

The logo for GRASP (Greater Resources for After-School Programming) features the word "GRASP" in a large, bold, sans-serif font. The letters are white with a light blue shadow effect, giving them a three-dimensional appearance. The letters are set against a light blue background that has a subtle, abstract geometric shape behind it.

Greater Resources for After-School Programming

# Moving an Out-of-School Agenda: Lessons and Challenges Across Cities

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with the support of the  
**Charles Stewart Mott Foundation**

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## The Common Ground: Challenges across Cities

What, then, are the common tasks facing cities committed to saturating their city with high quality out-of-school opportunities, available to every young person? While no list is definitive or complete, we identify ten critical tasks.

**TASK #1:**  
**Ensuring adequate coordination, collaboration and networking among those working with young people — within sectors, across sectors, and between organizations and community/family stakeholders.**

Every city examined through the GRASP process cited “relationship-building” tasks — convening, collaboration, networking, coordination — as among the most vital tasks in strengthening out-of-school opportunities for young people. The range of stakeholders, the different fields and organizational cultures in which they do their work, and the necessity of joint efforts to satisfy unmet needs create a climate where connection is a top priority.

Several types of relationship-building efforts stood out as clear challenges. Cities struggle to build networks within sectors — most notably, coordinating bodies that bring together out-of-school program providers. They also struggle with consistent tensions between public providers (schools in particular) and community-based organizations. While several cities indicated that relationships between city governments and school districts were of particular importance, few have built effective working partnerships. Finally, in cities of any significant size, whole-city coordination infrastructures are not sufficient; coordination at the neighborhood level is equally vital.

Cities face an uphill battle in strengthening the connections among stakeholders. Few existing tables have seats for all the stakeholders — workforce development, libraries, schools, parks, youth-serving organizations, city government, juvenile justice and young people themselves, just to name a few. At the same time, structural commitment — build-

ing the right tables — is not enough. A number of cities have created structures that, on the surface, look remarkably promising but fail to make concrete contributions. One critical ingredient of effective coordination: local intermediaries — organizations by their nature in the “brokering and facilitation” business — are nearly a necessity if communities hope to sustain the relationships between the range of out-of-school players (Wynn, 2000). Unfortunately, intermediaries are as delicate as they are essential, making connection-building horsepower difficult to maintain.

**TASK #2:**  
**Building a stable, high-quality workforce through credentialing, staff development, training and compensation.**

Out-of-school programming is a human business. It is first and foremost about the people who are in daily contact with young people. Yet, ensuring that staff are competent and well supported is remarkably complicated. Much of this complexity has to do with the emerging and composite nature of the out-of-school field. New funding streams have generated new jobs — few of which are well understood, appreciated or paid. And many of these new jobs sit at the juncture of previously separate professions — teaching, youth work, child care, employment training. New challenges join persistent ones. Lack of competitive wages and benefits, limited opportunities for advancement, and few opportunities for professional development combine in a recipe for high rates of turnover in most out-of-school-related professions. The good news is that a number of national and local efforts are addressing each of these problems by developing credentialing schemes, innovative pay subsidies, and truly new sorts of positions that present much-needed opportunities for job growth. In most communities, however, staffing issues have neared crisis stage.

Cities need to face these multiple challenges simultaneously. Factors like pay, professional reputation, training and advancement are too closely allied for communities to tackle one at a time. As cities work through the multiple challenges, strategies can be shared across age groups and settings. The staffing issues facing elementary school-age care providers, youth organizations, school-based programs and others

are similar enough that many of the system-building tasks and lessons are the same. On the other hand, while staff competency areas are similar across the out-of-school field, specific concerns and needs vary locally. Local language fluency and cultural savvy can be among the most important skills staff can possess.

**TASK #3:**  
**Creating quality standards, assessments and supports that result in effective organizations and programs.**

As cities make substantial investments in providing out-of-school opportunities at scale, an increasing number are ready for a serious discussion about how to ensure that these programs are of high quality — that is, that they live up to high standards of practice and deliver on the outcomes that they claim they will achieve. Cities are beginning to develop program standards to which they hold out-of-school programs, often adopting or adapting national models like those administered by the National School-Age Care Alliance. Communities that want their standards to last and reflect local needs are engaging a range of stakeholders into their development — as in Kansas City, where young people and providers drove the process, or in Chicago, where funders, community-based organizations and city government are all at the table. Nearly all of the resulting standards address a set of central issues related to organizational capacity, program characteristics, staffing, health and safety, and family involvement. The existing standards (with notable exceptions) much less frequently speak to the importance of meaningful youth engagement or involving the community members and resources in the program.

