

# TELLING TALES (ABOUT) OUT-OF- SCHOOL

SHEDDING THEIR STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES AS BABYSITTERS AND LAST-RESORT TUTORS, AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS ARE NOW IN THE VANGUARD OF EDUCATION REFORM, THANKS TO FOUNDATION SUPPORT THAT HAS THEM PARTNERING WITH PARENTS, SCHOOL OFFICIALS AND FUNDERS TO PROVIDE EXCITING OUT-OF-CLASSROOM LEARNING. BY CHRISTINE O'TOOLE PHOTOS BY JIM JUDKIS

---

*Christine O'Toole is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to h. In our special Spring issue devoted to food and healthy eating, her opening essay provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities for improving how we select, prepare and consume food.*



The Pittsburgh Public Schools' Summer Dreamers Academy put a new twist on summer school by including activities that made the experience feel like camp. Among the outdoor events was kayaking, which is what these middle school students from Pittsburgh King school were preparing to do on the rivers that border the city's downtown.



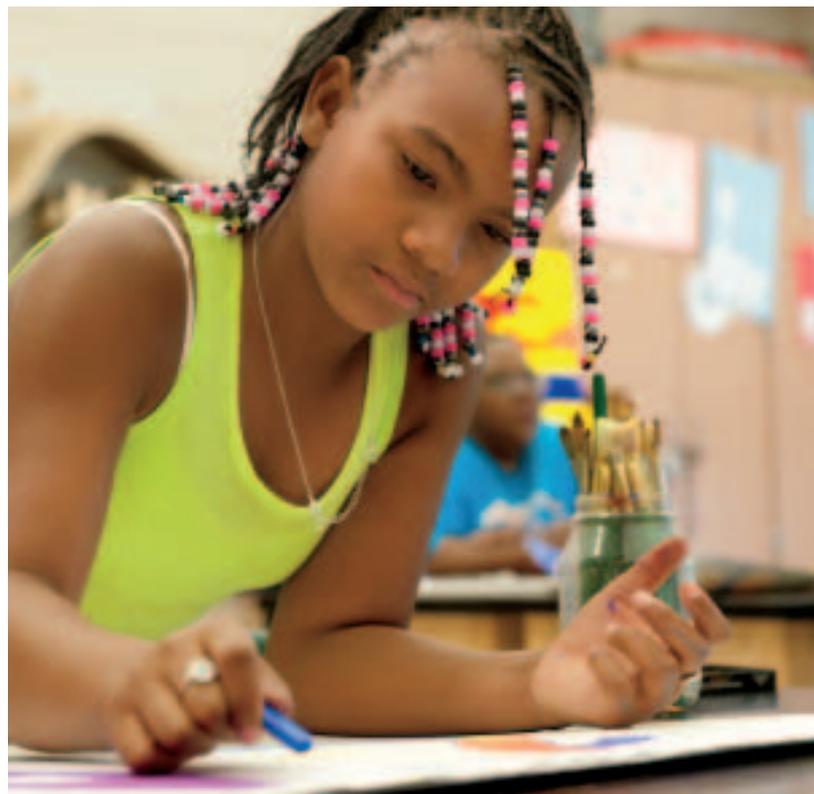


Summer Dreamers participants explored their creative sides through a variety of projects organized by local nonprofits. Above left, Chris Thompson and Ashley Hankins are “tree huggers” in a play about littering and recycling that students wrote and performed at the Eco-Warrior Camp developed by the Pennsylvania Resources Council. Above right, the environmental theme continues as



Pittsburgh Center for the Arts staff show campers how to recycle old clothes, shopping bags and other items to create unique ensembles. Teacher Karen Page looks on as Annika Fedak delights in the swirling effect of the layered fringe she added to her skirt in her ECO ART Fashion Design class. Below left, Jaylen West, center, and Ceaira White, right foreground, design and paint signs for a peace rally to promote an end

to violence in schools and communities. The art activism project was developed by the Marilyn G. Rabb Foundation. Below right, campers are given the chance to tell their stories and interpret their world using art and creative writing in the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts 2-D Sampler program.



