



YOUTH RESILIENCE: Strategies for the Third Space



Overview

In a small, rural state such as Vermont, out-of-school time programs and resources play a critical role in efforts to break the cycle of addiction and to heal opioid-affected communities. The strategies proposed in this report promote prevention in communities affected by opioid addiction by:

- Increasing youth resiliency;
- Supporting systems alignment and cross-sector collaboration; and
- Strengthening out-of-school time programs and supports.

Complementing state opioid crisis response efforts that focus on home and families, as well as interventions through the formal education system, the recommendations in this section strengthen and deepen Vermont's ability to respond to the opioid crisis by increasing access to out-of-school time programs and by raising the awareness, skills, and resources of staff and practitioners working with children and youth in afterschool programs and other youth-serving organizations.

The strategies outlined also significantly contribute to prevention efforts in Vermont by increasing opportunities for youth voice and youth engagement and by empowering young people affected by addiction in their families and communities to become integral contributors to the solutions most needed in Vermont.



Prevention in the Third Space

Vermont recognizes the value of the third space in a young person's life. With home and family being the first space, school and the formal education system being the second space, the third space includes everything else—all the important time outside the school day and over the summer, where so much important learning and growth can happen. Research over the past decade has shown that this third space is critical to helping children and youth develop into healthy, well-rounded adults. It also encompasses a significant amount of time: a young person in Vermont spends only 20% of their waking hours in school and the rest of the time at home or in this third space—in the community, working jobs, hanging out with friends, participating in extracurricular activities, volunteering, and pursuing interests and hobbies. An effective statewide approach to prevention must take into account this vital space where youth and young adults live, work, play, and grow.

Research has also shown that adolescence is a critical time for investing in health, learning, relationships, and experiences, with benefits that continue across the life course. Adolescence is a time of great potential when decision-making faculties crystallize, social-emotional skills mature, new interests grow, and adult identities begin to emerge. Young people experience a major developmental window for the brain from adolescence through the mid-20's, centering on the frontal lobe. This is the control center for "executive functions" such as planning, impulse control and reasoning. As the brain continues to develop, adolescence is a time when youth first start making decisions independently of parents or families, choices that can help set young people up for success or start them on more riskier paths.

Adolescence presents an opportunity to shape long-term outcomes for Vermont by laying the foundations of future health and well-being, not just for the current generation, but also for the next. The data and recommendations in this section outline how Vermont can best invest in programs and strategies for youth in the third space in ways that will fundamentally expand prevention efforts and have positive, profound, and long-lasting impact on the academic success, healthy development, and future achievement of our youth.

A note on terminology

When used throughout this report, the word "afterschool" is used in the most expansive manner and encompasses any program working with children and youth in elementary, middle, and high school outside the school day and over the summer. Programs operating in this third space—outside of home and school—include before school programs, summer camps, traditional afterschool programs, extracurricular activities, teen centers, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs, local libraries, sports teams, prevention networks, and more.



Afterschool Programs and the Connection to Prevention

The rate of opioid overdose deaths in Vermont is the 14th highest in the nation and is still rising. The impacts are striking:

- Living with an addicted caregiver is the third most common adverse family experience facing children and youth in the state, according to Vermont researchers;¹
- One out of every seven children in Vermont lives with someone with substance use problems;² and
- The opioid epidemic continues to strain Vermont's child welfare system, with substance abuse being a factor in almost a third of all reports received by the state from people who are concerned about a child's well-being.³

Without collective action and resiliency-focused crisis responses on a community level, many of Vermont's affected children and youth will be caught in a cycle of addiction themselves. In breaking this cycle of use, addiction, and overdose, Vermont cannot afford to allow any of our collective resources to go underutilized. The Governor's Opioid Coordination Council published a report (January 2019) that highlights the importance of community-based prevention and strengthening resiliency

in Vermont communities. The strategies proposed in this report recommend fully leveraging our statewide system of afterschool programs and youth-serving organizations—not to mention Vermont's youth themselves—to disrupt this pernicious public health crisis.⁴ Specifically, one of the report's recommended primary prevention strategies is to increase geographic equity and access to afterschool and out-of-school time activities.

