
Youth After-hours Program in Longview and Kelso, Washington¹

Presenter:

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Background

In the fall of 1992 a Longview police officer noted that nearly 18% of Longview's distress police calls came from the Highlands neighborhood that surrounds St. Helen's Elementary School. The highest number of calls came between 3 and 6 p.m. What was most alarming was that youth were often involved, either as the victims or the perpetrators. The officer questioned why these youth were not engaged in structured afternoon activities, and she contacted the Kelso Superintendent of Schools to see what might be done. This area of the city comprises less than 5% of the city, but it contains one-fifth of the under-18 population.

From this initial contact-and the subsequent efforts of community leaders, school administrators, law enforcement officials, and youth organizations-sprang the Youth After-hours Program. Project staff determined that two factors kept low-income youth from participating in activities offered by more traditional programs: the cost of materials, and the availability of adult volunteers. Many parents, for example, could not afford to buy scout uniforms. Youth also needed consistent positive activities and interaction with adult role models.

The Youth After-hours Program is an after-school program offered at two elementary schools in Longview and Kelso, Washington. Both schools are located in high-crime, high-risk neighborhoods. Many families and children are experiencing financial distress, substance abuse, violence and other

abuse (i.e., physical, emotional and sexual). Approximately 40-45% of the parents in these two neighborhoods have not completed high school. Eighty-five percent of the kids are on the free lunch program.

The challenges facing Wallace Elementary School in Kelso and St. Helen's Elementary School in Longview caused both schools to elect to operate on a modified academic calendar. This approach involves shortening the summer break to six weeks and creating additional breaks throughout the year. The principals at both schools feel that their school should be the hub of the neighborhood and that community collaboration can be a catalyst for changing students' lives. This philosophy undergirds the Youth After-hours Program (see Exhibit 14A).

Exhibit 14A

Children who feel attached to their school and neighborhood tend to be more likely to go to classes and to succeed there. If not, they'll find something else to be attached to, such as a gang or peers that may be a negative influence.

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¹ Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

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Program

Beginning in the fall of 1992 a coalition of community leaders, school administrators, law enforcement, and youth development organizations began to work together to identify the needs of this highly at-risk population. The group concluded that the best way to meet the needs of these children was to provide free, positive after-school activities. The youth organizations agreed to work together to provide a program every day after school until 5:30 p.m. The Cowlitz Substance Abuse Coalition acted as lead agency for the project. Each participating organization that offered programs was able to keep its identity. The agreement signed by the participating organizations is shown in Exhibit 14B.

Each agency provided life-skill, hands-on activities two to three times per week, and the parks and recreation departments provided activities every day. This system allows agencies to provide activities in which they specialize while avoiding reinventing programs and services that community departments are already offering. Most of the youth organizations involved use adult volunteers to work with youth. However, it is difficult to find volunteers who would commit to an ongoing program for the entire school year. Thus, it was decided to have paid staff members conduct the activities. This ensured consistent, positive role models and helped establish trust.

To fund this program for the 1993-94 program year for two schools approximately \$66,000 was needed. The Cowlitz Substance Abuse Coalition wrote grant applications to business, industry, and service groups. In response, Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation became the major funding source (with a three-year commitment), along with assistance from the Ben B. Cheney Foundation. The three-year commitment from Weyerhaeuser was critical to the program's success because it provided funding for a time period sufficient for the program to demonstrate its viability. Several local service clubs also contributed from \$500 to \$10,000 each.

Although only 35% of the budget had been committed at the beginning of the school year, the youth organizations began the program in August 1993. A parent or guardian had to complete a registration form. Children could attend as frequently as they wished (e.g., every day, once a week, twice a month). At the start of each day, every child had to sign in and wear a name tag. Registration and the name tag procedure helped resolve issues such as who was authorized to pick up the child at the end of the day. In addition, children could not leave the program early if the registration form indicated that a parent would not be at home.

The program is currently using picture ID tags to help identify children and to separate children who are participating in the program from those who are just involved in free play on the school grounds.

After signing in, children receive a snack and choose which activities to participate in for the day. On a typical afternoon children participate in two different activities with two different agencies. Hands-on activities that have been offered include: clowning, rocketry, photography, drama, music, dance, creative arts, cooking, math, science, recycling, environmental education, sports, cooperative games, wood science, and cultural awareness. Every other Friday, participants go swimming at the YMCA.

The program tries to maintain a 1:15 staff-to-child ratio. For the program to have continuity, each school has a site coordinator (a community college work-study student) who prepares the school site, briefs staff, deals with student behavior issues, supervises staff, and serves as a liaison to the parents and the school principal. The site coordinators are critical to the success of the program. For example, if a child has a discipline problem, the program leader can call in the coordinator to help deal with it, rather than disrupt the flow of the program. Site coordinators also decide what goes into the monthly parent newsletter, and they undertake special projects, like holiday parties or family nights.

In 1994-95 the program averaged 110 participants per day with over 250 students registered. Because management of the program is so time-consuming for the coordinator of the Cowlitz Substance Abuse Coalition and the chair of the Steering Committee, the budget included funds to hire a program coordinator. In addition, the 1994-95 budget of \$111,179 includes two site coordinators, increased staffing costs, YMCA reimbursement, and funds to evaluate the program—all costs that were not included in the budget for the previous year. Partial funding has been provided again by the Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation. Additional funding will be sought from United Way, Longview Community College Work-Study program, local service clubs, Ben B. Cheney Foundation, and other foundations.