**When the buses roll away from Pittsburgh's Lincoln Middle School on a muggy spring afternoon, the shouts and laughter punctuate the end of the school day as clearly as the clanging school bell. For these sixth- to eighth-graders from the city's Larimer neighborhood, the end of the school day is their chance to relax.**

But few of them will go straight home. Some are heading to sports practice; some are en route to tutoring sessions or club meetings at a nearby church community center. And about a third will be completely on their own until evening—the most challenging and potentially risky situation of all.

Nationally, the peak hours for juvenile crime and victimization are late afternoon and evening. A 2006 report from the U.S. Department of Justice showed that 61 percent of violent crimes committed by youth occur on school days, spiking as soon as classes end. Twenty percent of the offenses—murder, rape, robbery, aggravated and simple assault—occur between 3 and 7 p.m.

A disturbing example in the Pittsburgh region took place last April when 60 to 100 children—mostly girls and mostly middle-schoolers—brawled on a playground next to a day care center in the borough of Homestead. The ugly after-school fight left three police officers injured, sent four of the youth to jail and made local headlines.

That clash and the national data prove that, despite their protestations to the contrary, even older children need supervision until they're safely home. Parents have known that for decades.

"They have nowhere to go. They're bored. And you wonder why they get into trouble?" says Carmella Jones, who's advocating for an after-school program at her 12-year-old son's middle school in Homestead. "The older kids need it the most."

But after-school programs do more than keep adolescents safe. They can change student attitudes and achievement. Their impact on academic

performance—particularly standardized test scores—has galvanized school officials to support them. The Study of Promising After-School Programs, a 2007 review of about 3,000 low-income, ethnically diverse children, found that elementary and middle school students who regularly attended high-quality programs for two years had standardized math score gains of up to 20 percentiles and 12 percentiles, respectively, compared with unsupervised peers. Annual data from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers show that students in those federally funded programs improve both their reading and math grades by more than 40 percent.

Yet, compared to child care offerings for younger children, publicly funded programs for "tweens" and teens struggle across the country. Their budgets remain a tenuous amalgam of government funds, private donations and family contributions, and a consensus on the best programs for this age group has been hard to reach. There's no standard curriculum, schedule or price tag, nor can school districts afford to pick up the bill. As a result, trying to establish comprehensive regional, statewide or national guidelines and strategies has required patience and perseverance. The problem is, "after school" isn't school. It's life.

Wayne Jones, a Heinz Endowments officer in the Children, Youth & Families Program, has directed the foundation's grant making in developing after-school systems since 2002. He points out that "out-of-school-time" programs—an umbrella term for activities that happen after classes end for

the day, on weekends or during the summer—have a long history, particularly in Pittsburgh. “It’s not as if after-school programs were just invented,” he says. “They’ve been around for more than 100 years.”

And they’ve been a part of the Heinz philanthropic legacy for that long. Howard Heinz founded Covode House in 1901 as a club for immigrant boys on the city’s economically and socially struggling North Side. This pioneering effort in youth programming later became Sarah Heinz House, which was one of the first members of the national Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Since then, the Endowments’ support of various after-school programs has run deep and long. As its grant making expanded to include out-of-school-time infrastructure development, the foundation’s annual programmatic and strategic investments have ranged from an estimated \$3.5 million to \$4 million for the past five years.

#### LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

**A**cross the country today, after-school programs are ubiquitous. While extra-curricular programs such as sports teams, singing groups and chess clubs help young teens pursue specific interests, after-school programs—especially those that depend on public funding—offer a broader menu of cultural, recreational and academic activities. National research shows that it’s

not the specific pursuits, but careful attention to participants’ social, emotional and academic growth, that make for high-quality after-school programs.

As kids grow up, however, they drop out of organized programs. A recent report by the Harvard Family Research Project revealed the decline: Middle-schoolers represent only 18 percent of all children in after-school programs, while high school students comprise 12 percent.

