

# Catalyst Chicago

## Cover Stories

[Making after school cool](#) by Rebecca Harris January, 2010

Crystal Lane, a 16-year-old sophomore at Gage Park High, failed a freshman math course. This fall, she joined a Caribbean dance class through After School Matters that helped her raise her grades by boosting her self-confidence, providing her with a place where she felt respected and giving her incentive to study harder.

Now Crystal is proud to show off her midterm progress report: all A's and B's. The class, she says, "is teaching me what I can do to make myself happy and make my family proud."

After School Matters provides high school students with paid apprenticeships in the arts, fitness and other fields. In terms of demand, it's one of Chicago's more successful programs, serving about 8,000 students each semester at more than 300 sites that often turn away up to twice as many students as they accept. The program draws students whose grades and attendance records are stronger than average, but a study by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children found that participating students had fewer course failures, better attendance and a better chance of graduating than a comparison group of non-participants.

This success is an exception, however. Participation in after-school programs declines sharply among teenagers, in part because of a shortage of resources.

When money is in short supply, elementary students are often first in line. "People decide to make sure younger kids have a safe place," says Jennifer Rinehart, vice president for data and research at the national Afterschool Alliance.

The proposed ASPIRE (Afterschool Partnerships Improve Results in Education) Act would fund programs specifically for high school and middle school students. The Act has been introduced in the U.S. Senate and is slated to be introduced in the U.S. House. In Illinois, the ACT (Afterschool for Children and Teens) Now campaign is aiming for a bill that would create dedicated funding for after-school programs.

But demand is also a factor. Teens won't participate just because an adult tells them to, Rinehart notes. And in Chicago, a small number of the spots in teen-oriented programs remain empty, says James Chesire, director of the Chicago Out-of-School Time Project, a citywide effort to create an organized system of high-quality after-school programs.

Even some After School Matters sites have struggled with attendance. "Even though we offer a stipend," says David Sinski, executive director of After School Matters, "we find that if it's not a strong program, it's not going to keep kids coming back."

In general, many after-school programs don't engage teens or serve their needs. Robert Halpern

of the Erikson Institute believes that After School Matters is successful partly because its job-like structure—including pay, required attendance and high behavior expectations—leads adolescents to think about the process of becoming an adult.

His 2008 book “The Means to Grow Up” details his research into programs that use apprenticeships that engage young people in meaningful, adult tasks valued by society, rather than providing emotional support or life-skills instruction.

By exposing teens to adults who are passionate about their work, and to high standards, such programs help teens “begin to understand what they need to do to become adults, and [that] gets them to focus a little bit more on school tasks,” Halpern says.

The Mikva Challenge, an organization that promotes civic leadership in young people, is bringing teens and young adults into the mix through a recently formed Out-of-School Time Council that will advise the city and help advocate for more resources and better quality.

Still, “there is not a common awareness of what quality looks like for older youth,” Chesire says. So the Out-of-School Time Project has turned to a research-based tool developed by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. The tool evaluates programs on basics such as physical and emotional safety, as well as higher-level characteristics such as interaction, meaning the degree to which programs help youth develop a sense of belonging, participate in small groups, and act as facilitators and mentors. At the top of the pyramid is engagement—allowing young people to plan activities themselves, make their own choices and reflect on their work.

Programs for teens need to offer higher-level characteristics. “The older you are, the more important it is to go higher up on the pyramid,” Chesire says.

To address the issue, the Out-of-School Time Project launched a pilot project in which 38 after-school sites volunteered to undergo a self-evaluation and external evaluation based on the assessment tool. After the evaluation, the sites were offered professional workshops and coaching on improving quality to better engage teens. An additional 30 sites are now receiving similar support.

The project also sought help from a California-based firm, Rescue Social Change Group, which in 2007 and 2008 had hired teens in Chicago to interview their peers about after-school activities; the interviews revealed a number of features that turned teens off, such as including elementary-age students in programs and not having expert adults to provide guidance and learning.

The interviews also revealed that students are attracted to programs based on the results they promise, such as service opportunities, academic success, career education, or social and cultural enrichment.

Rescue Social Change also created a toolkit to help after-school programs market themselves better. Twelve other sites that the Project deemed ready—sites with high-quality programs and extra space—received a two-day marketing training.

But ideas for a broader, regional marketing campaign based on the research have been shelved for now, Chesire says. If such a campaign worked, the city still doesn't have enough space in programs or enough funding to create them and meet the demand.

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