Program Objectives

Local risk assessment studies utilizing data collected through public meetings, key informant interviews, and surveys indicate that most children in the two target neighborhoods (Wallace and St. Helen's) are affected by one or more risk factors in everyday life. While the Youth After-hours Program affects some risk factors, it is primarily designed to enhance

Exhibit 14B**Youth After-Hours Program-Interagency Memorandum of Understanding**

It is understood by the undersigned agency that they will participate in the cooperative Youth After-hours Program, coordinated by the Cowlitz Substance Abuse Coalition, offered at Wallace Elementary School in Kelso, and/or St. Helen's Elementary School in Longview, State of Washington, under the conditions listed below. This program is designed to offer youth development program opportunities to children in a daily after-school setting at the school building.

It is recognized that each agency independently enters into this program opportunity and that its own agency rules, regulations and policies dictate its program delivery and assure the safety of children that will participate. It is recognized that each agency will participate with promotion of cooperative communication among and between participating agencies. Each agency commits a representative to serve on the Steering Committee which will meet regularly to manage and evaluate the program.

Conditions of Participation:

As a participating agency in the Youth After-hours Program our agency will:

- provide program activities as agreed upon by the Steering Committee;
- provide adequate supervision as defined by agency;
- provide health and safety procedures as necessary by agency;
- complete facility agreement as required by the Longview and Kelso School Districts and assure opening, closing and care of room as outlined in the districts' rules and by their direction;
- provide necessary insurance documentation (Certificate of Insurance) as required for facility usage;
- provide program supplies as necessary to carry out agency program unless separate arrangements have been made to use school equipment;
- participate as appropriate in the coordinating meetings of the Steering Committee to be scheduled as necessary;
- understand that the program being delivered is to support and enhance the role of the school districts in meeting the needs of children and respect the regulations regarding their participation in the federally funded feeding program;
- understand that the role of the Cowlitz Substance Abuse Coalition is that of facilitating communication between agencies participating and assisting with obtaining and managing program funds;
- submit appropriate requests or reports for expenditure of program funds, within established budget guidelines and properly documented, on a monthly basis to the Coordinator of the Cowlitz Substance Abuse Coalition for approval and submission to the fiscal agent;
- agree that United Way of Cowlitz County is authorized to act as fiscal agent for the Youth After-hours Program; and
- provide at least 90 days notice of intent to terminate participation in the program.

Any participating agency/program failing to comply with the aforementioned conditions may be subject to review and/or sanctions from the Steering Committee.

Agency Name

Authorized Signature-Position

Date

Authorized Signature-Position

certain protective factors to counterbalance the risks these children face daily.

The program is designed to build resiliency in children by providing them:

- (1) secure and stable relationships with caring peers and adults;
- (2) safe and attractive places to relax and be with their friends;
- (3) opportunities to develop life skills; and
- (4) achievement, recognition, a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, goal setting, and self-esteem.

The program is seen as more than fun and games; the goal is to teach the participants such skills as how to communicate, make decisions, and solve problems.

Cooperating Agencies

The youth serving agencies providing activities at Youth After-hours include: Camp Fire Boys and Girls, Pacific Peaks Girl Scouts Council, Boy Scouts of America, Longview Parks and Recreation Department, Kelso Parks and Recreation Department, W.S.U. Cooperative Extension/4-H, and the YMCA of Southwest Washington. Each of these agencies sends a representative to monthly steering committee meetings. The program is managed by the coordinator of the Cowlitz Substance Abuse Coalition and the chair of the Steering Committee. Also involved in the Steering Committee are Longview and Kelso School districts. The United Way of Cowlitz County serves as fiscal manager of the program. One official noted, "These organizations never had a reason to get together before. Fortunately, they left the turf issues behind."

Program Evaluation/Outcome Indicators

- In 1993-94, the program had 350 participants registered at Wallace and 231 participants registered at St. Helen's. This represents approximately two-thirds of the two schools' population.
- Over 18,000 child days of service were provided.

An evaluation was completed in June 1994 using written surveys of staff (19), parents (14), and focus group interviews of participants (73) with the following results.

School staff stated:

- the Youth After-hours Program (per the principal at St. Helen's) is a contributing factor to a decrease in the number of office referrals;
- the program has a positive influence on school day attendance because children want to go to Youth After-hours, but they must attend school in order to do so;
- students seem happier at school;
- children who earlier did not want to go home at the end of the day, now have something to which to look forward;
- students are excited to go to the after-school program, so it is a great motivator for getting work done during school time, because they don't want to miss after-school activities; and
- the program keeps kids off the streets, out of abusive homes, and puts them in a safe environment.

Parents commented:

- they have a difficult time convincing their children to come home after school, because they enjoy the program so much;
- they use participation in the program as an incentive in behavior management;
- 58% of parents surveyed rated quality and choice of activities as "super;"
- 42% of parents surveyed stated they had seen an improvement in the behavior of their child as a result of the program; and
- 82% felt that recognition of their children's accomplishments was important and well-done.

Participants commented:

- 58% of students rated the overall program as "great" or "very good" (See Exhibit 14C).

Exhibit 14C

Third grader David says he likes the program and comes every day. "It sure beats staying home alone watching TV, which was boring and sometimes made me mad. Since the program started, I'm not mad!"

The program offers staff the opportunity to counsel individuals (some as young as third grade) into participating in the program rather than becoming involved in gangs. A few have left the program to join gangs and then returned after direct contact with a site coordinator.

In 1994 the program received several awards including the Governor's FACE IT award for prevention, and the Community Leadership Award from the Washington Association of School Administrators. According to Larry Wilgus, Director of Student Services with Kelso School District, and the person who nominated the program for the award:

The program is truly a harbinger for communitywide cooperation in the future as we all strive to meet the needs of increasingly needy students.