



Educator Brief

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION • VOLUME 3/NUMBER 1 • MAY 2025

Series
IMMIGRATION
INITIATIVE

After-School Programs: Supporting Immigrant-Origin Youth Development and Belonging

By Paige Marshall

WHAT ARE AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS?

In the critical hours between the final school bell and evening, after-school programs (ASPs) create structured learning environments that serve as locations for youth development. With origins dating back to the 1800s, these programs initially emerged to support immigrant communities through assimilation-focused education and cultural adaptation initiatives.¹ Today, ASPs have evolved into vital spaces for youth development, enrichment, and community building, operating typically between 2-6 PM. Modern ASPs encompass three primary domains: risk mitigation, positive youth development, and academic support.

immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu

EDUCATOR **1** BRIEF SERIES



Inside

- > [Why do After-School Programs Matter?](#)
- > [Challenges to Program Access for Immigrant Families](#)
- > [Resources](#)

Risk mitigation after-school programming focuses on low-income communities, taking a deficit lens framed around preventing crime and delinquency.² **Positive youth development** programs can include prevention goals, but they also focus on providing access to programming that supports core developmental needs as well as enrichment programs that go beyond just needs to providing youth with opportunities to learn new skills, express themselves, and connect programming with pieces of their identities (including through artistic and cultural exploration). Finally, **academic support after-school programs** typically focus on programming aimed at enhancing academic outcomes, including remediation, tutoring, subject-focused clubs, homework help, and college/test prep. Academic programs are often the most invested in by parents and funders because of their easily quantifiable outcomes and perceived impact on students' future achievement, though the other program types—especially enrichment programs—also demonstrate promise.³

WHY DO AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS MATTER?

Research consistently demonstrates that quality after-school programs can significantly impact youth development.⁴ These impacts manifest across multiple domains:

- Increased self-esteem and emotional regulation through supportive relationships and structured activities
- Improved academic performance via targeted support and enrichment opportunities
- Decreased school dropout rates through sustained engagement
- Enhanced sense of belonging and community through peer connections
- Development of positive bicultural identity in culturally responsive environments



The challenge is not just about access but about creating programs that authentically engage with and support immigrant origin youth's complex identities and experiences.¹⁰

- Safe spaces for cultural expression and learning

These outcomes are particularly significant for immigrant origin youth who must navigate both academic challenges and cultural adaptation simultaneously.^{5,6}

The landscape of American education is increasingly diverse, with over 25 percent of school-age children having immigrant parents.⁷ While schools primarily focus on academic requirements and English language acquisition, ASPs provide more adaptable spaces that can respond to students' broader developmental needs and unique challenges.⁸ Compared to school staff, ASP staff often have more flexible time and a higher likelihood of shared experiences and cultural heritage with students which allows them to develop relationships and a sense of belonging with youth that may not be as readily accessible in schools.

This flexibility and greater potential for connection allows youth to feel safer in their ASP to participate in all types of programming leading to greater outcomes. These programs can transform perceived challenges into strengths, supporting multilingualism, resilience, and critical consciousness

development.⁹

CHALLENGES TO PROGRAM ACCESS FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

While after-school programs (ASPs) offer significant developmental opportunities for immigrant origin youth, multiple barriers prevent families from accessing quality programming. Research identifies three interconnected categories of challenges: **practical barriers** tied to resources, **systemic barriers** reflecting historical patterns of exclusion, and a **lack of** culturally sustaining programming that impact program engagement and belonging.¹¹

Practical Barriers

Day-to-day challenges often prevent participation in ASPs. Key obstacles include:

- Transportation limitations and safety concerns, particularly for youth walking home after dark
- Program costs and family financial pressures
- Need for youth to contribute to family system because of lack of access to economic resources

- Complex work schedules limiting parent engagement
- Language barriers in program communications
- Limited translation services

