

OUR WORK ON THE QUALITY OF AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS: 2003–2011

The William T. Grant Foundation devotes most of our funding and the work of our staff to research. To keep that work relevant, we try to improve its connections to policy and practice by supporting advocacy, communications, and program development activities.

All of our activities are focused on a finite set of questions in order to increase the effectiveness of our limited grantmaking dollars and staff resources. Since 2002, we have funded research on how to improve the everyday settings of youth—such as classrooms, youth organizations, and less bounded environments like neighborhoods and families. We also fund research on how policymakers and practitioners acquire and use research evidence, and how that work can be improved. Our support for advocacy, communications, and program development is focused on a subset of our research portfolio, which we refer to as our “action topic.” Since 2003, that focus has been improving the quality of after-school programs.¹

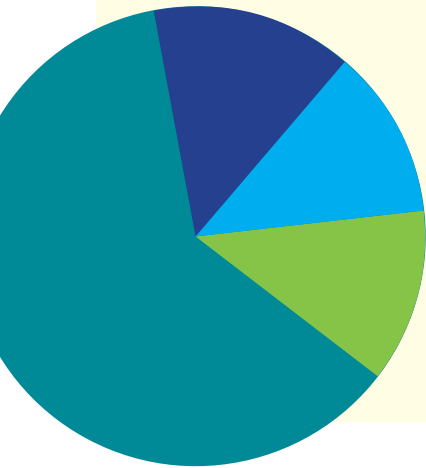


During the past eight years, the after-school field has made real progress, particularly in understanding what “high-quality practice” means and how to measure it. And, we at the Foundation have learned a great deal about how to do our work from our efforts in this area. This essay describes what we learned and the implications for the future. Woven throughout is an overview of how the after-school field has evolved and the issues that remain.

1. In 2003, we defined “after-school programs” as adult-structured programs for young people ages 6–18 that operate during the school year between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. The programs have a range of goals, structures, organizational settings, and funding sources. Over time, our definition expanded to include programs held on Saturdays and during the summer.

OUR STRATEGY

Being a medium-sized foundation, we work to stay focused and without too many moving parts. Our guiding assumption is that the lives of young people will improve if high-quality research informs the policies and practices that affect them. To encourage that, we use three strategies: (1) supporting the production and synthesis of rigorous and relevant research evidence; (2) building the capacity of researchers to produce such evidence and of policymakers and practitioners to demand and use it; and (3) communicating to improve policy and practice. We devote significant energy to working with grantees post-award to build their skills and improve methods in the social and behavioral sciences nationally. This essay describes how these strategies were implemented regarding after-school quality.



AFTER-SCHOOL GRANTMAKING BUDGET 2003-2011

- Advocacy, \$3M
- Capacity-Building, \$2.5M
- Communications, \$2.5M
- Research, \$12.9M

THE AFTER-SCHOOL FIELD: BACKGROUND

The current era of after-school programs began in the late 1980s, with a message to get children and youth off the streets and into supervised activities. The Carnegie Council on Adolescence made youth safety a prominent goal in 1992, with its report characterizing 3:00–6:00 p.m. as the peak hours for juvenile crime. This report advanced a policy emphasis on increasing the supply of community-based programs to provide “safe havens” for young people.

The bulk of programming at that time was funded with public, school-aged child care monies—block granted to states and cities—coupled with local public and private funds. The growth in funding for new or expanded programs raised a concern about keeping individual after-school providers part of a coherent system. Citywide intermediaries such as L.A.’s Best in Los Angeles and The After-School Corporation (TASC) in New York were launched in the late 1980s and early 1990s, primarily to create and support community-based after-school programs.

In the mid-1990s, the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund (now the Wallace Foundation) was on the leading edge of more recent foundation-funded efforts to try to improve the systems of after-school programs at the city level with its Making the Most of Out-of-School Time (MOST) initiative. As maternal employment increased, states such as California along with the federal government through its 21st CCLC program were increasing funding, with public support primarily driven by the dual objectives of safety and childcare. Taxpayers understood both needs, which generated bipartisan support. The 21st CCLC funding grew from \$40 million a year in 1998 to more than \$1 billion per year in 2002. Also in 2002, California passed the After-School Education and Safety Program act, with a major increase in state funding authorized as soon as the state budget improved. (This funding was triggered in 2006. The act is currently known by its designation for voters as “Proposition 49.”)

