After-School Educational Programs: Goals, Work Practices and Best-Practice Indicators

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Executive Summary

Background
The main goal of after-school educational programs is to help low achievers and disadvantaged students to fulfill their academic potential. In pursuing their goal, the programs play a part in the effort to reduce educational gaps. The rapid growth rate of such programs in Israel and abroad has led to increasing efforts to define and measure their quality. At the request of the UJA-Federation of New York, the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute conducted a mapping of the main educational programs implemented in Israel in an attempt to discover the extent to which the practices perceived to contribute to the quality of the programs are being implemented. This report is intended to support decision-making regarding new directions and priorities in the development of after-school educational programs.

Study Goals
The study's ultimate goal, as noted, was to provide information to support decision-makers regarding new directions for the further development of after-school educational programs. The study focused on the following questions:
1. What are the key best-practice indicators in the literature?
2. Which are the outstanding programs implemented in Israel?
3. To what extent do these programs reflect best practice?
4. What difficulties do these programs experience? Which best-practice indicators are difficult for them to achieve and what issues do they have to address in the course of the implementation?

Study Method
The study was based on a list of the main educational programs in Israel (42 relevant programs were identified) and an in-depth mapping of 25 of them, which were representative of a range of characteristics of programs and age cohorts. The data were collected from self-report questionnaires completed by directors or representatives of the programs between May and September 2009. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with professionals at the Ministry of Education and planners and implementers of after-school educational programs. The mapping did not include an examination of the actual method of implementation or the outcomes of the programs regarding the students' situation.

Main Findings
The mapping of programs in Israel revealed a diversity of programs and implementation strategies, including comprehensive support programs, group academic assistance programs and mentoring programs. The programs' work was examined in terms of best-practice indicators identified in the literature as promoting effective work.
In the literature, best-practice indicators are divided into structural indicators (relating to the program goals, quantity and quality of personnel, measurements and evaluation), indicators relating to the learning process (which relate to program aspects with a direct impact on the students' learning experience) and the program's relationship with the school, the parents and the community.

This study found that there were some areas in which implementation methods considered effective were being used to a great extent and other areas in which little use was made of methods considered effective. In these areas, best-practice methods should be further strengthened and utilized.

The principles of best practice that were usually implemented included the following:

- Declaration of clear goals
- Provision of academic assistance as well as enrichment activities
- Support for students for at least three years
- Appointment of a staff member for liaison with the students regarding academic and social matters
- Monitoring of student attendance and achievements
- Appointment of a staff member for liaison with the school
- Training on how to work with low achievers.

The study also showed that important principles of best practice were not often implemented. These included:

- Extensive involvement of schools in all aspects of decision-making regarding the program
- Inclusion of youth in planning activities and decision-making
- Significant work with the parents.

Finally, there were principles of best practice that were sometimes implemented, notably the following:

- Frequent opportunities for individual learning
- Most of the teachers have a teachers certificate or B.A. degree
- Individualized learning plans
- Cultural sensitivity is an important element of the teacher training.

The main difficulties that the program directors reported they had to contend with were: budget constraints and the constant struggle to find funding; difficulties in recruiting quality teachers in the periphery and teachers who met the program's criteria; difficulty finding college students and volunteers willing to make a long-term commitment (in programs working with college students and volunteers); coping with additional needs of the students (emotional problems, behavioral problems, learning difficulties and financial difficulties); difficulty contending with attendance problems and dropout from the program; difficulty adapting the program activities for a range of ages; and difficulty working with parents, particularly when there was a need to cope with cultural differences.
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