These practical constraints particularly impact low-income immigrant families, creating what researchers call a “wall of disconnection” between programs and parents.^{12,13} The lack of effective communication can lead to misunderstandings, with schools misinterpreting limited family involvement as disinterest rather than recognizing structural barriers.¹⁴

Systemic Barriers

Deep-rooted structural challenges shape both program access and design:

- Pervasive deficit mindsets about immigrant children’s capabilities
- Over-emphasis on “fixing” perceived problems rather than building on strengths
- Uneven resource distribution even within immigrant communities
- Limited program choices focused mainly on remediation
- Experiences of discrimination and exclusion in multiple contexts
- Significantly heightened deportation efforts

Research shows these systemic barriers often lead to programming that fails to meet the needs of immigrant youths and their families nor recognize their assets and potential.^{15,16} Even within co-ethnic neighborhoods, some children receive advanced academic preparation while others are limited to remedial services.¹⁷

Lack of Culturally Sustaining Programming

Programs frequently struggle to create culturally responsive environments due to a variety of factors:

- Defunding of culturally specific



After-school programs that embrace cultural strengths, foster belonging, and support critical consciousness development create transformative spaces for immigrant origin youth to thrive.”²¹

- programming in favor of measurable academic outcomes
- Limited bilingual capacity among staff
- English-only policies that restrict authentic communication
- Policies that fail to acknowledge familial and cultural practices and responsibilities
- Programming that forces choice between acculturation and heritage maintenance

Studies indicate this cultural disconnect can make youth feel “othered” and contribute to their sense of displacement rather than belonging.¹⁸ Programs often fail to strike an effective balance between supporting acculturation while celebrating cultural heritage, leading to environments where immigrant youth struggle to develop integrated identities.¹⁹

Research suggests that successful programs actively work to eliminate these barriers through flexible scheduling, multilingual communication, and culturally responsive practices.²⁰

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING IMMIGRANT ORIGIN YOUTH

Based on the potential promise of after-school programs for immigrant youth and the current challenges faced by youth and their families in accessing them, the following evidence-based best practices are recommended.

Sustained Community and Familial Partnerships

The best way to ensure that families feel properly supported and reflected in program offerings is to partner with them in the design and implementation of programming. One strategy is to designate community members or staff whose role is to engage families in accessing programming and connect families to school and other community



resources through their ASPs.²² In addition to supporting families in accessing and changing current programming, they could also seek out input from families on long term goals for their children, plus children's long term goals for themselves to develop programming that is more attuned to the desires and needs of families.²³ Studies show that programs grounded in community needs and cultural assets lead to stronger engagement and better outcomes.²⁴

Research indicates that successful ASPs recognize family engagement as crucial for program success. Evidence-based practices include:

- Designating staff to engage families in program design and implementation
- Creating flexible attendance policies that honor cultural practices and family needs
- Developing multilingual and multicultural staffing
- Including families in programming decisions and activities

These practices help build trust and create culturally responsive environments that benefit both youth and their families.²⁵ Programs that effectively engage families report

stronger student outcomes and more sustainable community connections.²⁶

Culturally Grounded Support

Effective programs must reflect and respond to the cultural identities of participating youth:

- Programming should mirror community diversity and community-identified needs and strengths
- Curriculum should adapt to match cultural contexts
- Mental health support must be culturally responsive
- Home languages should be honored and integrated while supporting academic English development

Research shows that culturally grounded programs lead to stronger engagement and better outcomes. When programs honor cultural identities, youth demonstrate increased confidence and stronger bicultural identity development.^{28, 29}

Opportunities for Youth Leadership

Youth can be powerful partners in the success of after-school programs.

- Allow youth to serve as resources for their peers and ASP staff about their language, culture, and experiences
- Encourage youth leadership within program structures
- Create opportunities for youth to support each other and give back to their community

Sometimes the most powerful supportive relationships for immigrant youth can be other immigrant youth; ASPs can help facilitate these connections and learn from them to build better programming.

