



American Youth
Policy Forum

Afterschool and Workforce: Bridging Systems to Serve Older Youth

July 18, 2017

Discussion Group Summary

Meeting Overview

In our efforts to better prepare young people for success in postsecondary education, careers, and civic life, we must create a range of learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. Some communities and programs effectively leverage partnerships between afterschool systems and workforce systems to provide an array of connections to workplace skills, career exploration, and work experience for older youth. Yet too often, these systems operate in isolation, failing to take advantage of the shared goals and mutually beneficial expertise in exposing students to critical skills and competencies needed in the workforce. Despite this general disconnect, innovations exist across the country in effectively leveraging afterschool as part of a collective community agenda to prepare youth for long-term success.

On July 18, 2017, the American Youth Policy Forum convened representatives of national organizations, research institutions, and city, state, and national leaders to share expertise, build relationships, and identify questions about effective collaboration between afterschool and workforce systems. More specifically, participants:

- Explored the connection between skills and competencies fostered in afterschool settings and those needed by the workforce, including 21st century/employability skills, technical skills, STEM skills, literacy skills, etc.;
- Discussed the ways in which afterschool and workforce systems can provide opportunities to develop those skills through working collaboratively;
- Identified the benefits of coordination/alignment to both afterschool and workforce systems; and
- Learned about successes and challenges from communities working to connect afterschool and workforce systems.

Building a Framework

To launch the meeting, AYPF shared its framing and rationale behind the benefits of coordination and alignment, emphasizing that both afterschool and workforce systems are critical components of a [broader youth-serving ecosystem](#).

Aligning the variety of resources youth need to achieve success in school, the workplace, and their communities requires careful systems coordination. Within the broader youth-serving ecosystem, the conversation was narrowed to focus solely on afterschool and workforce systems¹, though collaboration with various other systems, including schools, is necessary. While extensive work has examined the connections between schools and afterschool programs and between schools and workforce systems, less credence has been given to the potential links between afterschool and the workforce. This “missing piece” to the puzzle represents an important opportunity for further work, especially given the many resources contained within the afterschool sector.

Defining “Afterschool”

For the purpose of this brief, the term “afterschool” is inclusive of all out-of-school time activities, including before and after school programs, summer programs, and expanded learning activities.

¹ [Afterschool systems](#) are defined as coordinated approaches to promote access to high-quality programs for all youth within a given community; [workforce systems](#) similarly are categorized as networks of entities that function to develop a future workforce equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Identifying opportunities for afterschool and workforce system alignment

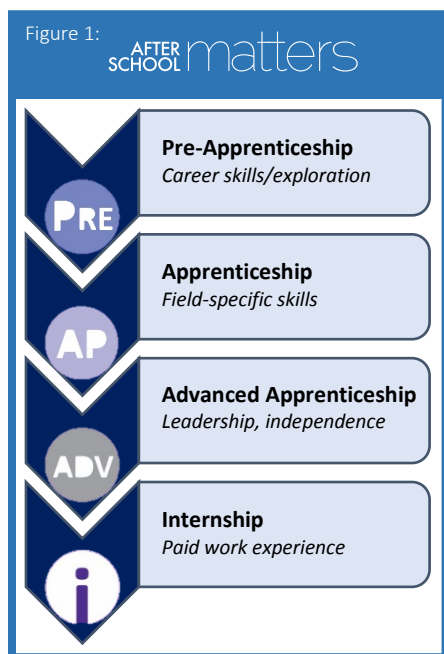
Employers have clearly articulated the skills they most value and have expressed concerns about a gap between the skills emphasized in formal and informal learning environments versus the skills [employers expect](#). In order to better prepare today’s youth for the 21st century workforce, explicit training is needed in non-academic skills such as those emphasized in the [Employability Skills Framework](#) created through a joint effort of the US Departments of Education and Labor. Skills like creativity, communication, and collaboration, along with technical skills and academic knowledge, are increasingly being viewed as essential competencies. In response, youth development experts are [operationalizing these skills](#) from an educational standpoint. Action and reflection are particularly important steps in employability skill building, and afterschool provides an array of opportunities and experiences for young people to develop and internalize these skills.

Participants responded to the framing by noting that coordination of afterschool and workforce systems may serve as a powerful promoter of equity. High youth unemployment rates disproportionately affect the poorest youth, denying them the same access to labor market resources as their middle class peers. Building workforce skills in afterschool settings promotes equity in access to critical pre-employment experiences.