Afterschool programs sit at a crucial nexus between school, community, and family. When it comes to effective prevention strategies, Vermont cannot afford to focus only on school-based interventions or only on community-based interventions. It is also not enough to create strategies that address school, community, and home unless the connection and alignment across these arenas is meaningful and substantial. The potential for significant and long-lasting change comes from moving into the space between and across these silos of prevention, something that afterschool programs and youth-serving organizations are well-positioned to do. It is by breaking down these disparate approaches that the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts.

There are two critical components behind this approach: (1) understanding why the third space is an important and integral element in Vermont's response to the opioid crisis, and (2) recognizing how a targeted investment in this space can have a significant impact in disrupting the multi-generational impact of opioid addiction and mitigating the effects on Vermont's children, youth, families, and communities.

Data from Vermont's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) also support this connection between participation in afterschool activities and reduced incidents of drug use. The 2017 YRBS data show that students who participate in extracurricular activities each week (up to 19 hours/week) are significantly less likely to use any alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana than those who did not participate in any activities.⁵

In addition to keeping kids away from drugs after school, afterschool programs build protective factors that prevent substance use disorders from occurring and can reduce risk factors that lead to misuse of substances. Afterschool programs that stress authentic youth engagement and youth voice reduce substance abuse through the development of protective or resiliency factors such as school connectedness, self-control, self-confidence, and quality peer relationships.⁶

Quality afterschool programs are themselves protective factors for youth and families. Families engage with program providers regularly, and afterschool programs often serve as the first line of communication on adverse behaviors. Afterschool programs also help connect parents and families with needed community resources when dealing with a multitude of issues in and outside of the home. In communities throughout Vermont, afterschool program providers are called to step in when families are in crisis and the affected children and youth need supervision, caring adults, academic support, and a safe, healthy environment between school and home. In addition, schools often refer specific students to afterschool programs when they have concerns about a child's behavior or home situation.

Why Afterschool Matters

Studies have shown that without access to programs and activities, drug use and other dangerous behavior increases in the afterschool hours. Specifically, on school days the hours from 3 to 6pm are the peak hours for youth to commit crimes, be in or cause an automobile accident, be victims of crime, smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs.⁷ Research finds that youth who are not involved in constructive, supervised extracurricular activities are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as school failure, drug use, and delinquency.⁸ In fact, one study showed that teens who do not participate in structured activities after school are nearly three times more likely to skip classes at school, experiment with drugs, and engage in sexual activity than teens who do participate.⁹

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Afterschool programs provide a safe and stable place for children and youth to reduce stress through exercise, healthy eating, engaging activities, positive peer relationships, and caring adults. Afterschool programs are also integral to providing supports for children in foster care, an increasing number of whom are in state care in Vermont due to substance abuse issues.¹⁰ Quality afterschool programs have staff who can provide trauma-informed services that offset the impact of living with an addicted caregiver or loved one. Addressing the impact of addiction and other adverse childhood experiences in turn reduces development of substance use disorders and other future health concerns.¹¹ As the opioid epidemic continues to disrupt Vermont families, these supports become increasingly important.

Leveraging Existing Systems

Vermont has a strong, vibrant network of afterschool programs and youth-serving organizations that are well-positioned and receptive to being fully leveraged to address the current crisis. Afterschool program directors in Vermont are a well-educated, dedicated, and experienced workforce. Effective afterschool directors work closely with school-based professionals, collaborate with a wide variety of community partners, and are adept at interacting with youth and engaging families.

Training and support for direct service staff in these programs is important. Afterschool staff are often the ones who interact with families and caregivers at the end of the day and need to know how to recognize the signs of addiction and what to do when dealing with a family or child who is in crisis or who has experienced a recent traumatic event. However, a recent statewide survey conducted by Vermont's Youth Services Advisory Council found that afterschool providers and other youth care workers across Vermont are looking for additional and higher-level opportunities for professional development and training specifically related to prevention, substance use, and trauma-informed practices. A significant proportion of survey respondents reported the impacts of addiction and opioid crisis-related family trauma on children and youth as among their top concerns and challenges in being able to do their job well. Staff also need to be trained to recognize when the need or situation being presented goes beyond their own expertise and how and where to refer the family or young person. Bringing targeted training and crucial prevention information to direct service staff in afterschool programs and youth serving organizations will help to mitigate these gaps in knowledge and better utilize an important workforce that is present in and integral to the well-being of communities throughout Vermont.

