# Middle School Students and Out-of-School Time:
## Barriers to Participation and Strategies for Recruitment and Retention

Out-of-School Time (OST) programs help middle school students build skills for academic success while helping them navigate the transition to middle school.  They provide youth with opportunities to interact with positive role models and promote engagement at a time when students often begin to disengage.

Meaningful, frequent and sustained participation in quality OST programs is critical to achieving positive benefits.  Yet, participation in OST programs often declines when students enter middle school.

Almost 4 million middle school students lack supervision in the afterschool hours nationwide.

As children approach the middle school years, the need for afterschool child care diminishes.

Middle school students are often seen as old enough to be left unsupervised for brief periods during the afterschool hours.

## BARRIERS THAT PREVENT MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM PARTICIPATING IN OST

OST providers face a unique set of recruitment and retention challenges when serving middle school students.  Middle school students are less likely to be appeased by programs designed for younger students.  They also have unique developmental needs:

- ➢ They are extremely self-conscious.  They need opportunities to do things well and feel a sense of achievement.
- ➢ They are beginning to understand what it means to be an adult.  They need opportunities to see themselves as participants in the larger society.
- ➢ They need structure and boundaries to help them define the areas they can explore.  Because they are older, they are capable of working with adults to begin to set their own rules and limitations.
- ➢ They are developing socially and intellectually.  They need opportunities to use these new talents and to make meaningful contributions to their programs.
- ➢ They need the supportive and positive relationships of caring adults and peers.

*Disinterest:*  Middle school students are more autonomous and less inclined to take part in adult-supervised activities during OST.  Some students attend programs initially and drop out later because of boredom or a lack of interest.

*Access*:  Students from lower-income areas often have fewer opportunities to participate in OST programs, in particular, high quality programs.  Most federal funding for OST supports programs serving elementary students.

*Competing Responsibilities:*  Middle school students are busier and more autonomous.  Parents often rely on middle school students to help with household chores and to care for younger siblings.

*Student perception*: Youth often view OST as an extension of the school day. They prefer to "hang out" with friends. Students are less likely to participate if the program is perceived as "uncool" by their peers.

*Transportation*: Lack of safe transportation to and from OST programs is another barrier.

## STRATEGIES TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH

OST programs that recognize the unique developmental needs of middle school youth and employ strategies to overcome participation barriers are more likely to recruit and retain these students. Some of these strategies are:

➢ Promote the benefits of OST. Help students and families make the connection between frequent participation and positive outcomes.

➢ Reach out to students and families in their schools, homes and communities. Make phone calls or personal visits to students and families in the cafeteria or on campus. Use street outreach workers to target at-risk youth.

➢ Build relationships with parents and extended families. Seek family input. Hold parent meetings and events. Involve parents in the recruitment process.

➢ Develop partnerships with teachers and principals. Ask them to promote the program and refer students.

➢ Invite friends to join together. Use youth participants as peer recruiters.

➢ Offer an array of high-interest activities. Give students an opportunity to explore new activities within a safe structured setting.

➢ Connect with, yet maintain an independence from school. Programs should be linked to school curriculum and personnel, yet inherently different than the school day.

➢ Hire and train caring staff interested in working with and building strong, positive relationships with youth. Recruit staff from the local community. Have staff participate in activities alongside students.

➢ Provide students with opportunities for leadership development. Value their feedback, give them a voice in decision-making and in designing OST activities.

➢ Schedule time to allow students to socialize with friends

## NONPROFIT AGENCIES THAT HAVE PROGRAMS TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Communities in Schools of San Antonio – www.cissa.org

YMCA of Greater San Antonio – http://www.ymcasatx.org/

## SAN ANTONIO AREA FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION INITIATIVE

The San Antonio Area Foundation is committed to increasing the high school graduation rate in Bexar County. Our High School Completion initiative awards grants to nonprofit organizations providing OST programs for Bexar County students in the 6th through 9th grades that:

➢ address and improve at least one of the three dropout indicators – attendance, behavior or course grades
➢ enable students to hold leadership roles or engage families in participation
➢ have a relationship with a public school

In addition, the Area Foundation builds the capacity of OST programs through training and technical assistance, convenes stakeholders, engages donors and commissions research to strengthen grantmaking.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Afterschool Alliance - http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/

American Youth Policy Forum - http://www.aypf.org/

Excel Beyond the Bell SA – http://beyondthebellsa.org/

Harvard Family Research Project – http://www.hfrp.org/

National Institute for Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at the Wellesley Centers for Women http://www.niost.org/

Texas Afterschool Association - www.txafterschool.org

Texas Partnership for Out of School Time (TXPOST) - http://www.txpost.org/

The Wallace Foundation - http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/Pages/default.aspx

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