City Level Collaboration in Action: After School Matters, Chicago

Michael Crowley, Director of Policy and Communications, After School Matters

To ground theory in practice, Michael Crowley shared the work of [After School Matters \(ASM\)](#), the out-of-school-time (OST) intermediary in Chicago, IL, in coordinating with local employers to give 16,000 teens access to labor market experiences each year. After School Matters aims to prepare students to “discover their potential and find their future” – a mission that stems from a deep commitment to fostering youth development.



One of the key domains ASM’s program model emphasizes is *occupational development*, which they define as “experiencing satisfaction and enrichment from work while planning the steps necessary to achieve work goals in the future.” In order to inspire Chicago teens to develop their occupational interests, ASM has developed a program framework that helps youth develop the employability skills needed to thrive in the labor market, culminating in paid professional internships. Starting at age 14, youth are offered scaffolded experiences to move from career exploration to skill mastery (see Figure 1). ASM strikes a balance between creating programs that help teens gain advanced skills in fields they are passionate about, while also ensuring the skills gained are useful for participants who decide to pursue other career tracks. In this program, workforce development is not an add-on, but an integral part of the youth development model.

These initiatives have had a proven impact on a broad range of desired youth outcomes related to success in school, employment, and beyond. ASM participants are more likely to be on track academically at the end of freshman year, have higher school attendance rates, are more likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary educational opportunities than their non-participating counterparts. By connecting teens to employment opportunities and immersing them in the workplace, ASM helps inspire dreams for future careers, motivating students to achieve in school and life.

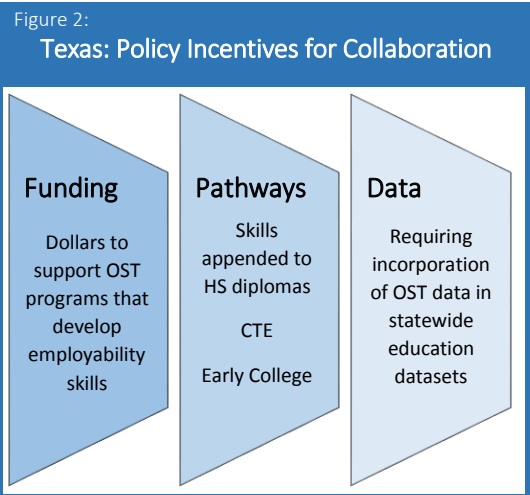
Looking to the future, Crowley emphasized the need for ASM to continue to enhance its partnerships with local employers, which make possible the organization’s occupational development efforts. While ASM focuses on five core program components – to advocate for teens, build opportunities through partnerships, disseminate best practices for out-of-school time, showcase teen accomplishments, and engage teens in working towards higher education and careers – Crowley believes advocacy and engagement are the most critical in expanding afterschool and workforce system collaboration. On the one hand, afterschool programs must create opportunities that students are excited about and see the value in. Content must balance fun, career exploration, and skill building to get students excited to learn. On the other hand, the afterschool system must prove itself invaluable to the workforce. Leveraging the program’s alumni relationships may be one way to facilitate these partnerships, as individuals who have personally benefitted from ASM programming have the opportunity to give back. Further bridging afterschool and workforce systems promises expanded benefits for the youth of Chicago, as well as the local workforce.

State Level Policy and Coordination: Texas

Alison Reis-Khanna, Executive Director, TXPOST

Alison Reis-Khanna, the executive director of the Texas statewide afterschool network, [The Texas Partnership for Out-of-School Time \(TXPOST\)](#), highlighted the evidence for the effectiveness of statewide advocacy and policy work in facilitating afterschool and workforce collaboration. Before diving into the specific work of TXPOST, Reis-Khanna provided important background information on the context of both the political climate and economy of Texas. Within the state, a strong pro-business attitude and the presence of 49 STEM-related Fortune 500 companies incentivizes policies that promote workforce development, especially programs that prepare youth for employment in the science and technology sectors. Similarly, TXPOST emphasizes these goals in fulfilling its two primary functions: (1) collaborating with policymakers to advocate for the role of afterschool in promoting workforce development in state policy, and (2) facilitating systems coordination with regional partners throughout the state.

