachers, law enforcement officers, and other members of the community expressed concern about the number of children and young adolescents who leave school at the end of the day to go home to empty houses. The notion of after-school care is being expanded to include all of the nonschool hours when parents are not available to supervise their school-age youths—weekends, school vacations, even the Friday after Thanksgiving. Opportunities to use the time outside school to enhance the positive development of youths have also come to light. Research findings are emerging that support the effectiveness of youth development activities. Together, these factors provide a strong foundation on which to build a cohesive federal policy for America’s middle children. By 1999, bipartisan support is beginning to emerge for a major federal initiative supporting nonschool hours.

If efforts to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents are to be successful, their aims must be defined clearly in a manner that will build public and political consensus. For instance, the growing concern about how young adolescents are spending their nonschool hours can be linked to debates about the content of daytime talk shows, restricting access to certain Internet sites, tax credits for “stay-at-home” mothers, full-day and full-year schools, and the transfer of young adolescents from juvenile court to adult criminal court, among other political issues. Workforce arguments are also compelling. If America’s young people are to be prepared for the next millennium, they must acquire the skills, experience, and tools they will need to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. That means not only avoiding risky behaviors during their teen years but also having the moral, physical, emotional, academic, and social competencies required of a successful adult. That is the destination.

The Federal Role

Reaching this destination will require that federal policy help youths, families, and communities obtain the support and tools necessary for reaching their own destinations. Here, the second political hurdle arises—that of identifying the proper role for federal, state, and local governments to play in this arena, with respect to both funding and policy change.

There is little question that funding for youth development must be substantially increased; there are only questions about how much funding and from where it will come. Existing federal programs targeting youths can be modified to allow communities to use those funds for youth development activities. Innovative revenue sources should also be sought to provide flexible funding. For instance, a trust fund for youth development could be created by collecting interest on child support arrearages, imposing a surcharge on prison commissary purchases, or creating a “value added” postage stamp similar to the new breast cancer stamp.

Moreover, a multitude of obstacles to youth development are embodied in policies and priorities on the local level, and these must be tackled locally. For instance, to better accommodate the needs of families and children, schools must make an array of changes in transportation rules, in school hours, and in the collaborative relationships they forge with other youth-serving organizations. Businesses can do more to help their employees meet the demands of raising a family through flexible scheduling, family and medical leave policies, telecommuting, and other innovative practices. Communities should provide opportunities in the form of organized activities, safe spaces, and effective programs that will engage parents and youths alike in positive youth activities, and they should make those opportunities available, accessible, and affordable.

Federal legislation should serve as a catalyst for community investment in young adolescents by providing incentives for businesses, schools, and other sectors of the community to create new opportunities and to eliminate barriers like those described above. The responsibility for assessing and prioritizing needs, setting specific goals, and implementing the activities should devolve to local communities. The broadest possible community base needs to be engaged as active participants in the structure used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate the activities. Extraordinary efforts must be made to draw upon existing resources, making maximum use of the strengths of a community while shoring up weaknesses that may be present.
Conclusion
Creating a cohesive federal policy for young adolescents will require a continual refocusing of the public debate on how young people spend their nonschool hours. Policy solutions must not only invest additional funds but facilitate the removal of barriers to service. Policy decisions must be based both on research findings and on a common-sense understanding of communities, families, and young adolescents. Federal policy must serve as a catalyst for change and facilitate innovation, not dictate the creation or replication of a "model" program. Most important, the federal policy must embrace the highest achievable goal of helping youths acquire the skills and experience necessary to make a successful transition into adulthood. Young people deserve and the country can afford no less.

4. Parallel conflicts arise between states and local governments when debates take place over whether and how administrative responsibilities should be devolved to the community level.

The Policy Climate for Early Adolescent Initiatives

To get a voter’s view of the policy climate for initiatives targeting young adolescents, I conducted an unscientific survey of people I met in various places—cab drivers, people sitting next to me on trains and planes, a woman in an elevator. I asked them what they thought about young teens in today’s world. If their response contained worries, I asked what they thought should be done. Then, who should do it.

These conversations consistently sounded four major themes. First, it was not hard for people to sympathize with the dilemmas of being a young teen; most remembered those years as a confusing and uncertain time.

Second, most thought that today's youths have it harder than yesteryear’s, because of the wider availability of weapons and drugs, the media’s demoralizing impact, and generally the fast pace of change. All of these forces erode traditional values.

Third, people primarily blame parents and the public schools for not supporting and guiding youths through these challenges—although they have few specific positive ideas on what parents and schools should do.

And finally, average Americans like those I interviewed have little or no confidence that public policy has any solutions.

