

The Power of Afterschool & The Future of Learning

Introduction

Ten years ago, a collaborative group of afterschool practitioners and stakeholders had the first conversations about the potential for afterschool to make change in our state. As a result of the hard work of this ever-growing collective of afterschool professionals, the past ten years have seen a marked shift in the way Rhode Islanders view afterschool programs and practitioners.

In a single decade, the afterschool field has shown that when a group of committed stakeholders come together to share ideas, build consensus, and pool their talents, a series of incremental changes can culminate in a major transformation. Having met the challenges of the last decade, the field is stronger and better positioned to face the new, more complex challenges that lie ahead.

Afterschool is an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of expanded learning programs and activities that occur beyond the traditional classroom, including before school, after school, holidays, weekends, and summers.

The Power of Afterschool: 2002 to 2012

In 2002, the public predominately viewed afterschool programs as a tool to help working parents ensure their children's safety after the school day ended. The hours between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. had been identified as the peak time for juvenile crime and victimization, and parents' decisions to seek adult supervision for their children were not unfounded.¹ Even so, in many cases, afterschool programming was much more than just babysitting. The markers of high-quality programming were there, and children and youth across Rhode Island were making strides as a result of their participation. The missing ingredient was intentionality: making purposeful choices to reach goals for the future.

In the past ten years, funding for and participation in afterschool programs has grown, and because the field came of age in an era of outcomes and accountability, much research has been conducted to evaluate the potential of afterschool.² More than a decade of research across the nation confirms that children and youth who participate in afterschool programming experience benefits in a number of interrelated outcome areas—

academic, social/emotional, prevention, and health and wellness.³

An important shift took place locally as well. Since 2002, afterschool professionals in Rhode Island have collaborated to strengthen their skills, knowledge, and the programs they offer via systems for quality improvement and professional development; raise public awareness about the value of afterschool and summer learning; and build a network of key stakeholders and champions willing to rally for this work. Based on its longstanding commitment to out-of-school time efforts in the state, United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI) was a driving force behind these changes. New local organizations like the Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance (RIASPA) and the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) formed to bolster the work of the field and guide these efforts to create systems change.

Afterschool has not only become a true profession within the education field, but public perception of afterschool has evolved as well. A June 2011 survey yielded that, in addition to helping working families and reducing the chances of children engaging in risky behavior, afterschool programs help promote social development, give children greater opportunities to engage in

— Envisioning a Rhode Island that maximizes how, when, and where children and youth learn to ensure their success. —

physical activities, help keep children safe, and help boost academic achievement.⁴

Major Accomplishments in Afterschool

Quality Improvement

Quality improvement efforts not only allow afterschool practitioners to advance their practice and refine their programs, they also have helped afterschool to gain legitimacy as a professional field. Due to the hard work of afterschool professionals in our state over the last ten years, Rhode Islanders can participate in quality improvement processes that are consistent, grounded in research, and provide meaningful strategies to promote high quality programs for Rhode Island's children and youth.

In 2005, organizations and field professionals collaborated to create the Rhode Island After School Quality Standards. Soon after, in 2006, PASA developed the Rhode Island Program Quality Assessment tool—or RIPQA. Via this self-assessment tool, afterschool practitioners track their program's progress toward excellence. The Rhode Island Core Knowledge and Core Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals, another collaborative field effort, followed in 2009. In order to train afterschool professionals to use these valuable tools, a more sophisticated professional development strategy has been implemented via a statewide professional development calendar and a series of biannual mini-conferences.

Public Policy

Since 2002, and especially over the last three years, public policies

have shifted to support afterschool. The General Assembly passed legislation directing the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to create a report outlining what an exemplary afterschool and summer learning demonstration program would look like if state funding were available. That same year, the Assembly formed a Summer Learning Taskforce charged with investigating how to build and improve access to high-quality summer learning programs. In 2010, RIASPA released the first in a series of policy briefs highlighting various relevant topics (summer learning, expanded learning opportunities, and parental views of afterschool and summer programming). Created to put a Rhode Island focus on national issues, these briefs help to educate the afterschool field, but more importantly, constituencies outside of the field who have direct ties to afterschool.

Innovative Programming

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that combating summer learning loss is critical to student success. The field has responded to this challenge by building strong summer learning programs that blend hands-on, experiential learning; academics; and recreation. The recommendations from the 2010 report of the Summer Learning Taskforce have provided a foundation for RIASPA, on behalf of the afterschool field, to construct legislation advocating for a summer learning funding stream. The Expanded Learning Opportunities for High School Graduation Credit initiative has also been a source of innovative programming, enabling high-school students in Woonsocket and Central Falls to receive graduation credit for studies pursued outside of the classroom.

