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After School Programs as an Oasis of Help for Black Parents

Gerard Robinson discusses how and why low-income and working-class Black parents are involved in enrolling their children in after school programs.

Many low-income and working-class Black families in urban areas consider after school programs (ASPs) an extension of home—a place where caring adults can nurture a child's talents or provide a positive influence. ASPs broaden the positive influences on a child to include not just family members but members of the larger community. Indeed, ASPs are one of many community-building strategies that parents in poor neighborhoods use to educate successful children.¹

ASPs represent an important avenue for family involvement in the lives of children, especially low-income and minority children. The simple fact of enrolling a child in an ASP requires family involvement. When a family enrolls a child in an ASP, the family identifies the programs and opportunities that can supplement the child's education and thereby enhance her or his academic, social, and emotional development. ASPs also offer opportunities for parents to communicate with educators, interact with their children, volunteer, and get involved in other ways.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that ASPs have a positive impact on the academic and social well-being of low-income and minority children, families, and communities.² However, access to after school care poses significant challenges for many Black families.³ Minority and poor parents often express dissatisfaction with the quality and availability of ASPs.⁴

The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization whose mission is to actively support parental choice in order to empower families and increase quality educational options for Black children. For BAEO, creating educational options, such as ASPs, that foster family involvement is essential. Central to creating such opportunities is learning about how Black families choose and assess ASPs.

With financial support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, BAEO conducted a study of low-income and working-class Black families in Detroit, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, to understand the factors that influence parents' ASP choices, the ways parents assess ASPs' quality and availability, and how parents define a positive ASP experience. Results of this study are based on data obtained from 407 Black mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other adult caregivers, to whom the study refers broadly as parents. Nearly 50% of parents work full or part-time, and most earn \$20,000 or less annually. Approximately 60% reported that they rent their residence, and nearly half are single. Each parent completed a two-page questionnaire and participated in one of 46 focus group meetings conducted between November 2006 and March 2007. Parents

provided the following answers, presented in the order of frequency they occurred in response to each research question:

What is the purpose of an ASP? What outcomes are parents looking for? Parents say the purpose of an ASP is to provide homework assistance and individualized tutoring, a safe environment away from negative influences, and opportunities to learn leadership and decision-making skills. Parents want children to earn better grades in school, show greater maturity, and obtain broader exposure to diverse peers and experiences, as well as to positive male role models. As one Philadelphia mother explained, “A lot of us don’t have men at home for some children, and the mentoring [provided by APSs] is really important.”

What makes an ASP a strong, quality program? A weak ASP, according to parents surveyed, includes employees who show little interest in their job or students, inconsistency with applying rewards and discipline, and no parental involvement. A strong ASP includes well-trained and energetic staff, strong administrative leadership, and an appropriate balance between academics and fun. A quality program has a welcoming atmosphere that encourages parent and child participation, a defined schedule, structured activities, and happy and engaged children.

What do Black parents consider barriers to ASP enrollment? Parents reported that lack of transportation, affordability, and proximity of the ASP to the home, school, or both are barriers. Parental illiteracy is also a barrier.

What do Black parents recommend ASP leaders do to inform the community about ASPs? Parents primarily learned about ASPs by word of mouth from other adults, their children and their children’s friends, school personnel, and flyers. Parents surveyed recommended that ASPs advertise on at least one popular local radio station to ensure broader awareness of available programs.

Parents believe that strong, quality ASPs can, in the words of one parent, “help us bring our kids out of poverty.” To promote the creation of such programs—and with them, much-needed parent–ASP partnerships—BAEO will continue to support family involvement in ASPs through this study and other initiatives. At the same time, to ensure that low-income and minority families have access to the ASPs they need, BAEO will encourage our partners and stakeholders to continue investing in the human and financial capital necessary to support family-friendly ASPs in urban America.

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1. Jarrett, R. L. (1999, Fall). Successful parenting in high-risk neighborhoods. *The Future of Children: When School Is Out*, 9, 45–50.
2. For example, see Posner, J. K., & Vandell, D. L. (1999, May). After-school activities and the development of low-income urban children: A longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology*, 35, 868–879; Kakli, Z., Kreider, H., Little, P., Buck, T., & Coffey, M. (2006). *Focus on families! How to build and support family-centered practices in after school*. Cambridge and Boston, MA: Harvard Family Research Project and Build the Out-of-School Time Network.
3. Roehlkepartain, E., Mannes, M., Scales, P., Lewis, S., & Bostrom, B. (2004). *Building strong families 2004: A study of African American and Latino/Latina parents in the United States*. Chicago, IL: YMCA of the USA and Search Institute.
4. Duffett, A., & Johnson, J. (2004). *All work and no play? Listening to what kids and parents really want from out-of-school time*. New York: Public Agenda.