Although the expanded public funding was designed to support a range of program activities, it was often part of a K–12 education funding stream and inevitably after-school programs were pulled toward educational outcomes. As a result, by the early 2000s, it became accepted in the after-school field that programs had to promise effects on school achievement as a trade-off for financial support. At a meeting sponsored by the Partnership for After-School Education (PASE) in New York City in February 2005, Robert Halpern coined the term the “Big Lie” to describe the pressure on after-school programs to promise improved educational outcomes in order to get public (and increasingly foundation) funding. Halpern and others called for a “reframing of expectations” for the field, arguing that the comparative advantage of after-school programs and other less formal youth-serving institutions, especially when compared to school, was improvement of a broad range of “21st-century skills.” These included abilities that seemed relevant to success

in school, employment, and the rest of life, such as working well in a group, planning projects, taking responsibility, and communicating well with others.

This argument made sense to many, and it seemed to fit what researchers were finding in studies of young people in programs. But the call to reframe the rationale for the field met some limits. One was that the field did not have “proof” that it could deliver more than safe, secure places for young people. In part, this was because there were no good measures of 21st-century skills that could be widely used in practice or research, and consequently there were no strong data from program evaluations saying that after-school programs could consistently improve such outcomes.

In fact, when we entered the fray in 2003, a federal evaluation of programs funded through the 21st CCLC program was about to be released. The evaluation showed that these after-school programs were not raising school achievement over and above the other opportunities that existed for children and youth in their communities. The 21st CCLC program evaluation came out during an economic downturn, and President George W. Bush was looking for ways to reduce domestic spending. The administration saw the evaluation results as a reason to cut the program by \$400 million. After-school advocates, supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and others, quickly put together an “after-school summit,” notably including soon-to-be Governor Schwarzenegger, and the proposed cuts were withdrawn.

RESEARCH

Evaluations of the Effects of After-School Programs

From 2003 to 2011, we funded \$12.9 million in research devoted to after-school. We wanted to understand what after-school program could deliver, and we supported a number of strong evaluations of promising programs, looking for effects on youth outcomes. These included evaluations of the Building Educational Leaders (BELL) summer program, the New York City-wide program run by The After-School Corporation (TASC); the very academic Higher Achievement Program (HAP) in Washington, D.C.; Chicago’s After-School Matters (ASM) program for older youth; and an evaluation of an after-school reading curriculum, READ-180. While results varied, the main findings were that BELL, TASC, and Higher Achievement all produced effects that practitioners and policymakers saw as positive (e.g., BELL is now a grantee for expansion under the federal Social Innovation Fund program, TASC has received funding to expand an extended-day approach with schools, and the HAP evaluation is ongoing to see if its positive effects on student performance in middle school leads to enrollment in more competitive high schools). On the other hand, the results from the evaluations of After-School Matters and READ-180 were more sobering, leading the developers to think about how to strengthen these efforts. (Evaluations are often seen as positive if they “prove” that a program works. We also think it is important to learn when a program is not as effective as expected, as long as the evaluation provides insights into how effectiveness can be improved.)

AFTER-SCHOOL RESEARCH FUNDING

\$4.1M	DESCRIPTIVE, THEORY-BUILDING
\$3.7M	EVALUATIONS OF PROGRAMS
\$3.3M	EVALUATIONS OF EFFORTS TO IMPROVE PROGRAM QUALITY
\$880K	REVIEWS OF RESEARCH
\$860K	MEASURES OF PROGRAM QUALITY

Our grantees' findings fit what had become the standard news from evaluations—the effects of after-school programs are mixed. Our assessment, based on the evaluations we funded and others, was that after-school programs can affect important youth outcomes but often do not, and that the field needs to work to make quality better and more consistent within and across programs. The most reliable source for this type of cross-cutting observation is a multiple study review, and we funded one such review by Joseph Durlak and Roger Weissberg.

