



Evidence of Impact of Partnerships to Bolster Impacts of the Protective Factors

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What are the protective factors and how do they affect community outcomes?

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to echo in the hardest hit communities across the country. Children and families have experienced loss, trauma, and faced adversity not seen in generations. Over the past few decades, prevention research focused on resilience identified certain protective factors that net positive impacts on children, families, and communities. These protective factors contribute to the positive development of children and youth, and buffer negative or traumatic experiences.

A June 2021 report by WestEd¹, [Promoting Protective Factors in California Afterschool Programs](#), commissioned by the California AfterSchool Network, Austin, Wendt, and Lucyna provides a framework that allows some of the conditions described by Benard² to be actionable across settings.

The Protective Factors Framework addresses three distinct elements:

- 01** Caring Relationships (having a caring adult in a child’s life),
- 02** High Expectations (providing encouragement, support, and pathways), and
- 03** Meaningful Opportunities for Participation and Contribution (engage youth in decision making and allow pursuit of interest areas).

According to the report, when these factors are present in any setting (home, school, out-of-school time program), the combined effect of the protective factors allows for “resilience and positive youth development” (p. 2).

When these protective factors are in place, people (children, families, and youth) are:

- ▶ More likely to feel connected to school, society, and/or family (social bonding)
- ▶ Develop critical social and emotional competencies (self-awareness, empathy, problem solving, and emotion regulation)
- ▶ Avoid engagement in risk behaviors and take part in positive academic, personal, and healthy behaviors³

The report suggests that afterschool programs “can positively impact a youth’s sense of school support, safety, and connectedness, leading to more positive school behaviors, academic motivation, and other positive outcomes” (p. 7). In their study, they examined if state funded afterschool programs in California may be contributing to school-based protective factors for participants compared to peers who were non-participants.

¹ Austin et al., 2021

² Benard, 2004

³ Austin et al., 2021

The results showed that students who attended afterschool programs reported significantly higher levels of meaningful participation in school compared to students who did not attend the afterschool programs. This positive effect was true for both school levels (i.e., students in grades 7 and 9 / 11). There was also a greater difference in ratings for this indicator between afterschool participants and non-participants among high school students as compared to the younger students.

Participants in afterschool programs at both school levels also reported significantly greater levels of school connectedness, caring adult relationships, and high expectations, as compared to non-participants. The effect size was largest for high school students on these measures, indicating meaningful differences between afterschool participants and non-participants, with participants showing higher degrees of engagement in these areas.

Afterschool, expanded and summer learning sites as a hub for fostering partnership to enhance the impact of protective factors

What can communities do to amplify efforts to support the protective factors? Creating intentional partnerships can boost the impact by addressing the protective factors from a holistic perspective. Establishing a sense of partnership is contingent on perceptions of reliability, trust, joint planning, and information dissemination and sharing between community based organizations, school districts, and cross-sector partners that support the family and children. The depth and scope of relationships between these partners begin with trust and integrity between the school and afterschool program.

In many cases we know that afterschool staff not only are more likely to represent the diversity of the student population they serve, but typically come directly from the communities they are working in. They are often run by community based organizations that are responsive to the unique needs of the community. Their relationships to the students, families, and communities extend well beyond the typical 3 hours of dedicated afterschool hours per day, resulting in stronger, more trusting relationships. This sets a solid foundation for our afterschool and summer programs to serve as a hub within the community.

The reality in many communities is that school-afterschool partnerships are more often promoted, or included in grant proposals than fully realized. School leaders accept that afterschool programming is important, even as they discount its worth by treating it as entirely separate from the school. Meanwhile, afterschool program leaders may be pulled from developing full and sustainable partnerships with schools because of the immediacy of program needs, among other reasons⁴.



⁴ Anthony & Morra, 2016

In stopping this cycle of disconnection, opportunities for deeper learning, more meaningful relationships, and a true sense of partnership and community could be created. Using the Protective Factors Framework as a starting point for common language opens channels for communication that moves beyond the transactional to the transformational. Taking efforts from the singular to the collective requires coalitions of willing partners and open minds.

