



**NJSACC, the Network for New Jersey's  
Afterschool Communities**

231 North Avenue West, #363  
Westfield, NJ 07090

[www.njsacc.org](http://www.njsacc.org)



## **Children and Nature: Get the Facts**

### **High quality afterschool programs improve learning**

Educational researcher Reginald Clark has documented that economically disadvantaged children who participate from 20 to 35 hours per week in constructive learning activities during their free time get better grades in school than their more passive peers. A healthy discussion with knowledgeable adults or peers, strategy games, writing, homework, hobbies, chores, museum visits, theatre, movies and sports all contributed to their success.((i))

Researchers from Harvard Family Research Project's ten-year study revealed that participation in afterschool programs is associated with higher educational aspirations, lower drop-out rates, better academic performance in school and improved engagement in learning. They noted social and developmental gains as well and concluded that afterschool programs are linked to increased self-esteem, lower levels of depression and anxiety and decreased behavior problems.((ii))

### **Americans overwhelmingly support publicly funded afterschool programs**

In a nationwide survey, an overwhelming 92% of voters said that there should be some type of organized activity or place for children and teens to go after school every day, and two-thirds of voters expressed their belief that Federal or state tax dollars should be used to expand daily afterschool programs and to make them accessible to all children.((iii)) Educators and parents are not alone in their belief that we need better afterschool opportunities. Public officials recognize the need as well. In a 2003 survey, leaders in 65% of America's large cities said that their municipalities were providing direct afterschool services, as compared to 49% seven years ago.((iv))

### **New Jersey is a leader in state funding for afterschool programs.**

The State of New Jersey funds afterschool programs through two programs: New Jersey After 3 and Family Friendly Learning Centers. New Jersey After 3 receives \$15 million annually to support programs that reach 15,000 children. Family Friendly Centers are funded at \$2.5 million annually to fund 66 afterschool programs.

**But more is needed. New Jersey students are still underserved when it comes to high quality afterschool programs.((v))**

- There are 1,523,773 school-age children in New Jersey. 23% or 350,468 K-12 youth are unsupervised after school.
- Only 12% or 182,853 of New Jersey's K-12 youth are able to participate in afterschool programs.
- 28% of all children not in afterschool would be likely to participate if an afterschool program were available.
- Nearly 20,170 of New Jersey children are counting on the programs supported by the U.S. Department of Education's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers initiative, the only federal program dedicated to afterschool.
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- If the No Child Left Behind Act was fully funded by the federal government, New Jersey communities could have double the number of afterschool programs, giving nearly 50,060 children a safe place to go after school.

### **A capsule view of a New Jersey state-funded afterschool programs**

New Jersey After 3 is involved in a statewide initiative to improve and expand afterschool opportunities for New Jersey children. Funded at \$15 million, New Jersey After 3 reaches 14,000 students, a small percentage of New Jersey students, but it offers a case study in the impact and potential of afterschool.

An evaluation by Policy Studies Associates reports the results after one year. Findings include:

Active participation is key to the success of an afterschool program. Attendance at NJA3 programs average 73%. 84% of NJA3 programs had an average attendance rate of 60% or higher. Older students attended the programs with less regularity than younger students did. 84% of the 11,108 students enrolled in NJA3 are minority, including 34% that were Hispanic, and 49% that were African-American.

100% of NJA3 programs offer homework help -- 1 to 5 hours per week. 86% of students reported the program helped them finish their homework more often. "Highly active" students scored higher on the academic benefits scale than peers who did not attend as often.

Students were identified as "highly active" if they attended a NJ After 3 program for at least 80 days and attended at least 80 percent of the days that they were enrolled in the program during the school year

School attachment is associated with student academic success and avoidance of destructive behaviors (e.g. fights, drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity). At New Jersey

After 3, 91% of students felt safe in the program. 87% felt like they belonged. 86% felt successful. 85% felt staff cared about them.

### **The challenges at stake for students today**

- Non-school hours represent the single largest block of time in the lives of American children and youth. About 40% of waking hours are discretionary – not committed to other activities such as school, homework, meals, chores or working for pay. ((vi))
- Afterschool programs are not equitably distributed. According to a study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, 40% of low-income eighth graders, compared with 17% of high-income respondents, do not participate in any organized afterschool activities.((vii)) Access, not interest, seems to account for the difference since virtually every survey of American youth suggests that they want to participate in well-designed, organized afterschool programs.
- Violent juvenile crime triples between the hours of 3:00 and 8:00 pm and it is during these hours that children face the most serious danger of becoming victims of crime. Unsupervised children at this time are also in danger of increased risk of substance abuse and early sexual activity. ((viii))
- Over the past three decades, the rate of obesity in the U.S. among children has doubled from 15% to nearly 30% today, according to the 2006 Forum on Childhood Obesity. A number of studies indicate that child obesity can be improved by school interventions that engage children and their families in healthy activity and proper nutrition.((ix))
- Educators and parents are concerned over “nature deficit disorder,” the current phenomenon dubbed by Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in the Woods” and Chairman of the Child and Nature Network. He claims that as children remain distant from nature, their overall health suffers – psychologically, physically and spiritually.

((i))Why Afterschool Matters, New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition; Clark, R.M., Critical Factors in Why Disadvantaged Children Succeed or Fail in School, New York: Academy for Educational Development, 1988, [www.njsacc.org](http://www.njsacc.org).

((ii)) After School Programs In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Their Potential and What It Takes to Achieve It, Issues and Opportunities in Out-Of-School Time Evaluation, Number 10 Executive Summary, Harvard Family Research Project, February 2008.

((iii)) Why Afterschool Matters, New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition; Afterschool Alliance, Afterschool Alert Poll Report: A Report of Findings from the 1999 Mott Foundation/JC Penney Nationwide Survey on Afterschool Programs, January 2000, [www.njsacc.org](http://www.njsacc.org)

((iv)) A New Day for Learning from The Time, Learning, and Afterschool Task Force, January 2007. National League of Cities and Institute for Youth, Education and Families. The Afterschool Hours: A New Focus for America's Cities. Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2005.

((v)) [www.afterschoolalliance.org](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org)

((vi)) Why Afterschool Matters, New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition; Timmer, S.G., Eccles, J. and O'Brien, I., How Children Use Time, in Time, Goods and Well-Being, Juster F.T. and Stafford, F.B. (editors), Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, 1985, [www.njsacc.org](http://www.njsacc.org)

((vii)) Why Afterschool Matters, New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988: A Profile of the American Eighth Grader, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990, [www.njsacc.org](http://www.njsacc.org)

((viii)) Why Afterschool Matters, New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition; Carnegie Corporation of New York, A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours, New York, NY: Author, 1992, p. 33, [www.njsacc.org](http://www.njsacc.org)

((ix)) New Jersey After 3 Evaluation Summary. Anderson, P. & Butcher, K. (2006). Childhood obesity: Trends and potential causes. The Future of Children: Childhood Obesity, 16(1), pp. 19-46.

facts and studies courtesy of [www.childrensaidsociety.org](http://www.childrensaidsociety.org) and [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org)