Reviews of the Multiple Evaluations of After-School Programs

In 2007, Durlak and Weissberg published their review of program evaluations, and it was a game-changer. They reviewed 66 studies of after-school programs focused on social and emotional learning and personal development (e.g., avoiding risk and working well with others). Durlak and Weissberg found that after-school programs *did* have a positive effect on a range of youth outcomes—including school achievement—and they also produced a clue as to why. In their analysis, the investigators compared the results from two clusters of studies. In one group, they placed evaluations of programs focusing on specific social and personal skills (instead of a general focus on social development), that employed sequential learning activities to develop those skills, and had youth actively involved. In their report, they called this cluster “evidence-based,” since Durlak had found that mental health programs for young people with such features produced strong results in a prior review. In the other cluster were the studies of programs that did not have all these features. The evidence-based programs produced strong, positive results and the programs in the other cluster did not. (See my 2008 *Social Policy Report* “After-School Programs and Academics: Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research” for a more detailed discussion.) Around the same time, Patricia Lauer and colleagues published

a similar review of studies of academically oriented after-school and summer programs for low-income children, also showing modest positive effects on academic outcomes.

Advocates seized on the positive news from the reviews and argued that they showed that “after-school programs worked.” Perhaps more accurately, the reviews showed that programs *could* work—especially when done well and intentionally—and the issue was how to make more programs successful at broad scale. (Note that the practice community was not waiting for the researchers and policymakers to concur that programs needed to be stronger. From 2004–2010, I spoke at approximately 35 practitioner-oriented conferences and meetings, arguing for a focus on program quality and continuous improvement. Nearly everywhere, especially after 2005, I was “preaching to the choir.” Funders and practitioners were experimenting with various ways to measure and support better quality.)

Descriptive, Theory-Building Research on Programs

Our interest in program quality led us to fund some rich descriptive work that mixed qualitative and quantitative methods and data to look at the relationships between program activities, staff practices, and youth outcomes. Two of these studies stand out—one by Reed Larson and his colleagues of after-school programs in Illinois (and now Minnesota), and the examination of Boys and Girls Clubs in Chicago by Barton Hirsch, David DuBois, and Nancy Deutsch. Both were longitudinal studies that exemplified the best of the theory-building work we fund. And both uncovered the critical role of line staff in these programs as the key individuals who have the opportunity—with enough support and know-how—to help build youth's 21st-century skills.

Measures of Program Quality

When we undertook our work on the quality of after-school programs, we felt that having strong measures of what constitutes high-quality program practices was critical to improving practice. By 2011, we understood that when made widely available, such measures give staff a common language for talking about their work (e.g., “Here are staff practices that lead to a well-managed, positive program atmosphere”), and facilitate staff self-assessment and tailored staff development. In 2002, however, our motivation was more basic—we were going to work on program quality and were not sure how to define or measure it.

In 2002, a National Academy of Sciences panel issued a report on community-level youth programs, including after-school programs. The main conclusion of the report, titled “Community Programs to Promote Youth Development,” was that more research was needed to understand and improve youth programs. The fourth chapter of the report had a large effect on our Foundation and others about where to focus. Panel member Reed Larson drew on the research about household and family practices to describe a provisional list of eight features of daily settings (e.g., households, classrooms, after-school programs) that are important for adolescent development. The eight features Larson described are:

- 1 Physical and psychological safety
- 2 Clear and consistent structure and appropriate supervision
- 3 Supportive relationships
- 4 Opportunities to belong
- 5 Positive social norms
- 6 Support for efficacy and mattering
- 7 Opportunities for skill-building
- 8 Integration of family, school, and community efforts

Larson and his panel colleagues went on to say that these features are just markers of quality—the processes or interactions that lead to these features are what we should strive to understand. In short, the youth field needed good measures of what youth do with each other, with adults, and with materials that produces a “positive developmental setting.”

Historically, practitioners have developed such instruments for their own use, while researchers developed separate measures for research studies. (These instruments involve observing practice to assess its quality.) The instruments developed by both groups needed more research to prove to potential users that different observers would get the same results or—if a program improved the practices an instrument measured—youth outcomes would improve. Despite these needs, it was encouraging that while most developers assumed their instruments were unique, a review of the most commonly used instruments, which we supported, showed that they overlapped in their definition of good quality.