There are several successful models that have used local partnerships to begin dialogue to create change in their communities. Initiatives in Connecticut, California, Tennessee, and North Carolina are highlighted below. While the bright spots identified in this paper highlight how using a protective factors lens can help create partnerships and opportunities, there are many other examples across the country that show promise as well.

In New Britain, Connecticut the Coalition for New Britain's Youth and the Consolidated School District of New Britain's partnership have created a citywide [Summer Learning Program](#)⁵. Over the past 11 years, district and community partners have developed an award winning program that supports academics, social-emotional learning, life skills, and family support. With over 700 children per summer, the program has shown gains in attendance and academic success. Parents talk about how their child never wants to get up for school during the school year, but wakes them up at 7:00 to get to the Summer Learning Experience.

It is the relationships between partners and the families they serve that keeps the children engaged and coming back. Instead of focusing solely on academic outcomes, the planning team (which begins meeting two weeks after the close of the summer program for the next year) intentionally develops strategies and programs that can support and enhance the Protective Factors. This happens through a co-taught model of school district classroom teachers and community-based organization staff. This has been an evolutionary process as the community learns together to improve the next iteration.

In California, the [Quality Standards for Expanded Learning](#)⁶ embed principles of social emotional learning (SEL), positive youth development (PYD), and generative protective factors. All of the state's publicly funded Expanded Learning programs participate in a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process. The process focuses on building Quality Expanded Learning environments that are "Safe and Supportive," facilitate "Skill Building" and "Healthy Choices and Behaviors" through "Active and Engaged Learning" that surfaces "Youth Voice and Leadership" in a context that is equitable and accessible to all. The state supports quality and CQI efforts through a System of Support for Expanded Learning. Additionally at the state level, an alliance of statewide intermediaries are coordinating to build a Technical Assistance infrastructure to support statewide adult capacity for positive youth development, and trauma-informed, culturally relevant approaches to programming that boost physical, social, emotional, and cognitive health of participants.

⁵ Consolidated School District of New Britain, Summer Learning Experience

⁶ California Afterschool Network, Quality Standards for Expanded Learning

Moving down to the regional level, the COVID-19 Pandemic surfaced more acute needs for positive youth development, and in one example, emerging efforts have been taking place in Sacramento County with the goal of ultimately providing mental health and wellness clinicians at each school. Of the first schools selected for the county-wide mental health initiative, 10 of 11 had publicly funded Expanded Learning programs. Sacramento County Office of Education Expanded Learning Technical Assistance Providers collaborated with leaders of the County Mental Health Initiative to provide Technical Assistance (TA) about Expanded Learning programs, and how to potentially leverage Expanded Learning partnerships to promote mental health. As part of this, Expanded Learning technical assistance providers expressed the possibility of providing more intensive intervention after school, in partnership with the Expanded Learning program and the possibility of cross-training for mental health clinicians and Expanded Learning site coordinators. Additionally, Expanded Learning technical assistance providers have convened forums for District Leaders to engage with their mental health clinicians, and have provided contact information for all stakeholders across roles, so that all stakeholders could engage Expanded Learning agency leaders and Site Coordinators in partnership to support the mental health of students.

In a more local example, following school closures during the pandemic, in a small town in the greater Sacramento area, many students were struggling with mental health. A parent reached out to the Expanded Learning site coordinator because they had an established relationship, and the site coordinator had a relationship with the child. The child was experiencing a great deal of challenge and was expressing suicidal ideation. The Site Coordinator was able to engage the school counselor, and even though the school was closed and the counselor was not technically “on duty” the school counselor was able to unlock the mental health services to support that youth in crisis. School and Expanded Learning leaders collaborated to support the critical needs of a child during the summer because, “mental health does not take a vacation.”



In creating these local coalitions, afterschool and summer program providers, community and district leaders, mental health professionals, and others came together to discuss the current state of afterschool in the city and what were the academic and social-emotional needs of the students. The consensus was to use the afterschool programs as a vehicle for engaging students and providing valuable supports that fostered positive relationships and resiliency. With afterschool programs being positioned as a community hub that can link people with needed services, they and the children they serve are less likely to fall through the cracks.