“We do a decent job around younger kids, but we tend not to have as many programming opportunities for youth and young adults,” says Jake Wheatley, a state representative from Pittsburgh who has urged Pennsylvania officials to create a comprehensive after-school system. “We haven’t done a good enough job of explaining the value to parents.”

Carmella Jones says it’s not parents, but politicians and community officials, who undervalue after-school programs. “My neighbors are all for it. You can’t keep kids in the house all day, but if they go to a park, there is danger—like shootings. They need a safe place to go.” But when she urged a local mayor to get involved, she says, the response was, “What do you want us to do, be your babysitter?”

It’s not that these types of programs have no support in the Pittsburgh region. In Allegheny County, out-of-school-time programming

## PICK AND CHOOSE

Helping families find after-school programs that meet their children’s needs is the mission of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Afterschool Resource Collaboration. One of its tools is an online searchable database of after-school programs, which enables families and schools to find suitable programs based on neighborhood, activity, age level and other preferences.





currently receives \$55.8 million in public and private contributions. Almost half of that amount, or \$24 million, comes from the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning; Allegheny County's Department of Human Services provides about \$9 million; and local foundations collectively invest \$7.6 million. The balance is a combination of support from a variety of sources.

But such a tangled web of funding streams and oversight makes it a challenge to identify, monitor and champion high-quality programs. That's why the development of comprehensive systems has become a priority among after-school advocates in the Pittsburgh region and across the country.

Nationally, the Wallace and the Charles Stewart Mott foundations have led efforts to create and evaluate strong after-school systems. The Endowments and the Grable Foundation have followed suit in southwestern Pennsylvania. Their support for both school districts and social service providers through Allegheny Partners for Out of School Time, or APOST, has been an essential first step toward creating a coherent, statewide system for offering and promoting quality after-school programs for Pennsylvania youth.

"To do change, you need to figure out how to engage all the youth development partners and excite those who don't understand," explains Hillary Salmons of the Providence [Rhode Island] After School Alliance, which counts the Wallace and Mott foundations among its funders. The six-year-old program for middle-schoolers has been cited as a model for after-school programming. "It's like a big organization effort across the entire community."

Providence has an after-school hero in its mayor, David Cicilline, who has insisted that



out-of-school programs provide "high-quality learning opportunities from the moment [youth] wake up until they go to sleep at night." A similar champion has yet to emerge among Pennsylvania's patchwork of small municipalities and school districts. But after a decade of patient work, the foundation for the statewide system has been laid.

In southwestern Pennsylvania, the Endowments has invested \$550,000 to help fund the creation and expansion of an online searchable database of after-school programs. Also supported by the Richard King Mellon Foundation, the database was developed by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Afterschool Resource Collaborative and designed by 3 Rivers Connect, a nonprofit that creates information analysis tools for communities. The online system allows parents, schools and youth counselors to search for the right program with a few clicks: neighborhood, program type, hours, age level or activity. The SPARC database then scans 1,500 programs to find options. This information also puts schools in a better position to work with after-school partners in determining how to coordinate their roles.

With \$350,000 in grants from the Endowments, the Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network has drafted guiding principles regarding after-school structure, management and activities. In keeping with a growing consensus on what constitutes quality in after-school offerings,

Among the more conventional after-school offerings are tutoring and educational programs offered by organizations like the nonprofit Wireless Neighborhoods. Above, tutor José Rodriguez reviews with Peabody High School student DeVaughn Jemison the materials that are being used this year. At left, Peabody student Breanna Rice works out an equation during a Wireless Neighborhoods session.

Some life lessons, such as teamwork and dedication, can be learned through the joy of play, which Summer Dreamers experienced in Ultimate Frisbee games coordinated by Three Rivers Fencing at Pittsburgh Obama school. Here, Desmond Hargrove, left in blue, throws around Kierre Durham, center foreground. In the rear from left, Zach Digregorio, Coach Sam Bellin and Trevaughn Bryant try to help block the play.





the organization aims to establish a network of programs that create positive relationships with peers, family and community; offer a mix of academic and non-academic activities to build skills; deliver content for structured and unstructured learning; and promote student choice, independence and leadership. To accomplish all this, it has enlisted its members to approach their government representatives for federal and state funding, coordinated a series of summits to share best practices, and created an online resource for research and evaluation.