Our first grant to improve such a measure was given to Charles Hohmann and colleagues at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. This team developed and began building evidence for the validity of the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool. The YPQA included seven sections, each focused on measuring one dimension of program quality presumed to be critical for positive youth development: *safe environment*, *supportive environment*, *interaction*, *engagement*, *youth-centered policies and practices*, *high expectations*, and *access*. The goal of the YPQA was twofold. For researchers, it improved measurement of the staff practices that seemed to matter in youth programs. For practitioners, it could be used as an assessment tool to help drive optimal practices for youth.

By 2006, the YPQA had been refined and its technical properties looked promising. It and a number of other measures were being widely used in practice. But there was no source to help practitioners choose from among the most commonly used measures. We supported Nicole Yohalem and colleagues from the Forum for Youth Investment² to review the research on these instruments—with assistance from the various developers—as well as more practical considerations such as cost and ease of observer training. When that 2007 review showed lots of gaps in what was known about instrument quality, we announced that we would continue funding such research.

We supported additional refinement of the YPQA, along with the evaluation of a corresponding intervention designed to foster the line-staff practices it measures. We also funded Allison Tracy and her team at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time to test the reliability and validity of the Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool (APT) and the Survey of Afterschool Youth Outcomes (SAYO) as measures of program quality and youth outcomes. And another grant was given to Deborah Lowe Vandell and her colleagues to develop a training component for the well-researched Promising Practices Rating System (PPRS), which she had developed and used in a large federally funded study of youth development. The online, video-based training system is being developed to help practitioners use the PPRS. A second edition of the Forum's review in 2009 showed that many of the instruments were being improved and studied with other resources. At this writing, that second edition has been downloaded over 21,000 times, indicating the level of interest in the tools.

The instruments meant to measure after-school program quality are still not perfect. Some need revisions to make them more specific and clear for staff and all of them require ongoing training to be used well. But as they have been used in subsequent research studies and practice, they have confirmed the instincts of the 2002 National Academies panel. It is possible to measure the staff-youth interactions that are related to positive youth outcomes, and these interactions vary both within and between different programs. We see the increase in the existence and use of high-quality measures of program practices as perhaps the most productive example of our work on program quality—and a tangible example of a positive connection between research and practice.



2. In January 2008, the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, developers of the YPQA, launched the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality as a joint venture with the Forum for Youth Investment.

Evaluations of Efforts to Improve Program Quality

As the descriptive findings emerged and the measures of program quality matured, the Foundation also funded several teams to develop interventions meant to improve the effectiveness of after-school programs by focusing on staff practices. This is not easy because after-school staff come and go quickly, are part-time, and programs generally have little infrastructure to support program improvement. For example, teams in Wisconsin and Kansas worked for a couple of years each to see if they could develop promising program-improvement strategies—but were not able to show substantial change.

The notable exception was the five-state intervention study run by Charles Smith of High/Scope (his team is now a part of the Forum for Youth Investment). Beginning in 2006, Smith and colleagues implemented a staff development program in 43 after-school programs (compared to 44 programs assigned by lottery to get the staff development later). The “Youth Program Quality Intervention”—which emphasized on-site staff development that includes coaching, anchored by a well developed measure of program practice—produced substantial improvements in line-staff practice. Many practitioners in many states are now trying to achieve similar results using coaching by on-site supervisors along with a good measure of program quality like High/Scope’s YPQA instrument.



THE YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT TOOL AND INTERVENTION

In the early 2000s, we funded the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) Validation study, conducted by investigators at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. The team was developing and refining this tool, which used seven scales to measure staff practices. The tool was field-tested and refined, and in 2006, we awarded Charles Smith and colleagues \$1.0 million to test the effectiveness of an intervention meant to improve the staff practices being measured by the YPQA. The Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) was tested in a cluster-randomized trial of 87 after-school sites in Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, and New York. The intervention is a cycle of on-site observational assessment of instruction, improvement planning, training on specific instructional methods, and performance feedback following instruction for site teams. The investigators used the YPQA to see whether the process of self-assessment and coaching in the intervention impacted staff knowledge and behaviors.

