![AIR logo — Advancing Evidence. Improving Lives.]

Recognizing the Role of Research and Evidence

What does the research say about afterschool and summer programming?

In Guide 1 in this series, we defined key terms you might see in the federal relief plans. **Research** focuses on increasing knowledge through rigorously designed studies of implementation and outcomes, whereas **evidence** focuses on the extent to which outcomes are improving, for which students, and under which circumstances. In this guide, we describe what we know from decades of research on afterschool and summer learning programs. Understanding the research is a critical first step in ensuring afterschool and summer programs can design, implement, and continuously improve effective programs for youth, families, and communities.

As the country continues to reopen and rebuild, many policymakers, educators, families, and young people are focused on responding to the challenges of the past year like loss of instructional time, disengagement from school, and trauma.

Fostering academic, social, and emotional learning and development in safe and supportive spaces is a hallmark of afterschool and summer programs, which puts these programs in a unique position to support young people, families, and communities in responding to these challenges. As Linda Darling-Hammond wrote recently, we must respond to learning loss "concerns based not on outdated notions about remediation, but on what we now know [from the science of learning and development] about how people learn effectively." It is clear from ongoing guidance and funding directives from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) that afterschool and summer programs are fundamental to our collective response to these challenges and goals to "build back better."

The federal guidance specifies evidence-based comprehensive programming—in other words, programming that provides a safe and healthy environment for learning and development, meets individual needs, and supports a well-rounded education. A well-rounded education is one that includes core academic subjects (e.g., reading, language arts, mathematics), other disciplines (e.g., music, arts, computer science), and social and emotional learning and development.

Comprehensive programming is critical: young people will not see short-term gains or long-term improvements unless we build on their strengths and fully meet their needs. The many benefits associated with afterschool and summer programs are driven by this comprehensive approach. Well-designed and well-implemented programs have the potential to increase young people's sense of belonging and self-worth; facilitate their development of new interests, sense of agency, and positive self-concept; and encourage them to engage in positive relationships with others. Benefits like this support re-engagement and can accelerate learning.

Extensive research related to afterschool and summer programming, the science of learning and development, social and emotional learning, and trauma-informed care has elevated what matters most for equitable and transformative learning that fosters the conditions under which youth thrive.

In the sections that follow, we summarize what we know from decades of research and the key takeaways for afterschool and summer program implementation.

What does the research say?	How do afterschool and summer programs create the conditions in which youth thrive?

Context matters.

Learning and development does not happen in isolation. Individuals grow and develop in context (i.e., situation), and their context is a key driver of their development.[1] Afterschool and summer programs are connected to families and communities in important ways, and programs are trusted partners that understand and can elevate context (e.g., culture, lived experiences, community norms, values) to inform practice.[2]

Citations: [1] American Institutes for Research (2019), Osher et al. (2018); [2] Anderson-Butcher (2010)

Afterschool and summer programs provide experiences that reflect the culture, assets, and resources of the community. Programs should ensure that their program model, activities, and plans take context into consideration. To do so, programs can gather data; elevate youth, family, and community voice; and design program components with this goal in mind. Partnering with families is essential. Programs should find ways to elevate family voices, take their needs and assets into account, and provide them with resources and strategies to support their children's learning and development.

Adults matter.

Caring, well-trained adults make a difference in the lives of young people because they can create supportive spaces that are identity-safe and promote a sense of belonging.[3] Ongoing opportunities for professional development and self-assessment as part of a continuous quality improvement process are linked to improved program quality overall. Moreover, research shows that educator well-being is essential to their ability to support young people. In fact, socially and emotionally competent educators are better able to develop supportive relationships and to foster youth social and emotional learning and development.[4]

It is essential that programs hire well-trained adults and that there are ongoing opportunities for professional learning and development. In addition, addressing the needs of all educators must be a priority for afterschool and summer programs. These include basic needs, social and emotional needs, and the knowledge and skills that staff need to provide programming effectively. Programs should build in opportunities for staff meetings, discussions, and wellness.