Building Critical Consciousness

Creating safe spaces for identity exploration and advocacy is essential for immigrant origin youth development. Research shows that when programs intentionally focus on critical consciousness development, youth are better equipped to:

- Navigate complex cultural identities through dialogue about immigration experiences
- Develop positive counter-narratives to discrimination
- Support the pre-existing sense of social responsibility often evident in immigrant-origin youth
- Engage in community advocacy and civic action
- Build pride in their immigrant heritage and bicultural identity

Allowing youth to develop a critical awareness of their identity in relation to the world can help them develop a positive multicultural identity and better understand how they can care for their communities in this new context.^{33, 34}

Creative Expression and Heritage Connection

Arts-based programming provides powerful opportunities for cultural expression and identity development:

Key Elements for Program Effectiveness Include:

- Community partnerships
- Multilingual and multicultural staffing
- Cultural respect and celebration
- Youth leadership opportunities
- Designated staff for family engagement

- Theater and performance allow youth to process experiences of discrimination while reclaiming their narratives
- Storytelling connects youth with cultural traditions and community wisdom
- Music and visual arts facilitate emotional expression and cultural pride
- Community performances strengthen intergenerational bonds

Research shows that artistic expression helps youth who feel disconnected from their culture develop authentic connections while combating deficit-based self-perceptions.³⁵

REFERENCES

1. Halpern, R. (2002). A Different Kind of Child Development Institution: The History of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children. *Teachers College Record*, 104(2), 178–211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9620.00160>
2. (Halpern, 2002)
3. Philp, K. D., & Gill, M. G. (2020). Reframing After-School Programs as Developing Youth Interest, Identity, and Social Capital. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 7(1), 19–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219892647>
4. McCombs, J., Whitaker, A., & Yoo, P. (2017). The Value of Out-of-School Time Programs. RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE267>
5. Christensen, K. M., Kremer, K. P., Poon, C. Y. S., & Rhodes, J. E. (2023). A meta-analysis of the effects of after-school programmes among youth with marginalized identities. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 33(4), 882–913. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2681>
6. Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A

RESOURCES

National resources for after-school programming

- [Afterschool Alliance Toolkit](#)
- [SEDL Toolkit](#)
- [NAA Resources](#)

Cultural competency training materials + support for leaders

- [Racial Equity & Anti-Bias Resources for Youth Workers](#)
- [Equitable Communication for Out of School Time Leaders](#)
- [Equitable Hiring for Out of School Time Leaders](#)

Family engagement strategies

- [Parent Engagement Tools List](#)
- [Stories of Family Partnership Project](#)
- [Strategies for Family-Program Partnership](#)

Program evaluation tools

- [6 Tip Sheets for Program Self-Evaluation](#)
- [Program Quality Self-Assessment](#)

Community partnership guides

- [Developing Mutually Beneficial Community Partnerships](#)
- [School-Community Partnerships Guidebook](#)

Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs That Seek to Promote Personal and Social Skills in Children and Adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(3), 294–309.