The team, now based at the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality at the Forum for Youth Investment, found improvement in the quality of staff instructional practices, which resulted in improved instruction and higher levels of staff retention. However, the more important result for us has been the subsequent widespread use of measures such as the YPQA and systematic approaches to on-site coaching of staff. Our initial, fairly modest investment in this intervention and corresponding measurement tool has resulted in approximately \$10 million in additional investment—approximately 60 systems and 3,000 after-school sites have gone on to implement the YPQI/YPQA. This is a clear example of relevant, high-quality research being widely used in practice. Such research-practice connections are rare but, as this proves, not impossible.

But there is still work to be done. As yet, there are no rigorous studies in the after-school area confirming that when you improve staff practices correlated with youth outcomes, those youth outcomes also improve. Fortunately, such studies are starting to emerge in K–12 education using similar measures. For example, in a recent article published in *Science*, Foundation grantees Joseph Allen and Robert Pianta showed in an experimental study that when a well-designed staff development program helped teachers improve their practices, student achievement also increased. We suspect that such results are also occurring in after-school programs, but the field needs strong studies showing this is the case.

CAPACITY-BUILDING AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Since we launched our focus on improving the quality of after-school programs, we have made some major tactical shifts in how we do our work. Most of our grant dollars continue to fund research, but most of our staff time is now spent on capacity-building and communications. We refined this strategy first in our after-school work. Because we are a mid-sized foundation with a modest budget, we need to leverage all of our efforts to try to be effective. Across all our programs, we now spend less time working with possible and current applicants, and more with grantees after their grant award. Our goal is to increase the already impressive capacity of grantees to do high-quality applied research, improving their effectiveness when subsequently supported by others. In this vein, we support early- and mid-career fellowships and activities such as consultation services and the development of the Optimal Design software tool, which build the capacity of researchers. From 2003–2011, total funding for these various capacity-building grants related to after-school was \$2.5 million.

From 2003 through 2005, we held twice yearly meetings of the grantees interested in after-school. At the time, we had a conventional view that we would first support good research and when findings were available, we would help the findings get communicated to practitioners and advocates. (We now believe this paradigm is too linear.) But, we were strategic at the outset and mixed researchers, practitioners, and advocates in the after-school meetings and the topics on the agendas had broad appeal (e.g., what is the current thinking about the features of a good quality program? What have we learned about measuring program quality?) Our sense is that this mix of researchers, practitioners, and advocates led to more relevant research, and it is a strategy we now use in other areas of our work.

At the start, we knew we did not have the staff capacity or content expertise to support these meetings. So, we began a relationship with Nicole Yohalem and her colleagues at the Forum for Youth Investment; they helped us design and conduct the meetings and did some writing that communicated findings to a larger audience. Forum staff polled grantees as to the issues on which they needed help, we structured meetings around those issues, and we spent more time on how to do the work better than on what was going well. By 2006, we felt confident enough about the “learning community” model to expand it to other grantees, and we now think of it as a signature of our work.

We see the increase in the existence and use of high-quality measures of program practices as perhaps the most productive example of our work on program quality—and a tangible example of a positive connection between research and practice.

COMMUNICATIONS

Because we want research findings to reach practitioners and policymakers, we also supported communications activities. From 2003–2011, our communications grantmaking totaled about \$2.5 million and nearly all of it was on the topic of after-school quality. (This is over and above the support for writing and presentations built into research grants.)

Grants included improving *Youth Today's* ability to cover research for practitioners; funding for the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) to sponsor research-based briefings for practitioners and policymakers in Washington, D.C.; and ongoing writing by the Forum staff to produce practice/policy-oriented newsletters, two practitioner-friendly reviews of measures of program quality, and a recent review of measures of youth outcomes. One feature of all these grants was that we wanted to make any resultant materials (e.g., newsletters, articles) as low-cost to practitioners as possible. In retrospect, this model worked well for AYPF and FYI as intermediaries that did not depend on the sale of their materials—but less well for *Youth Today* as a subscriber-driven operation.

