



***Beyond 3:30* After-School Program for Inner City Middle Schools Narrowing the Opportunity Gap - Preliminary Findings**

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What the program is about ...

Beyond 3:30 - an innovative, multi-purpose after-school program - was first piloted in seven middle schools under the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) initiative in 2009-10. It was developed in partnership with the Toronto Foundation for Student Success (TFSS), the Toronto Community Foundation, and the Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport to address the after-school needs of adolescents in inner-city neighbourhoods. According to the TDSB's *2006 Grade 7-12 Student Census*, not only do many students from high-needs communities struggle academically, they also lack adult support after school, seldom participate in sports and recreational activities outside of school, and spend more time on TV and/or computer games. The Toronto Community Foundation's 2009 *Toronto Vital Signs Report* further points out that after school unsupervised children are more likely to engage in gang-related or delinquent behaviour, or to become victims of crimes.

In 2011-12, the program expanded to 13 MSIC middle schools with an enrolment of nearly 1,000 students. During the four hours between 3:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., a number of organized activities take place on the school premises. These multiple activities address the following areas:

- learning opportunities (e.g., Homework Club)
- healthy living (e.g., physical activities and Junior Chef's Club)
- life skills development (e.g., leadership, social skills, and building self-esteem)
- creative expression (e.g., performing arts)



What the research has found so far ...

In fall 2011, a multi-phase evaluation, funded by the Ministry of Education, was undertaken by the TDSB's research unit to assess the program in terms of implementation, immediate benefits, and long-term impact. Phase I findings - based on in-depth interviews with various stakeholder groups (including school principals, site co-ordinators, central staff, and parents) and participant surveys - reveal a number of important benefits students gained as a result of participating in *Beyond 3:30*.

Academic Performance

Over 70% of student participants reported in their year-end survey that their marks had increased since attending the *Beyond 3:30's* Homework Club. Interviews with principals, site-coordinators, and parents also indicated signs of improvement in their school work - e.g., more positive view of school, better study habits, and an increase in homework completion. In addition, site co-ordinators mentioned their participants became more confident and willing to ask for help with their homework.

Physical Health

According to the year-end survey and school principals' observations, student participants took part for an average of 60 minutes in regular physical and recreational activities offered by *Beyond 3:30*. In addition, through the Junior Chefs' Club, students learned to prepare healthy snacks and light dinners for their peers in the program. They reported becoming more knowledgeable about nutritious diet and food preparation with the use of healthy and inexpensive recipes.



Social and Emotional Well-being

Based on school principals' observations, aside from delivering the after-school program, *Beyond 3:30* staff also served as caring adults or role models for students. Students felt more comfortable discussing personal problems with them. Different stakeholder groups further confirmed that through specific programming and performance opportunities, *Beyond 3:30* helped students by building up their confidence, supporting their transition into secondary school, and reducing social barriers across grades, cultures, school 'cliques' or social economic background.

Parents also reported their child made more friends since attending *Beyond 3:30*. Some parents further mentioned that the program helped increase communication with their child through conversations about the different *Beyond 3:30* activities their child took part in. As well, program staff witnessed an increase in compassion, more effective communication skills, better conflict resolution abilities, and a stronger sense of belonging and security in school among their student participants.

Student Engagement in School

Interviews with program staff revealed that many student participants came to school because of the program. The variety of *Beyond 3:30* activities made schooling more enjoyable for them. Students looked forward to attending the program and became more engaged in school. Parents also agreed that their child seemed more motivated to go to school.

Student Behaviour after School

Since offering *Beyond 3:30* in their schools, principals witnessed fewer students 'hanging' around after school, and lowered incidents of gang related activities, theft, or complaints from community agencies (e.g., neighbourhood stores, community centre, library) about students causing 'trouble'. Parents also noticed their child becoming more helpful at home, and more positive in attitude toward other family members since attending the program.

Next research steps ...

The immediate impacts identified above will guide subsequent phases of the multi-year evaluation. Quantitative data on student participants (e.g., absenteeism, learning skills, school behaviour, and academic progress) will be gathered to track the sustainability of the immediate benefits gained, and to measure its long-term effects on inner city students and their school community. As well, qualitative data collection will continue to identify effective practices, successful strategies, and conditions required to make the program effective. The knowledge garnered will help establish replicable after-school delivery models that can be of benefit to more students.

* This article is an abstract of an interim report: Yau, M. & Presley, A. (March 2012), *Beyond 3:30 After-School Program: Multi-year Evaluation – Phase I Report*. Toronto, Ontario, CA: Toronto District School Board.