

The Collaborative for Building After School Systems: Defining an After-School System

In his 2003 paper, *The Challenge of System-Building in the After-School Field: Lessons From Experience*, Robert Halpern provides a good working definition of such a system as “...all the institutions that have a stake in after-school programming within some defined geographic boundary (providers, funders, regulators, resource organizations, and families themselves); the policies, procedures, regulations, initiatives, and norms shaping the behavior, interactions and relationships among these institutions; and, perhaps, the resource base for providing and supporting after-school programming,” (Halpern, 2003).

Halpern’s vision is good because it is general enough to account for the variety within the stakeholder groups as well as the fluidity and unevenness of the local after-school system building process. For example, in CBASS cities:

- **Providers** include the public and private organizations, and individuals responsible for the day-to-day operation of after-school programs: community based and other not-for profit organizations, public schools, libraries and parks and recreation departments, and public housing agencies. Providers can also be defined as the workforce, i.e. staff that work directly with youth as well as their supervisors (site coordinators or program directors). They include teachers and school supervisors, youth workers, college and high school students, volunteers, and teaching artists.
- **After-school funders** include public and private entities and fee payers that provide revenue for after-school programs. Public funding entities include local, state and federal legislatures, which allocate funds directly and indirectly to other stakeholders in the system. Public funders also include mayors, governors and other elected officials; and agency heads. Private funders include corporations, foundations, and individuals. Intermediaries have also helped increase the amount of private philanthropy targeted to after-school.
- **Formal and informal regulators** establish and administer operational policies and procedures influencing the actions of stakeholders. Many - but not all of them - exercise this influence in their capacity as funders, establishing service goals and benchmarks, staffing, administrative and sometimes even content requirements as conditions for funding. They also include local school boards that regulate the use of facilities, child care licensing agencies, and intermediaries.
- **Public and private resource organizations** help providers deliver after-school services, and help families access them e.g. cultural, professional and curriculum development organizations, childcare resource centers, evaluators and schools.
- In all CBASS cities, **families** are the primary beneficiaries of after-school systems and therefore the most important stakeholders. In addition to the participants, working parents and guardians need safe, continuous and affordable child care for their children until they come home, as do older siblings who are otherwise required to babysit their younger siblings after school.

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Halpern states that the behavior, interactions and relationships among these institutions are shaped by a variety of policies, procedures, regulations, initiatives, and norms. In CBASS cities as elsewhere, the multiplicity of rules and regulations also reflect the differing and shared functions after-school has served and continues to serve, its multiple funding streams, and its formative status. CBASS partners and other intermediaries have taken the lead - usually but not always – with the support of government in creating, modifying and sometimes enforcing the formal and informal rules and regulations. In doing so, they have demonstrated that the intermediary structure is itself an essential step in changing public policy to aid in the formation of a high quality, scalable after-school system. Core functions of intermediaries include: brokering relationships, setting standards, convening local organizations; expanding services; improving program quality; strengthening and supporting the after-school workforce; research and evaluation and promoting sustainability through policy change.

Thus, in addition to supporting the development of individual stakeholders, CBASS intermediaries have helped shape and strengthen the complex relationships among them, thereby creating dynamic and expanding local systems. They have not only established scalable program and cost models and standards of practice: They have built consensus for them among providers, regulators and funders, as well as the systems to support their operation. At the same time they maintain their focus on the child and community, and a commitment to continuous quality improvement and cost efficiency, all of which are difficult for government to sustain.

Additional funding is needed to bring these systems to scale: To this end, the partners continue to advocate at their local and state levels, and support national organizations like the Afterschool Alliance. But there are other challenges to overcome in order to bring quality after-school systems to scale including (but not limited to): accountability, coordination with school day learning; serving older youth, the effects of race, class and gender on system building efforts and workforce development. Intermediaries are well positioned to take on these challenges: and often are more responsive grantees than public entities, more flexible and more efficient.