

More than homework, a snack, and basketball:

Afterschool Programs as an Oasis of Hope for Black Parents in Four Cities



Gerard Robinson
Principal Investigator

Leslie Fenwick
Principal Investigator

PREPARED BY
The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)

SUPPORTED BY
The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

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RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) received funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to conduct a study about Black parents who have children or adolescents enrolled in an afterschool program (hereafter ASP or ASPs). For over a decade, researchers have provided encouraging evidence about ASPs and their impact on the academic and social well-being of Black children and adolescents. To gain a better understanding of what Black parents want and think about ASPs, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation decided to fund a project that directly asked parents their opinions. With this in mind, the goals of this study were: to discover which factors influence Black low-income and working-class parents' decisions to enroll their children in ASPs; to understand how these parents assess a program's quality and availability; and to develop a working definition of a positive ASP experience based on the identification of key contributing factors.

Overall, this study provided a voice to Black families' opinions about their children and adolescents enrolled in ASPs. Benefits from this study include the following:

- Empowering low-income and working-class Black parents with information about the benefits of ASPs;
- Informing policy decisions regarding the design and implementation of appropriate educational opportunities in ASPs for urban families; and
- Advancing research in the fields of public education, extended-day learning, and ASP activities.



Target Cities, Population & ASPs

The following criteria were used to select participating cities for this study: (1) the number of Black residents in the city; (2) the number of Black children enrolled in the city's public school system; (3) the diversity of ASPs; and (4) the existence of a local BAEO chapter. Based on these criteria, Detroit, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. were selected as target cities.

Participants in this study are low-income and working-class Black parents with at least one child or adolescent in grades 1-12 enrolled in an ASP during one or more of the following time cycles: 2006 spring semester, 2006 summer months, and/or the 2006-2007 school year. In order to participate in the study, parents had to meet the following criteria:

- Must live in a target city;
- Have a family income of less than \$50,000 a year; and
- Have a child or an adolescent enrolled in an ASP during the approved time cycle.

ASPs parents identified for their child's or adolescent's involvement include public school site-based ASPs, the Boys & Girls Club, YM/WCA, and the Police Athletic League (P.A.L.). Other nonprofit ASPs include the Beacon House in Washington, D.C., Education Works in Philadelphia, and Think Detroit PAL. Family-focused community-based organizations include the Perry School Community Service Center in Washington, D.C., Southeastern Village in Detroit, and COA Youth & Family Centers in Milwaukee. Gender specific ASPs such as Life Pieces to Masterpieces in Washington, D.C., and cultural heritage ASPs such as the African American Children's Theater in Milwaukee, are also represented within this study. Examples of ASP activities offered include academic tutoring,¹ chess and poetry clubs, team sports, financial management, and African dance and drum.

Overall, Black parents constitute over 95% of study participants. The remaining participants describe themselves as African, Caribbean, Hispanic/Latino, or other. Approximately 70% of the study participants are mothers, 12% are fathers, 11% are grandparents, 5% are aunts or uncles, and the remainder identify as "other." Nearly 50% of parents work full- or part-time, and most earn \$20,000 or less annually. Approximately 60% reported they rent their residence, and nearly half are single. Almost one third of the parents surveyed report completing some college coursework.

It is worth noting that parents in this study represent various zip code tracts in each city. Participating Detroit parents, for example, live in 77% of the city's zip code tracts, and Washington, D.C. parents live in 50% of the district's zip code tracts. Although one-third of the available zip code tracts in Milwaukee and Philadelphia are represented in this study, these zip code tracts are located in sections of each city with the highest concentration of Black residents. Principal investigators were careful to identify a broad cross section of Black representation from each city to minimize error and bias.

¹Supplementary Education Services (SES) outlined in NCLB were not a target ASP activity for this study. Private, for-profit tutoring service providers received the same treatment.

Research Design & Findings

Results of this study are based on data obtained from 407 Black mothers, fathers, grandparents and other care-giving adults to which the study refers to broadly as parents.² Each parent completed a two-page questionnaire and participated in one of forty-six focus group meetings held in Detroit, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. between November 2006 and March 2007. Section one of the questionnaire obtained background information about the parent, and section two obtained information about the child's ASP. As for the focus groups, each lasted nearly one hour. Focus groups represented a key component of this study because they offered access to Black parents' opinions about ASPs, and they allowed common and contradictory themes to emerge during the question and answer period. Data from the parent questionnaire and focus group meetings tell a fascinating story about the role ASPs play in the lives of Black families and children in four urban cities. Parents' responses provided the following answers to our research questions and each response is ranked in order of frequency.