Two years ago, state Rep. Wheatley sponsored a resolution that resulted in the state's first report on the availability and affordability of after-school programs. It was delivered to the state House's Legislative Budget and Finance Committee but has not been translated into a bill. In fact, there's no legislative momentum currently to put a statewide after-school system in place. Because of the heated race for governor of Pennsylvania, Kacy Conley, director of the Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network, says her organization is working on ways to make inroads with a new state administration.

#### A MODEL TO FOLLOW

**E**fforts to create a statewide network for quality after-school programs can benefit from a successful predecessor. The Keystone STARS—Standards, Training, Assistance, Resources and Support—Quality Rating System has helped more than 400 child care centers measure their work against statewide benchmarks. Programs are ranked in four categories, from learning opportunities to professional development for staff. Caregivers voluntarily apply for certification, earning from one to four stars for their programs.

The STARS initiative, now seven years old, emerged from a scaffolding of long-term, early childhood programming support from the Endowments and the Grable and William Penn foundations. Connecting funding for school

# SUMMER DREAMERS

In its old iteration, summer school was for losers. But a makeover made possible by federal stimulus money and foundation support redefined what happened in July and August at Pittsburgh Public middle schools.

The 2010 Summer Dreamers Academy was the district's first comprehensive strategy to connect academic goals with programs offered by community organizations. Based at six Pittsburgh schools, the free, voluntary five-week program combined a morning of literacy activities, led by district teachers, with an afternoon program that included arts or science exploration, and trips to the city's museums, community college and recreation groups. Each of the three dozen camps concluded with a specific event: a hip-hop dance performance, a peace rally or an overnight camping adventure on bicycles made by the students.

"I said there should be sports-related stuff, wildlife stuff and stuff with the arts," says Samantha Morgan, a 13-year-old swimmer and softball player who helped plan the offerings.

School officials bet big on the success of Summer Dreamers, applying \$10 million in federal stimulus funds to test the program for two years. Local foundations also supported the project, including the Endowments, which contributed \$150,000. When the district opened registration to the program—which included two meals and free transportation daily—Program Director Allison McLeod expected that 1,600 of the district's fifth- to

seventh-graders would sign up. After an initial flurry of 2,200 responses, an average of 1,200 students a day attended the program through mid-August.

The changes "made the [experience] feel like camp, not school," explains McLeod. "It's a new way of thinking for the district, to prioritize summers. We're doing something to engage students year-round, get them Promise ready."

The district is counting on the year-round activity counteracting summer learning loss—a well-documented case of out of sight, out of mind. Students in the Pittsburgh program received their own copies of popular books to read and discuss in morning literacy sessions. The extra emphasis on literacy was designed to bolster reading skills that have remained stubbornly low among middle school students; the 2010 state assessment tests showed that 26 percent of district sixth-graders scored at the lowest level, below basic.

Early results from the program's first year are expected within a few months. Middle-schoolers took the ForeSight test during the first weeks of the school year. The results will compose a snapshot of students' grade-level progress and indicate if Summer Dreamers participation has helped students stay on track.

And as educators and funders eagerly await the results, school officials already are pondering ways for the district to find funds to extend the program beyond 2011.

districts, community programs and universities, it has been acknowledged as a national model for early learning. In addition to creating incentives for improvement, the program has given families a frame of reference in selecting child care that not only meets but exceeds basic state requirements.

"What has changed in Pennsylvania is that now parents look to see the star level. There is a demand for this," says Conley. "We're looking to see how we can expand on that model. We want to connect folks for a consensus on what [after-school] quality looks like."

Marge Petruska, the Endowments' senior program director for Children, Youth & Families, knows from experience that creating statewide consensus takes years of patient effort. "With its efforts for quality child care, Pennsylvania has moved from the bottom third of all states to one of the top two," she notes. "It takes resources and leadership at all levels."