Having been hard hit by the opioid crisis, the Tennessee Afterschool Network in partnership with the United Ways of Tennessee, developed an evidence based toolkit to help guide programs and communities in their prevention efforts. In addition, the United Ways of Tennessee joined in creating a broader effort called United We Heal Tennessee. This effort reaches the 34 United Ways from across the state and connects cross-sector partnerships that creates a fabric of community. These efforts bolster proven, evidence-based strategies that support and employ the protective factors.

According to the United Ways of Tennessee, “Tennessee is one of the states most deeply impacted by our national opioid crisis. Our state experienced 1,186 overdose deaths in 2016; 13,034 non-fatal overdose outpatient visits in 2015; and 7,092 non-fatal overdose inpatient stays in 2015. In 2017, 6,879,698 painkiller prescriptions were filled in Tennessee, and we only have 6,716,000 people living in the state”⁷. Through relationships, they have been able to facilitate work with community partners, focused on treatment, help support the protective factors in children, and find ways that schools and community-based organizations can play a role in addressing the crisis. Some examples of United We Heal Tennessee efforts include offering drug take-back events; corporate assistance and support; public education; anti-stigma campaigns; tools for seniors on storing and disposing of medications; training in ACES (adverse childhood experiences) and trauma-informed care; as well as preventive interventions and social and emotional support for children and youth⁸.

The Tennessee Afterschool Network identified several factors that impacted children across the state as a result of the opioid epidemic. The Afterschool Heals Tennessee initiative, “help(s) programs be intentional about building resiliency, prevent drug misuse, and strengthen relationships with youth, caregivers and community partners”⁹. In 2019, the Afterschool Heals Tennessee Task Force was created by the Tennessee Afterschool Network to examine how afterschool programs could address the opioid epidemic and other substance abuse disorders in their community. Research indicates that children that participate in afterschool programs are less likely to abuse drugs¹⁰ and have increased academic and social success¹¹.

The [Tennessee Afterschool Network - Afterschool Heals Tennessee Toolkit](#) highlights evidence-based steps afterschool programs can do to support the protective factors and help children thrive. The Toolkit is broken down into four areas; Getting Started, Building Resiliency, Prevention Education, and Expanding Wellness Focus. In addition, there are several resources to help people get started in the work and learn more about the issue.

The progression through each of these areas helps to create buy-in and tangible results that can be seen in the program and throughout the community. Getting Started involves building awareness and being prepared for an overdose, both of which involve the community (Task Force, Medical). In learning these practices, afterschool programs and partners have the ability to see the potential impact they have with helping children not fall victim to opioid and drug abuse as a result of the relationships they have formed with them.

In the area of Building Resiliency, the protective factors are listed as an element and outlines steps leaders of programs can take to help support children that have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACES) in their lives. Explicitly listing these steps provides programs with a starting point for understanding how to create a trauma-sensitive environment where children can feel safe and cared for. Likewise, the toolkit outlines a step-by-step approach to Service Learning that builds resiliency and sees youth as partners, involving them in decision making about the program.

⁷ United Ways of Tennessee, n.d.

⁸ United Ways of Tennessee, n.d.

⁹ Tennessee Afterschool Network, n.d.

¹⁰ Peterson, 2018

¹¹ Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007

The Prevention Education component of the toolkit provides evidence-based curricular resources that address varying aspects of opioid addiction such as medicine safety, positive decision making, social and emotional learning, and resources afterschool programs and partners could use. Additionally, peer connections are highlighted as a way to share information about the dangers and realities of opioids in their communities. Another aspect of prevention education is around connecting with caregivers. This includes social media posts, email messages, and other ways programs can connect with families and the community.

Finally, the fourth section focuses on Expanding Wellness Focus. This area goes beyond drug prevention and teaches children about healthy eating and exercise. Use of the National AfterSchool Association Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) is highlighted for planning how to create a healthier environment overall. The section concludes with a link to role modeling and tips staff could use to be they are making healthy choices as well.

