

# Pathways to Success for Youth: What Counts in After-School



**A Report of the Massachusetts  
Afterschool Research Study**

## **POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**



United Way  
of Massachusetts Bay

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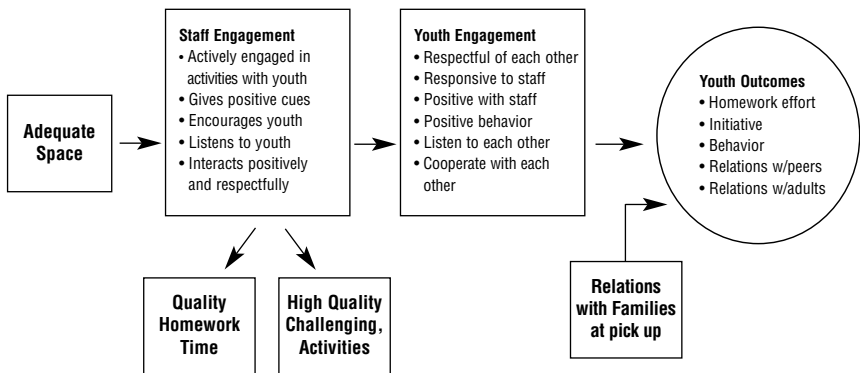
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# Introduction

The Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (MARS)<sup>1</sup> is the first study in Massachusetts to explore the relationships between afterschool program characteristics and program quality, as well as identify key quality components that help produce positive outcomes for youth. The findings should serve as a useful guide for policymakers as they work to better coordinate, expand, finance, and increase accessible, affordable, quality out-of-school programming for school-age children throughout the Commonwealth.

The major pathway uncovered by MARS was that staff engagement is significantly related to higher quality activities and homework assistance and is, in fact, the prerequisite for having fully engaged youth, which ultimately becomes the key factor leading to positive youth outcomes.



The results of MARS are particularly timely given the recent formation of the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), with its mandate to develop a comprehensive workforce development plan for both out-of-school time and early education and care, and the Afterschool & Out-of-School Time Commission. This brief explains the pathway and the components necessary for success.

# MARS Methodology

**MARS examines what really counts for kids in afterschool! For the first time, we have Massachusetts data that helps us to answer the following questions:**

- **What factors are likely to lead to high quality programs?**
- **Which aspects of programs are most likely to result in positive outcomes for youth?**

**MARS involved over 4100 children** in 78 afterschool programs from ten geographically and economically diverse school districts across the state, including urban, suburban and rural areas. Researchers visited each program in the fall of 2003 and again in the spring of 2004 to conduct interviews and observe the programs. The researchers collected a wealth of descriptive information about the programs as well as information about participating youth through surveys of teachers, afterschool staff, and the individual youth.

Participating program sites were those that generally receive funding from either the Massachusetts Office of Child Care Services (OCCS), the Massachusetts Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC), and/or a local United Way. A wide range of program models was included: programs located in the community and in schools, those run by community-based organizations and by schools, and faith-based programs. Programs had a wide variety of goals, activities, staffing and funding patterns, and served elementary and middle school youth.

## MARS Findings

# Staff Counts

**HOW DOES STAFF COUNT?** The education, compensation (salary and benefits), and retention of staff are key to afterschool program quality including the critical areas of staff and youth engagement. Not surprisingly, programs with more highly educated and better-paid staff had significantly better quality. The level of education of the program director and staff was related to positive change on many youth outcome measures. Yet, overall, only 48 percent of staff (22% in community-based programs) were reported to have a bachelor degree or higher.

The average pay for an afterschool teacher was just \$12.60 per hour and only 27 percent of programs reported providing health care benefits to staff. Low salaries, lack of benefits, and the predominance of part-time positions limit the number of qualified candidates and contribute to an exceptionally large turnover rate. Researchers also found that nearly one-quarter of afterschool program staff changed during the 2003-04 school year. As expected, higher staff turnover is associated with lower quality in programs. The percent of staff turnover was significantly related to youth engagement and homework outcomes.

Even among program director/coordinator positions, one-third were part-time jobs. MARS findings indicate that programs benefit from having a highly qualified coordinator or program director to set the tone for programming that promotes youth engagement, staff engagement, high quality activities and homework completion.

**WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS DO?**<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts needs to build on and connect existing resources to create a statewide, integrated system for developing the workforce for staff to serve all youth in after-school and out-of-school time programs. Policies and practices that increase compensation and retention of qualified staff are critical to ensuring that youth have consistent, supportive adults who implement high-quality programs.

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As such, Massachusetts should assess and improve its policies and practices around:

- **Afterschool and out-of-school time staff qualifications and training requirements**
- **Ongoing professional development opportunities**
- **Linking of compensation and advancement** toward achieving professional qualifications and/or degrees (for example, a phased-in approach that provides salary incentives and benefit enhancements that are earmarked within reimbursement rates and grants)
- **Creative strategies** that can increase the number of fulltime afterschool staff (for example, a unique model piloted by Citizen Schools, with United Way participation, creates a fulltime position by blending a morning position at a partner organization with an afternoon afterschool position)

In addition, a well-defined career pathway that specifies the various roles and qualifications leading to ongoing professional growth and movement will go a long way toward reducing turnover rates and attracting new staff to the field.

# Quality Counts

**HOW DOES QUALITY COUNT?** There are many studies and resources that examine what influences high-quality afterschool programming. MARS is unique in that it looks at the role that quality plays in creating positive results for youth. MARS also enables us, for the first time in Massachusetts, to understand more fully the relationship between program quality and program characteristics. Researchers found that the following characteristics were significantly associated with higher-quality program implementation, and also lead to positive youth outcomes:

- **Smaller group** sizes for activities
- **Lower staff-to-youth ratios**/fewer youth for each staff member
- **Emphasis on structured activities** and project-based approaches that are challenging and fun
- **Stronger connections** to school objectives
- **Better communications** with school teachers and principals
- **Well-organized programs** with clear routines
- **Better communications** with families
- **Practices** that lead to higher staff engagement
- **Practices** that lead to higher youth engagement

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In other words, MARS discovered a pathway to youth success where staff engagement leads to youth engagement, which in turn, leads to positive changes in youth outcomes.

MARS' observations showed that, generally, programs had a positive program climate with friendly, relaxed staff who were familiar with the youth, and youth were friendly with each other and displayed very few conflicts. At the same time, the study found that the field would benefit from increased training and technical assistance in a number of areas affecting quality. The following is a list of areas that are ripe for further discussion, planning and improvement:

- **The need for staff to facilitate** more youth engagement in learning by using facilitative questioning, group reflection, or project-based learning
- **The need to create opportunities** for youth leadership and peer learning
- **The importance of developing activities** that build on the cultural or ethnic backgrounds of the children attending the program
- **The significance of prior program planning** or intentionality with clear connections to themes or curricular goals.

**MARS measured whether higher quality programs would have more positive effects on youth outcomes. The youth outcomes examined were:**

- Homework Completion
- Initiative
- Behavior
- Relations with Peers
- Relations with Adults

**The quality indicators were:**

- Staff Engagement with Youth
- Youth Engagement
- High Quality, Challenging Activities
- Quality Homework Time
- Family Relationships at Pickup Time
- Appropriate Space

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**WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS DO?** Massachusetts should improve policies that help to create and sustain high quality afterschool programming. There are four areas to consider:

- 1. Core competencies for staff.** Since broad-based planning for professional development is now mandated for the first time in Massachusetts, policymakers should address the need for the field to have a systemic definition of required skills and knowledge for all roles and levels of responsibility. In developing such core competencies, research-based correlations between program quality and positive youth outcomes, such as the MARS findings, should be consulted, as well as relevant child and youth development and brain development research. These core competencies should then serve as the basis for credentials and degrees along a meaningful career pathway for afterschool and out-of-school time professionals.<sup>3</sup>
- 2. Higher education and professional development opportunities.** As discussed above, agreed-upon core competencies should provide the foundation for credentials and degrees within a career pathway. This career pathway should be linked to higher education, allowing staff to convert prior learning and future learning into credits and equivalencies, obtain credentials and degrees for job advancement, and pursue meaningful professional development opportunities. Course content and requirements should align with core competencies. Professional development offerings (both within and outside higher education institutions) should ensure that staff have the skills necessary to ensure high program quality. The state should consider establishing a scholarship fund to mobilize public and private resources for professional development and training.
- 3. Program standards.** Massachusetts should review its licensing provisions and develop program standards that take into account the program characteristics that lead to high-quality program delivery and positive youth outcomes. In addition, the state should support efforts for programs to seek national accreditation.

