

# **Interagency Coordinating Council on Youth (ICC) Afterschool Work Group**

## **Youth Behavioral Challenges Subcommittee Report**

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## A Call to Action:

An estimated 20% of NYC's youth currently experience emotional, behavioral and mental health challenges<sup>1</sup>. Enhancements to our afterschool programs are needed to improve outcomes for this population. The Subcommittee proposes a cross-agency action plan to improve the availability and effectiveness of afterschool and summer programs for youth with emotional, behavioral and mental challenges to enhance positive youth development outcomes for all of the city's young people. It is imperative that additional attention be given to understanding and meeting the full range of young people's needs when planning, funding and implementing programs.

## NYC's Youth:

In NYC an estimated 1 in 5 youth (approximately 360,000) has a diagnosable mental health condition and 1 in 10 has a serious emotional disturbance that causes significant impairment in functioning. Youth with emotional, behavioral and mental health challenges are at greatest risk for poor educational, vocational and social outcomes; costly residential placement; juvenile justice involvement; as well as disconnectedness from both school and the workforce. They may experience a spectrum of challenges ranging from disruptive behaviors to anxiety and mood disorders, yet with the right supports and structures, non-specialized afterschool services can successfully engage these participants. A smaller subset of this youth population that has serious emotional disturbances may need specialized or alternative programs with higher support levels in order to successfully participate in afterschool services.

## A New York City mother's experience, one heard too often:

"I am a single-parent with twin daughters who have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and are very active and verbal, easily distracted when faced with sensory overload, and in need of structure and supervision. All of the afterschool programs we tried were mainstream programs. The girls would get up and leave the room when they got bored or were not interested in an activity. Mainstream programs have not met their needs and the special needs afterschool program I found have kids that seem to not be as high functioning. We seem to be in the grey area, while mainstream and special needs programs are black and white. Also, the special needs program is too far from home. Since I work until 6pm, picking the girls up from a distant location is a challenge, unless there is transportation from the afterschool program to home. Finances are also an issue.

My daughters were in a mainstream afterschool program this past year located a few blocks from home. Before starting the program, I told the leaders that the kids have special needs and IEPs [Individualized Education Plans]. The program said that they do not turn kids away and that they would 'see how it goes.' No one asked to see their IEPs. The kids really liked it, but they didn't stay on task with the group and, as I see it, reasonable accommodations were never made... they were suspended from the program and in the end we were told we would need to find a new program and that the kids could not come back. They said that their staff cannot give my kids the attention they needed and that they are not trained for this. Additionally, they do not have enough staff and budgets are tight.

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Public Health Service, Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Personal account shared by a network partner of the Partnership for After School Education (PASE), 2008.

## Importance of Afterschool Services:

Youth with emotional, behavioral or mental health challenges have the most to gain from successful participation in afterschool programs. Studies show that afterschool programs are uniquely positioned to support and promote children's healthy development including strengthening socialization skills, peer relations and adaptive functioning<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, afterschool programs are effective in combating social isolation, gang involvement, substance abuse, and other risk behaviors. Furthermore, afterschool program providers can promote mental health services and resources for children and their families.

## Findings:

The Subcommittee identified issues that families, providers and funding agencies experience as they attempt to meet the afterschool service needs of youth with emotional or behavioral challenges. Important barriers identified by the Subcommittee include:

- families' difficulty in identifying and accessing appropriate afterschool programs;
- frequent expulsion of children with emotional and behavioral challenges from programs with no alternatives available to their families;
- inadequate cross-system planning with lack of sharing of best practices and little innovation to meet the needs of this population;
- scarce resources for training, technical assistance and supports to help afterschool providers effectively address difficult behaviors in the afterschool setting;

Additionally, there is the need to further assess the scope, needs, strategies and resources for youth with severe emotional and behavioral challenges who cannot be effectively served through non-specialized afterschool services. These findings have shaped an action plan.

I work full time and am alone. I try to research and do all of this when I can, but it is more than challenging. Work is very demanding and I work nine-hour days. There is so much follow up and running around to sort out these things for the kids. We have tried babysitters at home and they all quit. Please help! I do not know what to do anymore. My frustration pales in comparison to what my children feel. The kids ask, 'Mommy, why do we always get suspended and kicked out of these things?' They feel different and want to be included. All children are supposed to be 'included' in public programs and it is clear that they are not. It seems to all boil down to money and people not really getting it or caring."

Now, almost six months after this mother of two shared her story, she still has "found nothing because there is nothing...."

<sup>3</sup>Frazier S.L., et al. Linking Mental Health and After-School Systems for Children in Urban Poverty: Preventing Problems, Promoting Possibilities, Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 2007; 34:389-399.

## Action Plan:

1. Improve system level needs assessment and planning through:
  - development of an effective data collection system.
  - development of plans and protocols for: assessing the child's strengths and needs, practicing effective behavior management, and linking families to appropriate mental health or community-based supports.
  - augmenting existing quality indicators and tools to accurately measure a program's ability to address children's emotional and behavioral challenges.
  - development of a cross-system plan to address the special transportation needs of children with serious emotional and behavioral challenges.
  - ongoing discussions on how to better address the after-school needs of children with emotional and behavioral challenges.
2. Facilitate a team-approach at the program level to facilitate collaboration among afterschool providers, schools, community-based mental health services and families to share information, as well as identify and access resources to meet children's needs.
3. Develop guidance regarding best practices among after-school providers to facilitate positive outcomes through: flexible staffing patterns, modification of the attendance system, and provision of a variety of structured and supervised activities for children to participate in based on their needs.
4. Increase training and technical assistance opportunities for afterschool providers to develop competencies in: identifying and understanding emotional and behavioral challenges; promoting positive behaviors; engaging families; preparing students and staff for inclusion; and developing and maintaining a referral system and community/family partnerships.
5. Develop alternative afterschool programs for youth with severe emotional and behavioral challenges who cannot be effectively served through non-specialized afterschool programs.

## Youth Behavioral Challenges Subcommittee Report

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