What do Black parents believe is the purpose of an ASP?

Parents believe an ASP provides their child or adolescent with the following services:

- Homework assistance and individualized tutoring, particularly in reading and mathematics
- A safe environment away from negative influences
- A stimulating atmosphere where their child or adolescent can experience art, music, and dance
- An opportunity to learn leadership and decision-making skills
- Increased likelihood for academic and lifelong success
- Constructive activities while parents work
- Fun activities that counterbalance the academic focus of the school day

Overall, parents hoped to see the program improve their child's academic motivation, school engagement and bonding, and achievement. For example, parents wanted their children to earn better grades and improve their behavior (in and outside of school) as a result of participating in an ASP. According to one parent, the "[Afterschool program] gives them not only the academic help they need, it gives them the social skills that they need. It gives them something to look forward to. They have a positive reason to come to school."

What outcomes are Black parents looking for from an ASP?

Parents seek the following outcomes from ASPs:

- Better grades in school
- Better attitude by learning discipline
- Greater maturity
- Broader exposure to diverse peers and experiences
- Increased exposure to male role models

The role model factor was a consistent theme in each city, most particularly the importance of having adult male involvement in ASPs. For a Philadelphia mother, having male role models at an ASP played an important factor in her decision-making process to enroll her

² **Black** is used in this study in place of African-American to encompass people of African descent who are not American by birth, citizenship, or nationality (though some Blacks in the study identified as African). **Parent** in this study means a biological parent, a legal guardian, or a primary-care giving adult who has a blood or non-blood relationship with a child or adolescent enrolled in an afterschool program. A **Black parent** with an income that qualifies her or his child or adolescent for a free- or reduced-priced lunch is considered **low-income** for this study. The definition for working class is more fluid; therefore, a **Black parent** with an income between \$25,000 and \$50,000 is considered **working-class** for this study.

son. "I like the male influence," she said. "A lot of us don't have men at home for some children and the mentoring is really important." Mothers, aunts, and grandmothers in other cities expressed similar statements.

What do Black parents say makes an ASP weak or strong?

Parents say a weak ASP includes the following traits:

- Staff show little interest in their job or students
- Lack of consistency (e.g., with applying rewards and discipline)
- Lack of parental involvement
- Lack of adult supervision
- Little or no structured activities
- Unruly children

Parents' recommendations for staff improvement included professional training, paying higher salaries, incorporating a better screening process, and getting parents involved.

Parents say a strong ASP includes the following traits:

- Well-trained and energetic staff and strong administrative leadership
- Children and adolescents are happy and engaged in ASP activities
- Appropriate balance between academics and fun
- Effective communication from leadership and staff to parents
- Close proximity to home, school or both
- Parental involvement encouraged

A Philadelphia mother said, "Great leadership first and foremost" is what makes an ASP strong. She also stated that while academics are important, a strong ASP should not focus solely on academics. "Academics is a part of it, but I think they get enough of that in school during the day. [S]o the afterschool part I think should be [geared] toward them with more [activities] like music and art and things along that line."

What ASP activities do Black parents say their child or adolescent likes and dislikes?

Parents named several ASP activities their child or adolescent enjoys:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dancing and hip hop classes• Arts and crafts• Team sports• Interaction with other students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Snacks• Computers• Field trips• Academics
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Socialization between children and broader peer groups represented an important out-of-school time activity for parents. For one Milwaukee mother in particular, her son's ASP fills a void in his home life. "Well, my son enjoys being around other kids. By him being the only child, it's hard for me, especially when I'm working...it's hard for me to give him that time. And since he's only around adults in my house, for him to be around other kids in a different environment other than school is important for him."

Parents named several aspects of the ASP environment their child or adolescent dislikes:

- Academics
- Being told what to do
- Being controlled
- Leaving the program (i.e., students want to stay longer)

FOUR EMERGING THEMES

Based on parent responses, principal investigators identified four general themes about ASPs: (1) barriers to ASP access; (2) an information gap between ASPs and parents; (3) quality matters; and (4) the power of listening.