Citations: [3] Deutsch (2017), Eccles and Gootman (2002), Garst et al. (2019), Mahoney and Warner (2014), Newman (2020), Starr and Gannett (2017), Vandell and Lao (2016); [4] Jennings and Greenberg (2009), Newman (2020), Smith et al. (2012)

Relationships matter.

Relationships are essential because they create a sense of safety, build trust, and foster resilience. Trust, in turn, mitigates stress, trauma, and other adverse experiences, which creates an environment in which humans are better able to learn and develop.[5]

Citations: [5] American Institutes for Research (2019), Darling-Hammond et al. (2019), Osher et al. (2018), Risisky et al. (2019)

Relationship-building is a hallmark of afterschool and summer programming and the foundation for creating a safe and supportive learning environment. It is essential to design and plan for an environment and activities that foster strong relationships. When planning, it is important to remember that relationships exist among staff, between staff and youth, and among youth as well as with families and the community at large.

Safe and supportive environments matter.

Afterschool and summer programs provide developmentally rich, identity-safe, and supportive learning environments that meet the many needs young people have—from basic needs like food, water, and a safe space, to social and emotional needs for connection, self-efficacy, and agency. The more thoroughly youth connect and engage with the program, the more likely they will be to develop the skills, knowledge, or beliefs the program aims to foster.[6]

The content and structure of a program's activities must be designed in a way that promotes safety and creates a warm and welcoming space for all. Adults are critical to fostering and sustaining the learning environments through practices that support positive relationships, behavior, and engagement.

Citations: [6] Kauh (2011), Perkins et al. (2018), Smith et al. (2012)

Attendance and engagement matter.

The more frequently youth participate in quality afterschool programming, the more they benefit. Most evaluations on afterschool and summer programming have demonstrated increasingly positive effects with greater levels of attendance. In research on afterschool programs, this threshold for impact is around 60 days of attendance or more. Research suggests that attending summer learning programs for at least 20 days each summer for at least two summers may yield greater benefits. Attendance is important, but in addition to being present, young people also need to be engaged in their learning and development.[7]

Citations: [7] Huang et al. (2007), McCombs et al. (2017), McCombs et al. (2020), Naftzger et al. (2013)

Strong attendance, retention, and active participation are more likely to result in positive outcomes. Programs should identify ways to encourage strong participation while ensuring that policies remain flexible and creative. In fact, flexible design options—like a 2x2 schedule, a 4-day option, and full-time programming—might increase participation. Youth are more likely to attend an afterschool or summer program if they enjoy being there and feel like they are benefitting from it. Afterschool and summer programs have opportunities to enrich learning in fun and innovative ways that school-day educators might not, so creativity and alignment across learning settings is essential. Active and hands-on learning is key and might include project-based learning, group work, field trips, and service projects, for example.

Learning and development matter (and are not separate).

Studies of afterschool and summer programs have demonstrated a litany of positive outcomes including the following:

- Engagement in school
- Improved school-day attendance
- Fewer unexcused absences
- Fewer disciplinary referrals
- Improved academic performance
- Reduced behavior problems
- Improved social skills[8]

Programs must be intentional in the outcomes they aim to achieve by naming these outcomes explicitly and then ensuring that programming (e.g., the environment, activities) supports the attainment of those outcomes. (Think of it this way: you get out what you put in.) There are many ways that afterschool and summer programs can positively impact young people, but programs must be intentional in how they support those goals if they are to truly realize the benefits.

Citations: [8] David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (2019); Durlak et al. (2010), Lauer et al. (2006), McCombs et al. (2017), McCombs et al. (2020), Naftzger et al. (2013), Naftzger et al. (2014), Naftzger et al. (2020), Vandell et al. (2007), Vinson et al. (2019)

What's next?

Guide 3 in this series aims to demystify what evidence-based means for afterschool and summer learning programs, and the Guide 4 provides strategies—including how to create a logic model—to leverage the historic investment in afterschool and summer programs. Use these guides together to ensure that programs are grounded in the research and driving toward the evidence in support of comprehensive programming.

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