Within each of the four sections, the toolkit is broken down into three distinct areas; Ideas for Action, Pro Tips, and Resources. The ideas for action section provides leaders with a sequence of steps that will help staff learn about the issue, and support evidence-based strategies to help ameliorate the impact of the personal trauma children have experienced. Together, the toolkit and the Tennessee Afterschool Networks' Afterschool Heals Tennessee webpage provide communities with the resources to help combat the opioid crisis in their state.

With afterschool in many ways acting as a hub of the community, multiple threads converge to support the children and families in their lives beyond the school day and the afterschool program. Efforts such as the United We Heal Tennessee, led by the United Ways of Tennessee, dovetail with the Afterschool Heals Tennessee initiative. These partnerships allow a broader community to help build protective factors around children including schools, business, municipalities, and community members and providers.

The North Carolina Resilience and Learning Project, an initiative of the Public School Forum of North Carolina created the Anonymous Trauma-Informed Project. The project, according to Dr. Sheronda Fleming, Director of the North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs who developed the model says, “[it] is a collaboration between university, community, and school partners to create a whole-school, trauma-informed approach built around two critical mechanisms of change: (1) training and support for all school staff to address knowledge and perspectives about trauma responses, and (2) implementation of school-specific policies and practices to shift school culture and proactively promote student resilience”¹². Some of the methods employed by the model include topics such as staff wellness, school climate, staff-student relationships, social-emotional and self-regulation skills, disciplinary practices, and connection with families and the community. Additionally, project coaches meet regularly with a core group of staff to monitor strategies, support implementation, and modify action plans as needed. The model provides strategies for developing supports for ACEs in the classroom using the a tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) model that allows broad supports for most children and more narrow and targeted interventions for tier 1 and 2 children and youth. A model like this transcends classroom walls and can help create a seamless transition for children between the school day and afterschool program.

¹² S. Fleming, personal communication 9/29/21

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can have enormous impacts on educational outcomes at both the child and school levels. As a student's reported number of ACEs increases, so does that student's likelihood of challenges with attendance, behavior, academics, and social-emotional functioning. It is not surprising, then, that schools in communities facing high levels of adversity are the most likely to have low test scores, chronic absenteeism, high suspension rates, and high rates of teacher turnover.

While this evidence-based Anonymous Trauma-Informed Schools Project has been successful in schools, as noted in the first chapter of the book *Alleviating the Educational Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences: School-University-Community Collaboration*¹³, the focus is about helping educators understand the role of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and addressing the overwhelming nature this can potentially bring to the learning space. The introduction addresses both the foundational research and the practical implementation of the model. Dr. Fleming and her colleagues Elizabeth DeKonty, and Dr. Katie Rosenbaum, have developed training modules and protocols to help schools learn and implement more trauma-sensitive practices as part of the project.

Taking this model to community-based providers to inform practice for afterschool professionals on ACEs and teach strategies to support programming that is trauma-sensitive is the next step. Recently, they have introduced afterschool programs to professional development offered through the North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs to teach these same practices to practitioners working directly with children and youth. According to Dr. Fleming, "The Anonymous Trauma-Informed Schools can also be leveraged within out-of-school time programs as students with ACEs also attend programs before school, after school and during the summer months. Within the OST [out-of-school time] context, the two critical mechanisms of change are adopted in the following manner: (1) training and support for all program staff to address knowledge and perspectives about trauma responses, and (2) implementation of program-specific policies and practices to shift program culture and proactively promote student resilience."¹⁴

Working with afterschool practitioners, the project addresses topics with staff on trauma-sensitive strategies including approaches to staff wellness, program climate, intentional relationship building between program staff and youth program participants, social-emotional, self-regulation and co-regulation skills, promotion of predictability and consistency, limiting exclusionary practices and connection with families and the community. Creating a sense of community and partnership between the school and afterschool program has innumerable benefits. According to Bennett¹⁵, when there is a sense of partnership, sharing of resources (curriculum, planning, etc.) and having meaningful communication and relationships, children show an increase in test scores. Conversely, when there is little sense of partnership, children actually have a decrease. Creating points of connection that support evidence based practices such as this can help with the pervasive disconnection that often impedes successful partnerships¹⁶ that impedes the full actualization of the protective factors within the community served.