7. Ridley, J., & King, N. (2024). "I have meaningful work:" Crafting teaching and advocacy at an ESL after-school program. *TESOL Journal*, 15(1), e729. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.729>
8. Pak, J., Gurung, J., & Argenal, A. (2023). Refugee and Immigrant Youth Leaders: Strengths, Futurity, and Commitment to Community. *Social Sciences*, 12(11), 640. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12110640>
9. Morland, L. (2007). Promising Practices in Positive Youth Development with Immigrants and Refugees. *Prevention Researcher*, 14(4), 18–20. [sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1178632920970580](https://doi.org/10.1177/1178632920970580)
10. Gast, M. J., Okamoto, D. G., & Feldman, V. (2017). "We Only Speak English Here": English Dominance in Language Diverse, Immigrant After-School Programs. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 32(1), 94–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558416674562>
11. Zhou, M. (2009). How Neighbourhoods Matter for Immigrant Children: The
12. Studies, 35(7), 1153–1179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830903006168>
12. Cun, A. (2020). Concerns and Expectations: Burmese Refugee Parents' Perspectives on Their Children's Learning in American Schools. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 48(3), 263–272. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00983-z>
13. Afterschool Alliance. (2020). How Afterschool Is Supporting Learning and Recovery during COVID-19. Issue Brief No. 77 https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/issue_briefs/issue_COVID-19_77.pdf
14. Arellanes, J. A., Viramontez Anguano, R. P., & Lohman, B. J. (2019). Bettering the educational attainment for Latino families: How families view the education of their children. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, 18(4), 349–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2018.1426465>
15. Hong, H., & Cai, Q. (2023). Evidence-Based Educational Practices for Working with Refugee Children. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 37(3), 405–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2023.2211127>
16. Edwards, N. M., Isik-Ercan, Z., Lu, H., Fall, M., & Sebti, L. (2023). "Do the Best You Can with Resources You Have to Offer": Community stakeholder views on

supporting immigrant families. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(3), 837–859. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22970>

17. Zhou, M. (2009). How Neighbourhoods Matter for Immigrant Children: The Formation of Educational Resources in Chinatown, Koreatown and Pico Union, Los Angeles. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(7), 1153–1179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830903006168>
18. Tan, E., & Faircloth, B. (2023). One World: Refugee youth incubating epistemologies toward rightful presence with/in community-driven STEM. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 60(8), 1627–1656. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21846>
19. Lin, A. R., Dawes, N. P., Simpkins, S. D., & Gaskin, E. R. (2022). Making the Decision to Participate in Organized After-School Activities: Perspectives From Mexican-Origin Adolescents and Their Parents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 37(3), 378–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558420967116>
20. (Lin et al., 2022)
21. (Pak et al., 2023)
22. Cureton, A. (2023). "After the School Day, What's Next?": Exploring Refugee Youths' Engagement in After-School Programs. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 38(6), 1114–1141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584221144952>
23. (Lin et al., 2022)
24. (Tan and Faircloth, 2023)
25. Lee, S. J., & Hawkins, M. R. (2008). "Family Is Here": Learning in Community-Based After-School Programs. *Theory Into Practice*, 47(1), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840701764763>
26. (Edwards et al., 2023)
27. (Tan & Faircloth, 2023)
28. (Hong & Cai, 2023)
29. Elswick, S., Washington, G., Mangrum-Apple, H., Peterson, C., Barnes, E., Pirkey, P., & Watson, J. (2022). Trauma Healing Club: Utilizing Culturally Responsive Processes in the Implementation of an After-School Group Intervention to Address Trauma Among African Refugees. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 15(1), 155–166. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-021-00387-5>



30. (Tan and Faircloth, 2023)
31. (Pak et al., 2023)
32. Suárez-Orozco, C., Hernandez, M. G., & Casanova, S. (2015). "It's sort of my calling": The civic participation and social responsibility immigrant origin emerging adults. *Research in Human Development*, 12(1), 84-99.
33. Rodriguez, S. (2017). "People Hide, But I'm Here. I Count:" Examining Undocumented Youth Identity Formation in an Urban Community-School. *Educational Studies*, 53(5), 468–491. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2017.1322970>
34. Watson, V. W. M., & Knight-Manuel, M. G. (2020). Humanizing the Black Immigrant Body: Envisioning Diaspora Literacies of Youth and Young Adults from West African Countries. *Teachers College Record*, 122(13), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012201304>
35. Ngo, B. (2017). Naming Their World in a Culturally Responsive Space: Experiences of Hmong Adolescents in an After-School Theatre Program. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 32(1), 37–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558416675233>

Additional Credits

Editor: **Carola Suárez-Orozco**

Line Editor: **Kit von Campe**

Layout Designer: **Andrena Mason**

About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