Finally, Vermont's youth are part of this conversation as well. Authentic youth engagement is highly correlated with long-term positive youth outcomes. In October 2017, young people from across the state came together to create a Declaration of Youth Rights for Vermont.¹² The rights identified by the young people cover a wide swath of essential needs for healthy development and lifelong

success, specifically mental health, social connections, adult role models, access to afterschool programs, and having their voices heard. In a similar manner to youth stepping forward to address the crisis of gun violence, the opioid crisis response can create a space for young people to identify strategies to create a better future for their communities and help our state break free of the opioid crisis. Prevention efforts should increase opportunities for meaningful youth response to the opioid crisis and related youth issues across the state by increasing the number of afterschool programs and youth serving organizations effectively utilizing youth councils and other youth engagement processes to inform prevention efforts, advise on programming in the third space, and target needed increases in out-of-school time opportunities.

Current Status of Afterschool Programming in Vermont

In Vermont, 77% of children and youth ages 6-17 have all available parents in the workforce.¹³ For most families, there is a gap of 15-25 hours per week when parents are still at work and children and youth are out of school and need supervision. This need for programs is even greater during school vacation weeks and over the summer. Approximately 24% percent of Vermont's children and youth, grades K-12, are currently enrolled in afterschool programs. Of those not currently in programs, 33% (more than 22,000 children and youth) would participate if more programs were available and accessible.¹⁴ One of the biggest barriers to program participation is cost.

For two years, the Vermont State Legislature charged an Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Working Group under the PreK-16 Council with evaluating issues of equity in and access to Vermont's Expanded Learning Opportunities, including afterschool and summer learning programs. In several reports, the ELO Working Group identified: key elements of quality afterschool and summer learning programs; ways to increase access and remove barriers to afterschool and summer learning programs across the state; and recommendations for how afterschool and summer learning programs can play an integral role in supporting student success.¹⁵ In support of the ELO Working Group, Vermont Afterschool secured a

grant from the National Conference of State Legislatures to create a [statewide database of afterschool and out-of-school time programs](#), including indicators pertaining to quality and access. In the years since, Vermont Afterschool has continued to maintain and update that database and can provide a comprehensive analysis of the current state of afterschool programming and gaps in access throughout the state.

The ELO Working Group also assembled data on program cost and made detailed recommendations for how funding from the state could be best allocated through a community grant process.¹⁶ All this information could be used to quickly get a grant program up and running in order to increase access to afterschool and summer learning programs, especially for low-income children and youth and in underserved areas of the state. Finally, the ELO Working Group conducted a return on investment (ROI) study that found that for every dollar spent on quality afterschool and summer learning programs, Vermont gets back up to \$2.18 in long-term savings from reduced criminal activity and substance abuse treatment, as well as accruing additional benefits from increased high school completion and work productivity.¹⁷

For every dollar spent on afterschool, Vermont gets back up to **\$2.18 in long-term savings** from reduced criminal activity and substance abuse treatment, as well as additional benefits from increased high school completion and work productivity.



Drawing From Other Models

In developing the recommendations outlined below, the Opioid Coordination Council considered models for prevention and positive youth development from countries that have well-developed and effective approaches, namely Iceland and Finland. A brief overview of system-wide efforts in each of these countries is provided below.

The Icelandic Model for Broad-based Prevention

In response to concerns about the increasing prevalence of drug and alcohol use among adolescents, social scientists with the Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA), a non-profit research institute affiliated with Reykjavik University, developed and implemented an evidence-based, multi-stakeholder, community-based model for adolescent substance use prevention. The Icelandic Model of Adolescent Substance Use Prevention, or “Icelandic Model,” aims to reduce the use of substances including cannabis, cigarettes, and alcohol by increasing parental monitoring and parental social involvement, and through youth participation in organized sports, the arts, and other structured activities after school. Studies show that after implementing the model, substance use and risk factors such as engaging in a “party lifestyle” decreased dramatically between 1997 and 2017.