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#### **4. Program quality assessment and outcome measurement.**

Massachusetts should consider encouraging programs to use standardized, research-based tools to self-assess program quality and youth outcomes for continuous program improvement. The tools used in the MARS study are examples of a number of available research-based tools that could be used or modified for this purpose. The state could also partner with private funders of afterschool programs to develop common outcomes and a menu of acceptable tools to assess quality and track youth outcomes to reduce multiple reporting requirements.

## Communication with Families Counts

### **HOW DOES COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES COUNT?**

Research has found, time and time again, that strong relationships with caring adults are key to the healthy development and educational success of youth. MARS found that youth who showed the most improvement in their relationships with adults were significantly more likely to attend programs where there was good communication with parents at pickup time. MARS also showed that parent outreach and engagement strategies led to better relationships with adults in the program as well. Yet only 10 percent of program coordinators said they spoke with parents on a regular basis to provide updates. The most common reason that staff communicated with families was to discuss a problem, such as attendance or a behavioral issue.

**WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS DO?** Any program standards Massachusetts develops (discussed above) should specify expected levels and types of communication between afterschool staff and families to regularly discuss a child's progress including both strengths and challenges. In addition, such program standards should draw on the research available for best practices in engaging families. In implementing such guidelines, however, staff needs to be given support and resources such as adequate time as well as the skills to develop positive relationships with families on an ongoing basis.

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# Connections Between Schools & Afterschool Counts

**HOW DO CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND AFTERSCHOOL COUNT?** Programs reporting the strongest relationship with school teachers and principals (often, but not always facilitated by location at the school) had children who improved the most in four of the five areas that were examined: homework completion and effort, taking initiative, behavior in the program, and relations with their peers. In addition, programs with stronger connections to school had more engaging, challenging activities, higher staff engagement, and higher quality homework assistance. In these programs, staff attended school events, had regular meetings with school personnel, connected afterschool activities to school objectives and had good communications with school teachers and principals. It is important to note, however, that where a program was located—in a school or in the community—had no relationship to the quality of the programming it provided.

**WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS DO?** The Department of Education and EEC should collaborate to develop the resources and incentives needed to encourage school principals and teachers and afterschool staff to improve communications and relationships. Massachusetts should consider implementing strategies for linking these two distinct, yet related fields such as expanding the use of school-afterschool liaisons within school and afterschool programs. In addition, schools could be required to include afterschool staff, public as well as private, in their in-service learning and professional development activities and the state could require shared representation on each other's boards, working groups, and committees.



# Conclusion

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MARS is the first Massachusetts-based research to explore the relationships between afterschool program characteristics and program quality, as well as to identify key quality indicators that lead to positive outcomes for youth. In other words, we finally have the MARS research to tell us what really counts in creating successful afterschool programs: workforce requirements, quality program components, communication with families, and connections between schools and afterschool.

United Way of Massachusetts Bay wrote this brief for policy makers to consider as they work to improve afterschool and out-of-school time programming in the Commonwealth.

1. MARS was developed and funded by the United Way of Massachusetts Bay in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Education, the Massachusetts Office of Child Care Services, the Barr Foundation, and the Nellie Mae Foundation. The research was conducted by a team coordinated by John P. Zuman, Ph.D., of the Intercultural Center for Research in Education (INCRE) in Arlington, Massachusetts and Beth M. Miller, Ph.D., of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. This policy brief was prepared by Christie Getto Young, Senior Director of Public Policy and Lisa Silverman Pickard, Senior Director of Community Impact, both at United Way of Massachusetts Bay. It draws significantly from the findings reported in the MARS research. The Executive Summary and Brief Report can be found at [www.uwmb.org](http://www.uwmb.org).
2. Many of the policy recommendations included in this document are consistent with those recommended in the recently released report from The United Way of Massachusetts Bay, along with the Schott Foundation for Public Education, *Making it Work: Creating a Professional Development System in Massachusetts for the Early Education and Care and Out-of-School Time Workforce*.
3. Progress in this area is already underway with DOE, EEC, and DPH collaborating with others.

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