Barriers to ASP Access

The access issue remains a proverbial thorn in the side of America's ASPs. Part of the challenge rests with how access is defined. For example, some in the ASP community believe access is not an issue because plenty of ASP seats remain underutilized by families everyday. Therefore, lack of parental engagement, not access, is the real issue. Others in the ASP community believe the opposite. Access is an issue even if ASP seats are available because parents have competing interests that make ASPs inaccessible. Still others say the empty seat metaphor is an inaccurate measure of access because it overlooks institutional barriers that impact meaningful access. For these reasons, access will remain a topic for debate for years to come. In regard to the parents in this study, they identified five barriers to access:

- An unwelcoming atmosphere
- Proximity from ASP to the home, school or both too far
- Lack of transportation
- Affordability
- Parental literacy

Parents suggested ASP leaders review their existing outreach campaigns to assess if they create or remove barriers to access.

Information Gap Between ASPs and Parents

Parents in this study primarily learned about ASPs from one of four sources:

- Word of mouth from other adults including parents, neighbors, or friends
- Their child and their child's friend(s) speaking favorably about the program
- School personnel
- Flyers

Although word of mouth is important, parents expressed a great deal of concern about the lack of a strong communication network to "get the word out" about ASPs. According to one mother, "I found out about [the] afterschool program through my son's friend referring my son to it. His friend actually went and got the application, gave it to my son, and told my son before I knew anything about the program." In each city, parents emphatically recommended that ASPs be advertised on at least one popular local radio station. "Every kid listens to the radio....Promote afterschool like you promote HIV protection," suggested one father.

Quality Matters

Parents define a quality ASP as having the following features:

- Well-trained and caring staff who have high expectations and also serve as counselors to their child
- A welcoming atmosphere that encourages both parent and child participation
- A defined schedule and structured activities
- Designated time for their child to complete homework assignments under the guidance of knowledgeable staff
- A curriculum that is fun and has children working on projects
- The presence of happy and engaged children

Parents viewed the best programs as those that provided family support, encouraged constructive use of time through homework completion and participation in creative activities, and increased their children's social competence. According to parents, a quality ASP "keeps kids focused on school." These programs "nurture the kid's gifts," "keep it positive," and have strong communication links with parents. As one mother stated, "When I see my child and other children in the program developing and maturing---academically, socially, and behaviorally---I know that the program is a quality one." In order to maintain quality ASPs, parents suggested the following:

- Provide more training for staff and engage parents
- Receive more federal and state funding
- Renovate facilities and expand the space allocated for the program
- Extend the hours of operation to include weekends
- Improve affordability by eliminating fees
- Improve accessibility by having an ASP available in every public school
- Encourage employers to provide incentives that enable parents to have their children participate in ASPs

The Power of Listening

The previous three themes address the organizational nature of an ASP. One of the most insightful aspects emerging from this study is the role focus groups play in offering parents a rare opportunity to speak about the human aspects of an ASP. This includes stories about the important role an ASP plays in the social life of urban families and in improving the chances that the cycle of poverty will be broken in this generation. Although this study is not the first to use focus groups, parents thanked researchers for taking the time to do something remarkably unique with the focus group: To listen to the real experts explain their ideas about ASP access, quality, and purpose. Parents were unanimous in their desire to have more opportunities to share their ideas. Parents also want to listen to ideas from staff and children regarding their experiences in an ASP. Parents suggested ASP leaders host three types of focus groups annually:

- Focus groups for parents
- Focus groups for staff and parents
- Focus groups for children and adolescents without parents and staff

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ASPs are more than a place for homework, a snack, and basketball to the parents who participated in this study. Parents articulated an intricate understanding of the need for ASPs and an unyielding hope that these programs will improve their children's life chances. Ultimately, parents believe that an ASP can "help us bring our kids out of poverty." And according to Black parents in this study, the following assets characterize the programs they seek in ASPs:

- **Commitment to learning**, which includes achievement, motivation, homework completion, school engagement, links to the school, reading for pleasure, and math competence
- **Constructive use of time**, which includes participation in creative and fun activities
- **Support**, which includes individualized attention, positive family communication, a caring environment, and positive adult relationships
- **Social competence**, which includes interpersonal competence, cultural competence, decision making, and conflict resolution
- **Boundaries and expectations**, which includes high expectations and adult role models
- **Positive identity**, which includes self-esteem, personal power, and a positive view of the future

NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The National Advisory Committee consists of a diverse group of four men and three women. The committee offered technical guidance and commentary to ensure that the project was conducted in a sound manner, and that the researchers utilized the best practices in the field. Each committee member brought to this study a unique understanding of Black and urban students' educational development, and the belief that ASPs are an important asset to our society.

