

# Beyond Babysitting

## What does quality after-school care look like?

By **LORIN POWELL  
AND JEN MICKLOW**

AS PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS continue to struggle to do more with less, they strive for ways to maintain and enhance programs and activities that nurture well-rounded, successful students. Innovative approaches, such as extended school-day learning initiatives, have already started in some of the poorest districts throughout New Jersey. Traditional school-age childcare programs in districts of all types and sizes can also play a vital role in sparking students' interest and knowledge in all subject areas, without additional cost to the districts or taxpayers. School districts are able to provide these programs at no cost because many programs are funded by parents through tuition. In addition, state and private grants are often available to after-school program providers to help improve the quality of the care.

Boards of education and administrators are key decision makers, along with parents, in assuring that they offer families stimulating and affordable before and after-school programs. Among the many issues facing school leaders, decisions about the benefits that high quality, cost-effective school-age childcare can bring to a district are sometimes overlooked.

The main purpose of childcare providers is to offer safe and enriching environments for children who need supervision while their parents work, including for school-age children. In addition to providing recreational activities,

nutritious snacks and some “down time,” the hours before and after-school are an ideal time to support and enhance what is taught in all subject areas during the school day.

The New Jersey Department of Education agrees, stating that “out-of-school time programs should reflect a commitment to promoting knowledge, skills and understanding through enriching, hands-on and creative learning opportunities that do not extend, but complement the school day.”

“Quality school-age care is more than a babysitting service—it is a program that encourages kids to excel academically outside of a school setting,” said Edie Benjamin, program coordinator of managers and curriculum at the non-profit Archway Programs' Just Kids, which operates after-school programs in several districts in Camden, Gloucester and Salem counties.

A good after-school program offers an age-appropriate curriculum focused on these goals—not only by providing a safe environment, but also by combining staff- and child-initiated enrichment activities that stimulate children's social and emotional development while cultivating academic curiosity.

A study by the Harvard Family Research Project supports this notion, reporting that quality after-school programs can foster positive youth development that leads to academic success by decreasing children's behavioral problems, improving their social skills and relationships with others, and increasing their community involvement and self-esteem.

“It's necessary for quality after-school programs to provide project-based learning initiatives that reinforce all that happens during the school day through innovative ways,” said Mary M. Reece, Ed.D., director of school leadership programs at the Foundation for Educational Administration.

According to Reece, school-day lessons and after-school activities are not two separate entities—each contributes to the other’s success.

“School leaders and after-school project directors should combine efforts in professional development training sessions in order to strengthen the relationship, understanding and appreciation of what occurs during the school day and how it influences after-school development, and vice versa,” said Reece. “Children also take what they learn in after-school programs and apply it to their daytime lessons.”

**After-School Success in Science** An after-school program can incorporate academic ideas while still encouraging students to have fun. For example, the National Science Foundation (NSF) funds the National Partnership for After-School Science 2 (NPASS-2), a professional development program that is led by Education Development Center, Inc., in Newton, MA. The initiative is building a core group of personnel in its participating states to train after-school program staff to lead children in high-quality science projects. The greater goal is to encourage science, technology, engineering and math skills.

Two of New Jersey’s 15 NPASS-2 instructors are Edie Benjamin and Brenda



Saunders, both of Just Kids. They teach childcare professionals about the inquiry-based learning program, which encourages innovation as well as creative and critical thinking by instructing program leaders to



ask students questions instead of spouting-off facts or correcting mistakes.

NPASS training sessions consist of presenting several multi-faceted science projects that after-school programs can incorporate into their curriculum. For example, the “ball and tracks” project consists of teams of students using plastic pipe tubing to create their own roller coasters.

“The students have to think of everything involved, including the initial design, how to construct it, and the ‘safety hazards’ involved in trying to keep the ball on the track. Students appreciate the science involved in making the models work, and they experiment with the design until they get it right,” said Benjamin.

**It takes a village...** There are many reasons why it’s important to provide quality after-school care to children, according to Denise Sellers, executive director of Haddonfield Child Care, a parent-run non-profit organization that provides before-and after-school care for children in grades K-8 enrolled in the Haddonfield School District.