Similarly, she adds, "It takes time to build a statewide infrastructure that advances a public policy agenda, one that develops and supports quality standards and professional development, and creates a plan for a comprehensive and coordinated system of core funding for quality out-of-school programs and services."

## EARLY COLLABORATIONS

As the Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool Youth Development Network tries to build a statewide foundation, schools and agencies around Pittsburgh are working together on common goals. Through APOST, they are sharing data and ideas. And the Mount Ararat Community Activity Center in Pittsburgh's East Liberty section is one of the places where the ideas and the partners meet the children.

At the center, youth in the giggling crew from Lincoln Middle School step off the school bus and walk onto the front lines of Pittsburgh's after-school effort. The familiar faces that greet them are a mix of church staff, volunteers and tutors trained and employed by Endowments grantee Wireless Neighborhoods. The six-year-old nonprofit provides tutoring and learning opportunities to more than 500 low-income students in the city.

The middle school group clumps noisily to a Pathways to Health Careers workshop. Meanwhile, Stephen MacIsaac paces the hallway. Wireless Neighborhoods' youthful, rail-thin director greets Peabody High School students streaming into a math tutorial. He questions a young woman who's leaving the classroom—she shows a valid excuse—and eyes a young man whose pants are riding low.

“We’ve got to get Khalil a belt,” he tells Mary Bray. The unflappable Mount Ararat site coordinator takes the advice in stride. A longtime neighborhood resident, she knows her students so well that she often finds them on her front step, waiting for a ride to Peabody. They know she’s there nearly every day, checking with counselors and teachers on students’ progress.

And they are making progress. All of the 23 seniors attending the Mount Ararat center this spring graduated on time, and most attend college this fall, thanks to the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program. Fueled by the encouragement of Mount Ararat staff, they have qualified for grants for their first two years of college. The citywide effort awarded its third annual round of scholarships in June and has given rise to a new district catch phrase: Promise readiness. To sustain the levels of academic achievement required by the ambitious program, the district is asking partners like Wireless Neighborhoods to create programs that directly support its classroom efforts.

Wireless Neighborhoods has deliberately matched its program goals to Pennsylvania’s student achievement standards, aiming to have regular participants meet or exceed average performance in reading and mathematics. The lessons in each student’s tutoring folders, created by the organization’s staff, align with the district’s grade-level curricula; other programs, like health careers mentoring, complement workforce development efforts.

Academics aren’t the only goal. Wireless Neighborhoods also aims to improve school attendance and social skills, while reducing disciplinary incidents. In that quest, it has reached deeper into the school system than many after-school providers, successfully negotiating the thorny issue of sharing student data, obtaining parent permissions and forming close alliances with school principals. The result: Both school and after-school staffs know a child’s schedule, interests and assignments.

John Walker, who’s attended Wireless Neighborhoods programs at Mount Ararat for the past three years, has earned Microsoft software certifications and joined a Saturday work program as a result of his involvement. “I love math and physics,” says the Peabody High School graduate. He’s planning to attend Community College of Allegheny County, an achievement Bray applauds.

“They need someone to push ’em,” she says. “And it fulfills me to see them graduate, to watch them grow up and calm down.”

#### WEAVING IT ALL TOGETHER

Still, coordination between providers and schools is meaningless if families can’t connect to the right after-school programs. While the online after-school database created by SPARC and 3 Rivers Connect offers choices to parents and guardians who have Internet access, it also underpins “Welcome Back to School” packets tailored to individual Pittsburgh Public schools. The information, in the form of colorful booklets, includes a list of available support programs in the immediate community.

Many families have been putting the information in the packets to use, says Holly O’Donnell, who became the district’s first coordinator of after-school programs last year after heading the successful DC Scores after-school program in Washington, D.C. And the Pittsburgh district’s future offerings will include arts and athletics as part of the after-school system she’s developing to support district goals.

O’Donnell’s work in Pittsburgh reflects statewide after-school efforts and may not be any easier. Creating a centralized system of after-school information and programming that can be personalized to each student’s needs will be her first hurdle. Others follow. “After the first year,” she says, “we’ll figure out the real challenges— [reaching] the kids who aren’t in any programs.” *h*