

Strategies to Support Our Middle School Youth

A Strategic Plan of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Middle School Youth

Mounting research suggests that middle school youth who engage in quality out-of-school-time (OST) activities perform better academically, demonstrate greater social and emotional competency, engage less in risk behaviors, and engage more in sports and exercise in comparison to youth who do not participate in OST activities. Therefore, it is of great concern that only one-third of Cambridge middle school youth regularly participate in out-of-school time (OST) programs and activities.

Background

To address concerns about middle school youth participation in out-of-school time programs and activities, **Mayor E. Denise Simmons** appointed **Vice Mayor Sam Seidel** and **Cambridge School Committee Member Nancy Tauber** to co-chair a Blue Ribbon Commission on Middle School Youth. The Commission, comprised of school department staff, human service providers, expert consultation from the Aspire Institute at Wheelock College, elected officials and middle school families, completed a comprehensive strategic planning process in the spring of 2009. The result of this process was the development of *Shared Youth, Shared Strategies* plan that outlines a citywide approach for greatly enhancing OST opportunities for middle school youth and families across the city. The *Shared Youth, Shared Strategies* plan begins and builds from a single citywide strategic goal that has been adopted by City Council and School Committee:

GOAL: To ensure broad participation of Cambridge middle school youth in quality out-of school-time experiences that foster both their present and future learning and life success.

Shared Youth, Shared Strategies Key Findings:

The *Shared Youth, Shared Strategies* plan is based on a wide-ranging review of Cambridge middle school youth, youth development and the current middle school and youth serving systems. Key findings from this review include:

- 1. In comparison to nearby communities, the Cambridge middle school youth population is relatively modest in size, but spread across more schools.** Expanding and improving OST options for Cambridge middle school youth will require new and creative efforts to coordinate services across multiple school sites and OST providers.
- 2. Middle school youth are in a critical developmental stage, engaged in defining both a present and future self identity.** It is essential that adults working with middle school youth are well-versed in core developmental issues—e.g. identity, autonomy, and future goal orientation—and capable of translating this understanding into challenging and supportive programs for middle school youth.
- 3. Cambridge middle school youth would benefit from extended learning opportunities after school and during the summer.** High quality after school and summer programs can significantly increase the time youth spend engaged in learning activities, foster greater motivation to learn and improve academic content knowledge and skills, thereby helping to reduce achievement gaps between student subgroups.
- 4. While many middle school youth report high levels of physical activity, segments of youth are not consistently engaged in sports or exercise programs.**

Cambridge schools, OST programs and health agencies should explore ways to improve physical activity levels and healthy eating habits among middle school youth, especially middle school girls.

5. **Participation of Cambridge middle school youth in OST has increased in recent years, but there is room for further improvement, especially among older youth (seventh and eighth graders).** The city must make concerted efforts to engage the two-thirds of middle school youth who are not consistently enrolled in OST programs.
6. **Middle School OST options and experiences vary considerably across schools and neighborhoods.** Several factors related to where students go to school—such as the type of OST programs on site, transportation and school release times—have an influence on OST participation.
7. **There is currently less need for more OST resources than a need for improved coordination of existing resources.** Many OST programs are open to middle school youth, however, only a few serve significant numbers of middle school youth, especially older youth. Current OST programs must explore ways to target certain developmental age groups, rather than serve a broader K-8 range, and then provide broad access to these targeted programs.
8. **There are limited quality improvement and professional development activities specifically designed for OST programs serving middle school youth.** Cambridge OST programs working with middle school youth would benefit from specialized professional development for this age group, focusing on areas, such as youth development, academic enrichment, inclusion of children with special needs, and engaging families.

System Level Strategies

Based on these key findings, the *Shared Youth, Shared Strategies* plan outlines several system-level strategies for improving the quality and enrollment of middle school OST programs. These strategies are “system-level” because they are designed to change policies and practice across agencies, programs, neighborhoods and youth, rather than benefit individual youth, families or programs. The plan’s strategies focus on three areas:

1. Community Awareness and Outreach

Strategies to improve information about OST programs for youth, families, and schools.

2. Service Delivery and Coordination

Strategies to track enrollment, target services, and improve access across programs, schools and neighborhoods.

3. Quality Improvement

Strategies to support OST programs in offering rich, developmentally appropriate and challenging learning and social experiences.

Next Steps

Over this fall, the Mayor and Commission Chairs will pursue the following steps to move the *Shared Youth, Shared Strategies* plan forward:

1. **Implement the plan’s strategic goal** in partnership with City Council, School Committee, Kids’ Council, key city agencies, as well as community partners, school and OST program leaders.
2. **Work with the School Department and City leadership** to further develop and implement system-level strategies over the next three years (June 2009 to June 2012).
3. **Pursue funding and grant opportunities** that will support implementation of the plan.

For More Information about the Shared Youth, Shared Strategies Plan visit:

<http://www.cambridgema.gov/mayor.cfm> or <http://www.cpsd.us/cpsdir/BlueRibbon.cfm>