Brodrick Clarke

D.C. Children & Youth Investment Trust Corporation (CYITC)

Dr. Grenaé Dudley

Executive Director, Mayor's Time in Detroit

Dwight Evans

State Representative (D-Philadelphia)

Dr. William G. Howell

Associate Professor, Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago

Dr. Robin Jarrett

Associate Professor of Human Development & Family Studies and African-American Studies, University of Illinois

Naryan David Leazer

Former Director of Pre-College Programs, Marquette University

Priscilla Little

Associate Director, Harvard Family Research Project

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

Gerard Robinson is a senior fellow at the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University. Prior to this position, he worked in state and local government, and was also a schoolteacher. Mr. Robinson earned a master of education degree from Harvard University, a bachelor of arts from Howard University, and an associate of arts from El Camino Community College.

Leslie Fenwick is an educator with nearly 20 years of experience in PK-12 schools, higher education, and educational policy. She is author of numerous research articles and policy monographs on the principalship and urban school reform. Dr. Fenwick earned a PhD in educational policy and leadership from The Ohio State University and a bachelor of arts degree in elementary education from the University of Virginia.

Black Alliance for Educational Options



Black Alliance for Educational Options

The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) is a national, nonprofit, non-partisan membership organization whose mission is to actively support parental choice to empower families and increase quality educational options for Black children. The origins of the organization were in the hearts and minds of the 150 participants attending the first Symposium on Educational Options for African Americans held in Milwaukee, WI hosted by the Institute for the Transformation of Learning (ITL) at Marquette University March 4-6, 1999. The enthusiasm shown at the meeting generated the idea of moving beyond a loose network of people exploring and advocating for parental choice to a national organization. This belief led to the gathering of a group of 50 dedicated and committed Black people at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. December 3-5, 1999 for the first organizing meeting of BAEO. The founders adopted the name of the organization, the mission statement and the general principles of the organization.

At a meeting immediately following the Second Annual Symposium, which was again hosted by ITL, about 90 of the 350 people who attended the symposium attended a post-symposium session to continue organizing BAEO. At this meeting, the first draft of the organization's bylaws was reviewed and the participants elected Dr. Howard Fuller as President of the Board (the title was later changed to Chair of the Board). After the meeting, a 29-member board was formed and met for the first time on June 17, 2000. The organization was officially launched with a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. on August 24, 2000. Since its formal launch, BAEO has grown to become the preeminent national organization for Black people who support educational options. BAEO has continued to grow and advance its mission. Since its launch in 2000, BAEO has:

- Located its national office in Washington D.C.;
- Continued to annually convene an informative, inspiring, and empowering symposium on educational options which has become the largest gathering of parental choice advocates in the country;
- Created the Bailey and Sullivan Leadership Institute to develop the next generation of leaders and advocates for the parental choice movement;
- Developed effective public information strategies to support parental choice initiatives;
- Mobilized the support of Black people to enact, sustain and/or expand parental choice programs;
- Organized chapters and cadres of supporters in cities and states throughout the United States;
- Conducted outreach programs in Milwaukee, Philadelphia and Detroit to inform parents of their rights to Supplementary Educational Services under the No Child Left Behind Act;

- Recruited supporters and influencers who hold a variety of positions in government and private sector organizations; and
- Facilitated the development of three high schools as a part of the Gates Foundation Small High School Initiative with plans to support the development of at least seven additional schools by 2009.

In carrying out its mission BAEO supports:

- Charter schools
- Home schooling
- Effective innovations in traditional public schools
- Privately financed scholarships
- Public-private partnerships
- Supplementary education programs
- Means tested tax-supported scholarships (vouchers)
- Means tested tax credits
- Virtual schools

BAEO is staunch in its belief that parental choice must be an integral part of any serious effort to reform education in America. BAEO firmly believes parental choice programs, which lead to the creation of quality educational options, not only rescue the children who can take advantage of such opportunities but also create powerful incentives for all schools, public and private, to improve. These twin measures of opportunity and improvement provide broad social and economic benefits for the children and families involved and for the entire community.