The Finnish Model for Youth Work

Finland has an extensive system for Youth Work that is being studied by and replicated in countries around the world. With one of the shortest school days but some of the highest test scores in the world, the programs, support, and opportunities provided for youth in the third space in Finland are important to consider. Neighborhoods in every city and town have youth centers that are open usually from 12pm to 9pm and offer a safe space for youth to congregate as well as access to a wide range of resources (e.g., digital recording studios, theatre programs, graffiti art, painting, crafts, jewelry making, video production, band equipment, etc.). Encouraging young people to discover passions and interests in community with other young people and supported by adult role models and mentors is a priority in Finland: One of the key outcome measures of the Ministry of Education and Culture is that every youth in Finland will have a hobby. In this context, hobbies are seen as a way for young people to develop skills, interests, self-identity, self-efficacy, and social networks. Finnish youth workers are highly trained experts on youth development, youth transitions, youth living conditions, and youth culture who operate within this third space, connecting with youth and supporting healthy decision making. Bachelors, masters, and doctorate degrees in youth work are all available in Finland. The system of youth work in Finland recognizes adolescence and young adulthood as a special and important time in a person's life, respects the autonomy and decision-making abilities of young people, and provides a cross-sector integrated approach to supporting positive youth development (e.g., education, health, prevention, social connections, employment, etc.).



Recommendations

Youth make a better Vermont. Vermont values youth as they are; just by being young people living here, they enrich our communities. Young people are also problem-solvers who are eager to be engaged in making our state a stronger, healthier, and happier place to live. As Vermonters, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that all young Vermonters are safe, healthy, supported, educated, and engaged. This means recognizing that young people need what we all need: community connection, opportunities to learn, and access to recreation and other activities. The strategies proposed in this section reflect the fact that young people spend much of their time outside of their homes and outside of school, making the third space an important place for young people to get what they need as they grow up. Afterschool and summer learning programs are essential in this third space, and with a proven track record for preventing substance abuse, increasing resilience, and supporting positive youth development, investment in afterschool programs is an important use of state prevention dollars.



Recommendations to Increase Access to Afterschool Programs and Out-of-School Activities:



Increase state funding for afterschool programs, especially for children and youth in low-income families, young adolescents and teenagers, and in underserved areas of the state.

Reports from Vermont's PreK-16 Council found that \$2.5 million in state funding, as part of a grant program with a 1-to-1 match requirement, would help to provide for comprehensive afterschool programming in all low-income communities in Vermont.¹⁸ The structure for how funds are allocated should be decided by a cross-sector, cross-agency group as described below and draw on the recommendations outlined by the ELO Working Group in their report, *Closing the Gap in Vermont*.¹⁹



Convene a cross-sector committee on afterschool programming and out-of-school time opportunities.

Reconvene the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Working Group under the PreK-16 Council as a permanent legislative committee, reassigned to the Advisory Council for Strengthening Families, and charged with making recommendations for how Vermont can best use private-public funding, partnerships, and public policy to ensure that afterschool programs and out-of-school opportunities are available, accessible, and affordable in all communities. If this is not possible, an alternative approach would be to create a working group with these responsibilities either as a stand-alone committee or as a standing committee under a cross-agency, cross-sector council such as the Youth Services Advisory Council, which is supported by the Vermont Agency of Human Services.



Support systems alignment and cross-sector collaboration. Include afterschool providers in existing state-supported initiatives connected to prevention and youth resiliency, including school-based models (e.g., MTSS, PBIS, etc.) and community-based initiatives (e.g., Youth Thrive, Building Flourishing Communities, Strengthening Families 10-14, etc.). In addition, connect local and regional prevention efforts to key state and federal funding streams for afterschool programming. For instance, require schools that receive 21st Century Community Learning Center grants from the Vermont Agency of Education to connect their school-based prevention efforts with their afterschool and summer learning programs. Similarly, increase opportunities for licensed afterschool programs that receive funding and support under the Child Care Development Fund to meaningfully connect with school-based and regional prevention efforts.



Include youth voice in prevention discussions. Connect to the Vermont Youth Declaration of Rights and set a statewide expectation that prevention efforts and related discussions will incorporate youth voice in sustained and meaningful ways.²⁰ Support afterschool programs and other youth-serving organizations in forming youth advisory councils and creating opportunities for youth to identify and co-create targeted community-based prevention initiatives, improve afterschool programming in their area, and inform decisions affecting opportunities and resources for youth in the third space.

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