We also supported some original writing through a series of small grants to Robert Halpern and Sam Piha. Both are deeply committed to high-quality programs and interested in programs for older youth—an area that we continue to think deserves more attention.

In addition to supporting writing and briefings by researchers and intermediaries, I also did lots of presentations and some writing to try to convey to practitioners and policymakers “what the research showed” about the effectiveness of after-school programs and how that effectiveness (aka “quality”) might be improved. Examples included a commentary in *Education Week*, articles in practitioner-oriented journals such as *New Directions for Youth Development*, and a *Social Policy Report* published by the Society for Research on Child Development. These articles were augmented by about 35 presentations from 2004–2010 at practitioner-oriented conferences.

While none of the communication vehicles we used are novel, one distinctive feature of our communications strategy was its emphasis on reaching “key influentials.” In the 1990s, I was a senior officer at MDRC, a social policy research firm that was unquestionably influential in the national policy debates about changes in federal welfare laws in 1989 and 1996. I had been impressed by MDRC’s realization that in any domestic policy field there is an identifiable and relatively small number of key people who are the nodes in the communications networks that connect research, policy, and practice. The challenge for effective communications is to identify these individuals and stay in contact with them. The strategy seemed particularly suited to an organization like the William T. Grant Foundation. We did not have the resources to mount sustained general media campaigns, but we could create lists of influential people, and we could try to stay in touch with those individuals (one of the luxuries of being a funder is that people are more likely to open your emails).

When we began our work on improving the quality of after-school programs, we built a list of about 200 “key influential” researchers, advocates, practitioners, policymakers, funders, and members of the trade media, updating it regularly as the field evolved. We then routinely shared announcements, publications, and so on with that list.

ADVOCACY

Because federal, state, and city-level policymakers are so central in the allocation of public funding for after-school programs, and because after-school is a modestly funded service that competes with other priorities for support, we made about \$3 million in grants to advocates from 2003–2011. Being a funder that wanted research to matter, we sought advocates who drew on research in their work. When we began, the Afterschool Alliance—now the main national advocacy voice on after-school—was just being launched by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. For several years, we supported Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (FC:IK) and Every Child Matters (ECM) to carry the message about after-school. Both organizations are very effective—FC:IK in research-based legislative advocacy and Every Child Matters in electoral politics. But saddling them with doing research-based advocacy for high-quality, after-school programs was an awkward marriage, for reasons particular to each organization. For FC:IK, the issue was that at the time there was not enough strong research on how to measure or improve program quality to support a major policy push on that topic (the situation is much better now). ECM on the other hand looks for issues that will matter in election campaigns—and after-school programs already receive bipartisan support. Thus, it was hard for ECM to use after-school as an issue that would lead voters to certain candidates.

As advocacy organizations specifically devoted to after-school developed a track record, and the amount of policy-relevant research grew, we shifted our advocacy support to organizations focused exclusively on after-school at the federal, state, and city levels. We have stayed on this course with a series of grants to the Afterschool Alliance and other state- and city-focused groups. These organizations have done excellent work, particularly as policymakers have debated how to revise the federal education bill that supports after-school programs. (How much should this funding stream support extended school-day programs versus community-based after-school?). Even so, since the 2008 economic downturn, the focus on improving quality has been tricky for the advocates because budgets have tightened and the supply of program dollars has been reduced—leading to cuts in service. In that environment it is hard to carve out funding for program improvement.





IN CONCLUSION

The after-school field continues to be pulled in multiple directions. While there is some agreement that 21st CCLC funding should enhance instead of just lengthen the school day, the goals of education policymakers for after-school are still about improved educational outcomes, narrowly conceived. Many program operators remain rightfully circumspect about their ability to deliver such results without more support in the system. Outside the education funding streams, practitioners and policymakers are much more likely to emphasize safety, prevention of risk, and enrichment while parents work.

Researchers and research funders, including the William T. Grant Foundation, are not going to resolve these tensions. The goals for after-school are going to continue to be the product of larger forces in the country such as the domestic economy and our national priorities. That said, we plan to continue supporting research that helps policymakers and practitioners solve persistent problems.