These themes suggest a policy climate that is less receptive to public youth initiatives than one might expect given the concern that Americans say they feel for young people today.

The Climate for Public Social Policy
Why doesn’t the average citizen’s concern translate to wanting to do something? There are several reasons. First, Americans are historically distrustful of large-scale public interventions to prevent problems of individual and family behavior or to “develop”
individuals and families. In this country, public social policy is not a tool of first resort for improving social conditions or solving social problems. Quite the contrary. We generally view it as a tool of last resort, to be used when private solutions clearly do not work and when the condition or problem is serious and cannot be ignored.

When public social policy is adopted as a strategy, we are not patient with it. If we suspect social policy is not solving problems or is perhaps creating other problems, we will abandon public initiatives.

Within this generally resistant climate for social policy in general, the climate for a particular social policy initiative depends on three key factors: (1) the immediate moral power of the issue, or its capacity to strike the “fairness” button in American leaders and the broader electorate; (2) the resolve, resources, and political communications adopted by the issue’s key advocates; and (3) the availability of clear and compelling solutions. The first two factors capture the ability to gain an audience for the issue, while the third addresses the formulation and implementation of the solution. That is, is it comprehensible and intuitively doable?

The call for early adolescent “youth development” initiatives is not (yet) compelling vis-à-vis any of these factors.

The Moral Power of Young Teen Issues

While the members of the American public I spoke with are sympathetic to teens, they do not tend to be morally outraged on behalf of youths or to believe that public action is essential to address most youthful problems. Adults see adolescence as a trying time, full of new thinking, experimentation, and hormonal change. It is a period that adults find hard to characterize, hard to predict, hard to explain in causal terms. They tend to see early adolescence as a difficult period in life by its very nature and are not convinced that changing teens’ environments will significantly alter their behavior.

Moreover, unfairness does not strike adults as being at the root of the problems teens face. Rather, it is easy to see these problems as partly intrinsic to being a young teen and partly caused by parents and neighborhoods. Changing those seems well beyond the reach of social policies and programs. This explanation of teen behavior may cause sympathy—but it does not spark a call for public action.

The Success of Youth Advocacy Efforts

Part of the reason that the attitudes described above persist in the minds of many is that there is no sustained, long-standing, and powerful national advocacy movement for young teens.

It has been difficult to mount and sustain a campaign for adolescents in part because the information available about early teens supports divergent views of their problems and concerns. On the one hand, we hear that youths are dangerous to themselves and others—having babies irresponsibly, using drugs, and performing poorly in school. Indeed, some respected youth advocates and experts say that all youths are at risk. But there is an opposing point of view that stresses that most teens are not much different now than they were decades ago and that things are actually better in some respects. These differing views do not coalesce into a powerful image for building public policy.

Moreover, youth advocates have not grappled hard enough with the fact that the American public needs to be convinced, in language they understand, that clear problems face young teens and that there are solutions to those problems. Instead, the youth field has emphasized the complexity of the problems youths face and stressed how correspondingly complex the solutions must be. Calls for policies that are “comprehensive, integrated, holistic, and sequential” may be meaningful to the professionals who design youth initiatives, but such jargon does not serve to improve the policy climate. We have to be able to say in clear, ordinary language what it is we are concerned about and what we propose to do.

The concept of working toward the goal of “positive youth development,” which has won the allegiance of many youth professionals, can also be a challenge to advocacy efforts. First, many in the public at large think that at least part of what today’s youths need is more firm discipline—and that is not what the phrase “positive youth development” brings to mind. Moreover, youth development is hard to visualize and translate into policy or operational terms, and thus is hard to rally around. That brings us to the final factor that creates a favorable climate for action in a particular policy arena.

Clarity of Solution

The third factor that facilitates endorsement of a social policy response to a given issue is a clear, understandable proposal for addressing that issue. What is being proposed and to what end? The solution need not be easy to achieve, but it needs to be understandable.

The more problem-oriented the goal is, the easier it is to be clear about what to do. For the past 25 years, youth policy and pro-
programming have focused on problems. Experts defined a problem (teen pregnancy, drug abuse, poor school performance) and then proposed a concrete program to solve it. The results from this approach have, however, been weak. Evaluation after evaluation has concluded that the program it examined had little enduring effect on the lives of participating teens.²

The lack of demonstrated effectiveness of major public programs addressing adolescent problems has prompted many youth professionals to turn away from deficiency-oriented programming, in the expectation that a more positive youth development approach that focuses on youths' assets and potentials may be more successful. Indeed, accumulating evidence indicates that recognizable examples of the youth development approach do work.³