¹³ Rosenbaum, K., DeKonty, E., & Fleming, S. (2020). *Alleviating the Educational Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences: School-University-Community Collaboration*⁸ United Ways of Tennessee, n.d.

¹⁴ S. Fleming, Personal Communication, 9/29/21

¹⁵ Bennett, T. (2015).

¹⁶ Anthony, K. & Morra, J. (2016).

In addition to communication strategies, creating a sense of partnership and community also involves breaking down competitive barriers between afterschool programs within the community. How can we more effectively share resources (curriculum, websites, best practices) as well as staff and compliment the strengths each organization brings to the table? Are there age groups that are more suited for certain agencies? Who can take the lead and who can step back? Partnership is never easy and requires compromise and understanding to move forward, especially if some partners do not use the same language or jargon. The most important attribute to consider is aligning to a central vision of what could be, weaving the elements of the protective factors framework into everything with intention.



How do we collectively advocate for cross-sector collaboration that contributes to community-wide support?

We have seen in many places unprecedented dollars pouring into education and other youth-serving systems. In some places we have seen unique, innovative, child serving solutions, and in other places, in a rush to get dollars out the door and spent, institutions revert back to the default practices that meet the bare minimum of the requirements but ultimately do not center the needs of the key people in the system (students, families and staff). And in some cases we have even seen school districts, particularly small/rural districts, turn down money because in the midst of COVID, the top priority is trying to figure out how to open a school and figuring out how to do anything else can feel overwhelming.

So we must consider - what are the conditions of the system that allow for these unique and innovative child-serving solutions? How do we nurture these conditions in other places? How do we provide support and resources beyond just dollars so that we not only meet the most immediate and pressing needs, but simultaneously begin to reimagine the systems that support our children and youth?

In short, we know the answer is that we must collaborate - and not only within our systems but we must advocate for intentional partnerships that create a web of supports that can help lift children and families out of poverty, address the inequities that pervade systems, and create opportunities for growth and development that encompass a comprehensive strategy for implementing practices that amplify the protective factors. This is not an easy task, nor one that regularly has the political or societal will.

It is easier to maintain the status quo, to do what we've always done. Formula grants, parallel programming that is often duplicated within the same community by another agency, and more. It takes bold leadership and willing partners to create this vision. The good news is that it is possible and that, in response to the pandemic, the social, emotional, and academic wellness of children is being looked at more critically in multiple sectors using the available evidence-base. In many locations, for at least the next few years the new education funding in the American Rescue Plan (ESSER III) in many districts and communities is sufficient to help bring together partners and weave the tapestry of a community with a holistic approach and common language grounded in the protective factors and student success.

What are some recommendations for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers?

Practitioners

- ▶ Recognize the unique set of **assets** and **expertise** you bring to the table - these are important in supporting our students and families well being in any context, but are critical during crisis and in the COVID-19 era.
- ▶ Remain committed to the **core tenets of positive youth development and student success** as the foundation for your program, whether virtual, in-person, or hybrid:
 - ▷ Providing safe, calm, and predictable environments for youth.
 - ▷ Identifying and meeting the varying needs of students. Each is unique and meeting our students where they are is crucial to help them navigate the layers of trauma many of them are currently experiencing.
 - ▷ Prioritize opportunities for connection amongst students and caring adults - A single positive, trusting relationship with a caring adult can make an enormous difference in the ability of children to overcome a host of negative life experiences.
- ▶ **Make Sure You Are At the Table!** Cross-collaboration doesn't happen if folks aren't in the room when decisions are being made. If you're not already invited into those spaces, find out when and where they are happening and make the case to be included. Don't come empty handed or simply with a list of requests, it will often be easier to secure your spot if you can articulate the assets you bring and actionable ideas to collaboratively support students.