Given the current state of the field, some areas of our future funding are easy to predict. We will continue to test strategies meant to improve practice at a larger scale. For example, many practitioners are interested in having site supervisors coach line staff. While

on-site coaching is promising, there is a lot to learn about how to implement such a system well, and in a manner that is affordable. We also need studies that tie such interventions meant to improve staff practices to changes in important youth outcomes. A second area is the measures of quality practice. Observational measures are now commonly used in practice, yet they can still be improved. It is also possible that other forms of measurement may be useful to staff and less expensive—such as surveys that youth could complete. Third, we want to help the field understand why it is that promising programs seem to be effective in some situations but not others. How much of that is about the particular program approach? Or is the particular approach less important than how well it is implemented? Does the variation in effectiveness have less to do with programs per se and more to do with the organizations that house them, or the neighborhoods in which they are located? These are all important questions that transcend the after-school field—and they deserve our attention.

When we began our work on this topic eight years ago, I wrote an *Education Week* commentary with Tom Kane, discussing the results from four evaluations of different after-school programs that were being debated at the time. Tom and I argued that it was not likely that the after-school programs could affect achievement test scores, and the programs needed to focus more on boosting attendance in order to achieve any of their goals. It was an argument meant to temper what we saw as inflated expectations among advocates and policymakers. At the same time, the Foundation's Board and staff felt that there were many reasons to be hopeful. Federal, state, and city funding were growing; many foundations were supporting efforts to improve the funding and supports for programs; there was a large number of well-run intermediary organizations and service providers; and strong research firms and academic scholars were interested in the field.

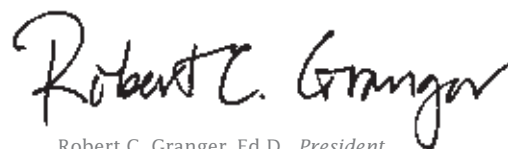
Across the past eight years, as this productive mix of practitioners, policymakers, advocates, researchers, and funders did its work, our message has changed. The after-school field now has strong research reviews showing what many in the field have argued; after-school programs can have an important impact on academic and other policy-relevant youth outcomes. That research also shows that effectiveness varies both within and across programs, and the primary issue facing the field is how to make results more robust and uniform. It is fortunate that foundations such as Mott, Wallace, Edna McConnell Clark, and others continue working to make programs (and the systems that should support them) as strong and accessible as possible, particularly for children and youth from low-income families. It is worth noting that this is the same priority in many youth-serving fields: how to increase the amount of high-quality teaching; how to improve the effectiveness of teen pregnancy prevention, employment, and mentoring programs at broader scale; and so on. In that sense, the after-school field has matured, and while doing so it has pioneered new approaches to program improvement that are very promising. These include the use of well developed rubrics or tools to guide staff development; a focus on continuous improvement; and the importance of building policies, systems, and organizations that help line staff do their best work. We are fortunate that we were able to be involved in this evolution, and as a research funder we will continue to work on these issues for the foreseeable future.

MOVING FORWARD

The Foundation plans to continue learning lessons from our work on after-school. We've funded two projects to help with this. The first is an examination by Sam Piha, a respected advocate and thinker in the field, of the evolution of the after-school program in California since 2003. California has been an especially important bellwether for other states, and put a lot of state money into after-school, beginning in the 1990s. We paid special attention to California as it increased its funding for after-school in 2006.

We also commissioned Pamela Stevens, now a private consultant and formerly on staff at the Edna McConnell Clark, Wallace, and Time Warner foundations, to conduct an external review that is more evaluative of our efforts. Pam is scheduled to report to our staff and Board in June 2012, and she and I plan to write about the lessons learned for other public and private funders this coming fall—the good, the bad, and (if such lessons exist) the ugly.

And we are beginning to work on our next action topic—improving the research-practice connection—which is described in detail by Vivian Tseng on page 22. We are filled with the same excitement and energy for this new endeavor as we were in 2003, when we set out to try to contribute to the quality of after-school programs.



Robert C. Granger, Ed.D., *President*