For example, a caring adult is one critical element of youth development, and a 1995 impact evaluation of Big Brothers/Big Sisters provided clear evidence that the mentoring program can produce substantial impacts on first drug use and school performance and behavior.⁴ The program achieves these results not by focusing on problems but by promoting friendship and trust between an adult and a youth who were previously strangers. Similarly, evaluations of after-school activity programs for youths, such as those provided by Boys and Girls Clubs, have documented that they provide critical supports for development—such as a sense of safety, adult guidance, and opportunities to take initiative.⁵

But note that it is particular components of youth development (mentoring and after-school activities) that are clearly comprehensible and that have evidence behind them—not the general phrase “youth development.” More evaluation work is needed, on more and more aspects of youth development, before we can begin to advocate for “youth development” with an appealing clarity and with credible evidence that it can be brought about by social interventions.

Mentoring and After-School Activities

In recent years, both mentoring and after-school activities have broken through the resistant policy climate and have attracted national advocacy and media attention in the private and public sectors. Mentoring has been promoted by retired General Colin Powell and his organization, America’s Promise; after-school programs have been embraced by the Carnegie Corporation, the Mott Foundation, and the National Urban League. Governments have followed suit. The Congress recently funded a major after-school initiative, adding to a $20 million investment in Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and to a mentoring initiative sponsored by the Department of Justice. Related initiatives are being mounted by numerous local governments and philanthropies to provide mentoring and after-school activities for young teens.

Policy Opportunities

Mentoring and after-school programming share several features that may account for their success in the policy arena and that can illuminate the opportunities and limits that make up the social policy climate for early adolescent initiatives.

For one, mentoring and after-school programming are very basic, easy to visualize, and doable. Most people remember that their own youth provided opportunities to be involved in after-school activities and to have caring relationships with adults. It seems only fair that today’s youth should have access to these basic supports.

Second, these strategies are identified with “brand name” organizations that people have confidence in, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Little League. Of course, good programs for youths do not take place only under these brand names. Nevertheless, the political reality is that efforts that are closely associated with well-regarded brand names have a better chance of adoption than unfamiliar programs or policies.

Third, while these two program strategies address universal needs that all youths face as they grow, their power to shape public policy is tied to their potential to reduce negative behavior. Public policy is, of necessity, concerned with solving priority issues. In the youth arena, priority issues are not hard to name. They have to do with adolescent crime, drugs, pregnancy, school performance, and preparation for employment. It is unlikely that we can create a durable and improved policy climate for early adolescent initiatives unless those initiatives effectively address priority youth issues.

Advocates for youth development should now embrace the mentoring and after-school program strategies as “good-as-they-come” opportunities to gain public support for the basic developmental supports that all youths
need. The nonprofit and philanthropic organizations that believe American society is shortchanging its youths should therefore organize around these two strategies to ensure that they develop roots in policy and implementation and that credible evidence demonstrates that they reduce the negative behaviors that concern the public.

Local Action with National Implications

It is worth noting that neither of these two promising and popular strategies is primarily associated with national public policy or with public institutions. Although these programs may receive government funding or operate in schools, their names call to mind volunteer adults coaching athletic leagues, recreation programs at the Y, or the prizes awarded by 4-H leaders at the state fair. In an age of low confidence in public policy, this image as a private undertaking is particularly useful.

Similarly helpful is the image of local action that mentoring and after-school activities bring to mind. This is, after all, the age of devolution. Resources and decision-making authority are being transferred from the federal to state and local governments. Youth programming fits comfortably with this trend: the local level is where many of the resources, adults, and decisions that affect youths are located and where all of these influences manifest themselves concretely. Moreover, given the previous difficulty in demonstrating the effectiveness of programs for this age group, issues of local design, program implementation, and evaluation require increased attention. The voting public can be expected to demand some form of concrete proof that an approach works before considering it nationally.

However, it would be shortsighted to ignore the national level where significant and equity-producing resources reside. It is important to remember that devolution itself requires the distribution of federal resources and that their continued distribution or growth ultimately depends on a national sense that these resources are used effectively.

Consequently, what is needed is a broad strategy of launching new state and local initiatives that promote national opportunities and national learning. Local experimentation is critical, but it must be tied to national opportunities, because the perceived success or failure of the local actions will greatly influence national attitudes about the usefulness of public social policy.

Mentoring and after-school programming may have limitations, but they are concrete local opportunities for which the public has demonstrated openness and support. The success or failure of these initiatives as they are implemented within specific states and localities will play a significant role in our country’s willingness to consider other policies that may be useful to early adolescents. Such concrete opportunities are the building blocks of improved policies and an improved policy climate. These opportunities may not represent perfect solutions, but their success can form the pathway to a more positive social policy climate for young teens.