After hearing someone say that it was a shame children have to spend their time in after-school programs instead of going home, Sellers decided that these programs shouldn’t be a shame—they should just be different.

To Sellers, after-school programs are akin to neighborhoods. “We’re recreating

a neighborhood environment where kids can make friends of all ages, have responsibilities much like the chores they would do if they were at home, and choose their own physical and creative activities,” said Sellers. “We must keep kids busy, active and involved in something that’s productive and creative in order to developmentally prepare them for their future.”

**Add the Arts** One way that after-school programs can enrich children’s experiences is by utilizing state-funded initiatives that take an innovative approach to learning.

For example, Archway’s Just Kids and Haddonfield Child Care were awarded Artists-in-Education (AIE) grants, which bring a professional artist into an after-school program as “a unique resource and approach to learning,” according to Shelly Benaroya, the Arts Education Administrator at AIE.

The Artists-in-Education (AIE) program is carried out through a partnership between the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, and a consortium made up of Arts Horizons and Young Audiences New Jersey. The program provides New Jersey schools with long-term artist residencies, and is made possible through state appropriations to the New Jersey State Council on the Arts as well as funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

During her residency at Haddonfield Child Care, artist Jeanne Jablonski helped students create various quilts out of paper to express their views on skin color through shades of gray and black tones, a concept based on Faith Ringgold’s story “How the People Became Colorblind.” Barry Moore, who previously led students in a production of “Stone Soup” during his residency, is now

completing a mini-residency to write and teach songs that coincide with the artwork.

Another AIE residency at Just Kids program at the Merchantville Public School features professional storyteller Queen Nur educating children about bullying through the art of storytelling. Students explore and discuss the challenge of bullying while learning ways to respond to various kinds of harassment and building empathy for one another in the process.

The residency culminates with a storytelling performance focused on the topic of bullying in early June. Students are storytellers, and those not taking part on stage play a vital role in the production and other behind-the-scenes activities of the performance.

**Meeting Special Needs** State-funded, innovative programs like AIE not only enhance students' learning experiences, but they can also be catalysts for the development and socialization of children with special needs, including autism, Downs syndrome, and cerebral palsy.

"JG", a child enrolled in the Just Kids program at Ethel M. Burke Elementary School in Bellmawr, was diagnosed with autism and has a low tolerance for physical contact. Consequently, JG was uncomfortable with the dancing component of a program, refusing to participate in Ethel Burke's AIE residency grant.

When guest artist Josh Robinson, a percussionist, incorporated a rain stick in his activity, JG walked through the crowd of students directly up to Josh. Showing interest in the program for the first time, the child took the rain stick and ran back to a corner to explore the instrument. Then JG astounded the staff by sitting among the circle of his peers and fully participating in the music and rhythm activities that Josh led.

Students with special needs like JG who participate in after-school programs build their potential and increase their skills, as evidenced by higher academic achievement and improvements in school attendance,

social competence and behavior, according to the Washington, D.C.-based AfterSchool Alliance, a non-profit focused on increasing public and private investment in quality after-school program initiatives at the national, state and local levels.

**Leading the way** A study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation concluded that there is no single formula to develop a quality school-based after-school program because community characteristics and needs vary, but one essential component that influences the success of these programs is the commitment and support of school leaders.

"As school leaders, we must provide the leadership necessary to collectively work on supporting student achievement both during and after-school. This includes not only academic education, but character education—social, emotional, developmental, and behavioral," said Reece, who, in addition to directing school leadership programs at the FEA, has also served on the NAESP board of directors.

"After-school care isn't an extended version of the school day. It's an opportunity for schools to provide a place where kids can learn and grow to be productive members of society and decent human beings," said Benjamin.

Many school-age care providers already lead the way in boosting student achievement by intentionally incorporating innovative activities into their after-school curriculums. With traditional school-age childcare programs serving thousands of New Jersey students each day, after-school care providers have a daily window of opportunity to enhance children's potential by offering enriching programs at little or no cost to the school district.

So, the question remains: Are we, as school leaders, taking advantage of all available opportunities to nurture students' development, or are we just expecting our after-school providers to be babysitters? **sl**

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