By incentivizing collaboration between diverse learning environments and industry, recent changes in Texas legislation have begun to codify the connections between afterschool and workforce systems (see Figure 2). In 2013, [HB 5](#) enabled afterschool programs to play a role in facilitating students on pathways from secondary education to careers. The bill appended “endorsement



areas” (like STEM, business and industry, and public service) to high school diplomas, which OST providers may help their program participants obtain. Funding and data management opportunities have also been achieved through policy. The [Texas Workforce Commission](#) provides over one million dollars for STEM summer camps on college campuses, while [SB 1404](#) requires the inclusion of afterschool and summer program data in the statewide Public Education Information Management System (PIEMS) for all programs held within public school buildings. Currently, TXPOST is promoting the role of afterschool programs in fulfilling the objectives of improving career and technical education (CTE) under [HB 3593](#), as well as supporting the mission of the newly created [Pathways in Technology Early College High School](#) (P-TECH). Through this work, TXPOST aims to leverage Texas education policy to facilitate stronger connections between afterschool and workforce systems.

In addition, TXPOST is working to highlight successful examples of systems bridging throughout the state, while continuing to think deeply about how this work can be improved and expanded to more Texas cities moving forward. Reis-Khanna focused on two specific programs during the discussion: [Code2College](#) and the supplementary internship program at [San Juan Diego High School](#), both in the Austin, Texas area. Code2College provides afterschool programming for low-income high school students, exposing them to career exploration and skill development with experts from tech moguls like Facebook and Google, and connecting them to 6-week internship placements over the summer. This program operates within the context of Austin’s thriving tech industry, which increasingly demands young talent equipped with STEM skills, soft skills, and technical competencies like coding. San Juan Diego High School uses 21st CCLC dollars to fund a program that runs partially during the school day and partially outside of it, ensuring 100% of students gain internship experience at least one day a week. However, in describing these programs, Reis-Khanna emphasized the unique circumstances that make them possible – Wall Street funders for Code2College, and private school flexibility for San Juan Diego High School. She posed critical questions to the group about how these innovative partnerships between afterschool and workforce systems might be promoted more systematically, and how they might better incorporate CTE, respond to regional economies, and balance the complementary goals of career awareness and workforce development.

Group Discussion: Emerging Themes and Questions

Following these presentations, panelists, respondents, and participants discussed the key challenges associated with afterschool and workforce system alignment.

Intersystem communication: A case of shared vision, but different languages?

A recurring theme revolved around dialogue between systems. The group generally believed that afterschool and workforce development systems shared common goals, but often struggled to communicate these commonalities due to semantic differences. Key phrases like “skill development,” “employability skills,” and “21st century skills” were emphasized as links between the systems. In contrast, talking with individual business owners about the big picture of “statewide workforce development” often backfired, as employers preferred to discuss direct benefits for their companies. Explicitly stating the connections between afterschool systems and training future employees, equipped with the skills desired by local businesses, proved more successful. There may also be potential to build off existing conversations between schools and workforce leaders –particularly positioning afterschool systems as a means to expand capacity to help older youth gain workforce skills. Strategic intersystem communication is a clear lever for effective collaboration.

In addition, intentionally building shared vocabulary around goals between afterschool and workforce providers might improve the definition and measurement of employability competencies – including both soft and hard skills. Participants emphasized the importance of local conversations, and the example of the [Connecting Activities](#) initiative in Massachusetts was presented, showing how two systems (in this case, public schools and workforce development) can work together to define mutually desired 21st century outcomes. Questions about scale of partnerships and the logistics of skill measurement were raised for further consideration.

Career and technical education: Should programs build generalizable competencies or specific skill sets?

The group also questioned where career and technical education fits within broader afterschool and workforce system alignment. CTE aims to connect what happens inside and outside of the classroom, and has long partnered with both afterschool and workforce development systems. In particular, career and technical student organizations ([CTSOs](#)) were discussed as important intermediaries, as they extend student learning outside the classroom through connections to industry leaders. However, the balance of training in specific career and technical skills versus generalizable soft skills remained a point of debate.

Perceptions: What do we expect from afterschool, youth, and employers?

Lastly, the group discussed the importance of broader societal perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of afterschool providers, youth, and employers. Below are a few questions to that end that AYPF will continue to explore:

- Is teaching employability skills enough, or do students need instruction in demonstrating and articulating the skills they already possess?
- Is there a role for advocacy by the afterschool sector on behalf of the skills the emerging workforce already brings to the table?
- To what extent are employers responsible for articulating and fostering skills needed in their future workforce?
- How are youth and youth-serving systems learning about the skills employers desire?

Next Steps

The discussion group highlighted both the opportunities of afterschool and workforce collaboration, as well as the lingering questions. As ESSA state plans are implemented and Congress debates the reauthorization of the Perkins Act, the American Youth Policy Forum is continuing to work to understand how to best capitalize on these intersystem opportunities. In a forthcoming white paper, AYPF will provide considerations for practitioners and policymakers at the local, state, and federal level to better integrate the work of afterschool and workforce systems.