- ▶ **Build and Leverage Partnerships** - now is not the time to go it alone. With significant dollars pouring into education and youth services it might be easy and tempting to return to our silos, but that often is not in the best interest of our students. Partnerships and collaboration are much like a garden - they don't happen overnight and require thoughtful and ongoing cultivation. So consider how you might start a small garden of partnerships and grow it over time. Do you have existing partnerships you can reinvigorate or strengthen? Have you been talking about a potential partnership but never made it actionable? If an entire organization/ agency isn't willing to collaborate, are there individuals you can partner with? Consider what's the one next thing you can do to build and leverage partnerships.

Researchers

- ▶ **Expand Research Partnerships:** Partnering with community based organizations can allow researchers to gather data from multiple sources. Being able to understand what adversity families face and what systems are needed could help in the implementation of the protective factors framework across a community.
- ▶ **Cross-Sector Research Teams:** Taking a multidisciplinary approach allows researchers to offer different perspectives and possible solutions to problems that are identified in a research study. This would allow multiple stakeholders to benefit from the research being conducted.
- ▶ **Identify Local Champions:** When partnering with communities, researchers could consider who are the local champions. Is there a funder that wants to know more about their community and how they can direct grants? Is there someone from a community based organization or a municipality that wants to take a lead in connecting research to practice? Is there a local coalition that can help shepherd the research being done on the ground to ensure it connects with the voices most in need of being heard?

Policymakers

- ▶ **Flexibility and Accountability:** It is crucial to find balance between flexibility and accountability. Flexibility should be provided to ensure that resources are responsive to local context, but also embed enough accountability to ensure that resources are utilized as intended.
- ▶ **Invest Resources:** Funding is unprecedented but also needed. To ensure funding resources can be well utilized policy makers must also invest in coordination and collaboration efforts. Much of the funding encourages collaboration but does not invest into the structures and coordination efforts needed to ensure true collaborative work occurs. Collaboration is often treated as a box to be ticked off and completed through something like a once-a-year stakeholder survey. True collaborative work requires time, intentionality, and staff to support coordination - if resources are not invested into these supports then funding will often be spent the way it always has been.
- ▶ **Invest in Staff:** Our staff cannot care for our children and youth if they are not themselves well cared for. Throughout COVID their workloads have doubled and tripled and the workforce has faced shortages as have many others. We must invest in our staff, invest in their health, safety, and well-being, and recognize their work with appropriate pay. We must also invest in the development of emerging, and cross-sector leaders. We must provide them with the supports they need to thrive in their roles and their careers.
- ▶ **Focus on Safety:** The focus on safety must be multi-dimensional and consider the physical, emotional, and mental safety of all of our students and staff.

Footnotes:

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As the Associate Executive Director for the Connecticut Network for Children and Youth, Ken has 30 years working in and with afterschool and summer programs as a line staff, site-supervisor, program director, district coordinator, and the past thirteen years with the Network. He oversees professional development, school and community partnerships, consultation, quality advising, and data, research, and evaluation efforts. He has a Bachelor's from Southern Connecticut State University; a Master's in Organizational Management & Leadership from Springfield College, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Hartford and was a White-Riley-Peterson Policy Fellow in its inaugural year in 2012. His research includes practices that build sustainable partnerships between school and afterschool programs and developing research-practitioner partnerships.

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Heather joined the California AfterSchool Network (CAN) team as the Policy and Outreach Director in December 2018. She previously worked for the Expanded Learning Division at the California Department of Education where she oversaw the development and implementation of strategic plan efforts that reshaped the Division to focus on providing high quality expanded learning opportunities for California's youth. She currently oversees CAN's work around advocacy and policy, data and research, communications and events, and other outreach efforts. Heather has over 14 years of publicly policy experience starting with her participation in the California Executive Fellowship program, and specifically over 10 years supporting afterschool/expanded learning programs. Heather received her BA in Political Science from CSU Fullerton and was part of the 8th cohort of White-Riley-Peterson Policy Fellows.

Resources/References

[Evidence Base for Summer Enrichment and Comprehensive Afterschool Opportunities](#)