Partnerships between community-based organizations and school districts have been a driving force in producing positive educational outcomes for our state's children in each of these initiatives.

Relationship with RIDE

One of the biggest champions of afterschool has been the Rhode Island Department of Education. RIDE's 21st Century Community Learning Center Initiative has been a successful effort that served over 12,000 children and youth in high-poverty areas/under-performing schools, and helped to leverage better partnerships with school districts. RIDE has also advocated for innovative summer learning models, expanded learning opportunities for high-school credit, and made changes to its Basic Education Program (BEP) to include afterschool language.

The Future of Learning

As a result of a decade's-worth of accomplishments, the afterschool field in Rhode Island is poised to do its part in helping children and youth to reach their full potential socially, emotionally, physically, and most importantly, academically. Many afterschool professionals are already engaged in the work of fostering children and youth's academic success, just as ten years ago many afterschool professionals were already offering much more than a safe place for children and youth to hang out after the school bell rang.

While there is a cadre of qualified, committed school-day professionals in the state, the challenges Rhode Island faces in ensuring that all children succeed in school and life

are abundant. For afterschool professionals in our state, these challenges represent opportunities to build the capacity of the afterschool field to create change. The time has come for afterschool professionals to harness their collective power

The Challenge of Too Little Time

A question on the minds of many Rhode Island educators is this: How do we best expand time and resources to help children and youth learn and grow year round at every stage of their educational development?⁵ While classroom learning plays a crucial role in an individual's education, children and youth spend the majority of their time outside of school. The hours before and after school, as well as summer vacation, are ideal (and often untapped) opportunities for children and youth to have experiences that enrich and complement the skills they learn in the classroom.

The Opportunity for Afterschool

Afterschool professionals can reach out to school professionals to develop complementary curricula so that children and youth might extend their school-day learning into afterschool. The hours after-school are a singular space in which educators, enrichment providers, and afterschool practitioners can partner to reinforce school-day concepts via experiential learning.

and unique expertise and join other educators in the task of ensuring that Rhode Island's children and youth reach their fullest academic potential.

The Challenge of Summer Learning Loss

Research shows that all young people experience learning losses when they do not engage in educational activities over the summer.⁶ Most students, regardless of socio-economic status, lose about two months of grade-level equivalency in math when they spend their summers understimulated. Low-income students also experience a loss in reading achievement.⁷ These losses, when compounded year after year, account for a large portion of the achievement gap between lower-income and higher-income students.

The Opportunity for Afterschool

In offering hands-on, applied summer learning programs, afterschool practitioners can ensure that children maintain learning during the summer. Summer represents a key time for educators to innovate and create programming that pairs seasonal activities with opportunities to learn content, skills, and knowledge. In implementing pioneering programs, educators and policymakers can work together to close the achievement gap, reduce summer learning loss, and foster a love of learning and creativity in Rhode Island's children and youth.

The Challenge of High School Completion

A high-school diploma is a prerequisite for college entry and many jobs. In Rhode Island, adults without high-school diplomas are almost four times as likely to be unemployed as those who have a bachelor's degree. Seventy-six percent of Rhode Island high-school students graduated on time. Of those that did not graduate in four years, 14% dropped out entirely. The odds of dropping out are much higher for English Language Learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, and students of color.⁸

The Opportunity for Afterschool

All students in Rhode Island should be given the supports and opportunities necessary to complete high school and enter into meaningful post-secondary education, training, or work opportunities. Afterschool programs are equipped to support students of all ages on their journey toward graduation. Working with younger children to build literacy skills, for instance, may help children reach reading proficiency by the third grade which is a crucial marker of whether or not that child will graduate from high school. Finally, programs can work with school districts on the Expanded Learning Opportunities for High School Credit Initiative so that students statewide may apply learning outside of the classroom toward graduation.

RIASPA's Role

Since 2002, RIASPA's aim has been to support and define the afterschool field for the good of all Rhode Island children and youth. This work has been of great help to the individual and combined efforts of committed professionals, advocates, and parents in the state. This year marks the tenth anniversary of RIASPA, and it is an ideal opportunity to refocus our goals as a field. It is RIASPA's belief that with a robust set of supports in place, the afterschool field can combine the expertise it has accrued in the past decade and begin working towards this new set of ambitious goals.

**In an effort to support this work,
RIASPA will help secure ...**

Focused professional development

Additional technical assistance

Increased policy development to eliminate barriers to success

Better data collection (common outcomes measurements, benchmarks for field-wide goals) & interpretation of those data

Conclusion

If the successes of the last ten years are any indication, Rhode Island's afterschool professionals are ready to take on this important work. In the past ten years, Rhode Island's afterschool field has been recognized nationally for its innovation in afterschool. In the next ten years, Rhode Island will aim to emerge as leaders in education overall.

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