While the standards debate can come to dominate the quality discussion, two other ingredients cannot be left off the table. First, holding programs accountable requires a significant investment in capacity building support. Such investments have been shown to pay off, as in the San Francisco Bay Area, where a year-long investment in organizational improvement resulted in programs that much more frequently deliver critical supports and opportunities to young people (*see* Task Brief #3 for more information). Holding programs accountable also requires assessment and evaluation

capacity — currently limited in most communities. While a handful of national organizations are beginning to support small-scale evaluation work, there is much more capacity-building to be done in this area.

**TASK #4:  
Developing the physical infrastructure — the transportation and physical space — that is the necessary context for accessible and high-quality out-of-school opportunities.**

Transportation and facilities are critical challenges, with both logistical and financial dimensions, facing cities as they attempt to build systems to support children and youth during the out-of-school hours. GRASP participants told stories of parks facilities that go unused because of insufficient funds for maintenance and staffing. Others indicated that gentrification and demographic shifts have moved young people out of neighborhoods where facilities are located — creating both a construction and transportation headache, and forcing young people to travel back to their old neighborhoods for the programs they had grown up in. Most cities are trying to overcome the infrastructure and political challenges that come with opening up school buildings and other public facilities outside their normal hours of operation. Most are barely cobbling together a combination of public transportation — sometimes almost non-existent in mid-sized cities — and school buses already stretched to the limits. Furthermore, all agreed that some facilities — churches and museums for instance — are not yet playing the role they might.

Amid these challenges, city stakeholders also told stories of innovation in the face of transportation and facilities challenges. They spoke of cities converting vacant school buildings into community centers, young people leading advocacy efforts for reduced bus fares, organizations coordinating the use of a range of community facilities — including churches and businesses — with the aim of having spaces open to young people on every block. Through a combination of such efforts, some cities are beginning to make real progress on the facilities and transportation front — as in Detroit, where up-front investments in facilities research and the creation of a new coordinat-

ing entity has helped leverage the redevelopment of dozens of park and recreation facilities (Skillman, 1995; see Task Brief #4 for more information).

**TASK #5:  
Marshaling adequate funding streams — local, state and national, public and private — to guarantee stable and sufficient resources for programming.**

Even in the context of growing public and private investments throughout the second half of the 1990s, in no city are funds sufficient to reach all young people with quality out-of-school opportunities. With an economic slowdown putting the brakes on private and public investments, and world events shifting funders' attention, cities are struggling against retrenchment and struggling to make ends meet. Working within the context of scarce resources, each GRASP city has cobbled together a diverse set of investments and policies in order to provide programming and build the infrastructure to support that programming. This local entrepreneurship has resulted in significant innovations: dedicated resource streams, novel use of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) dollars, and investments that combine desegregation dollars, 21st Century funds, private investments and local public funds into a coherent whole. It has also resulted in uneven investments, missed opportunities and idiosyncratic programming. Many cities simply do not know what resources they could tap into — Workforce Investment Act dollars and prevention resources are consistently under-utilized, for instance. And few communities have a sense of how the multiple investments — parks dollars, programs run out of the mayor's office, and foundation investments, among many others — add up or align.

Several themes emerge from an examination of the multiple funding streams converging on out-of-school programming:

- Categorical funding continues to be a primary obstacle to alignment and innovation.
- Public investments are essential to meeting the demand for programming, and private investments cannot hope to compensate for public disinvestment.

- Private foundation dollars are critical in supporting innovation, infrastructure and young people who fall through the cracks.
- Few cities are fully leveraging the range of federal funding streams that could be used to support out-of-school programming.

**TASK #6:  
Building leadership and political will — engaging champions in the public and private sectors, and at the highest levels of city government — to create and move an agenda.**

Municipal and community leaders — whether they gained their position through election, appointment or more organic community processes — have been critical in moving an out-of-school agenda in cities around the country. Elected officials, through use of their bully pulpit and their efforts to move public investments, often play the highest-profile leadership roles. Yet, in addition to this top-level leadership, a variety of other leaders and leadership bodies — city agencies and their directors, community organization and intermediary leaders, members of the business community, neighborhood leaders and spokespeople — help to focus public attention and community resources on out-of-school issues. While these leaders are important in every city, the breadth, depth and nature of leadership varies across cities. Many lack a public agency with sufficient clout to move a broad agenda. Some have built top-level leadership, but left grassroots organizations and community leaders out of important decisions. Others have a committed mayor and strong civic leadership, but a school district with a new superintendent every year.

Recognizing the diversity of leadership approaches and configurations in cities is important. But a scan of cities reveals several bottom lines. First, demonstrated commitment to the issues on the part of political decision makers and leaders of all sorts is vital, and this commitment must be rooted in an understanding of the issues. Second, the capacity of these leaders to move resources, broker connections, bring people around a common table and enact strategy is vital. These capacities are far more

important than the specific positions, in or out of government, which they occupy. Third, while different cities have different leadership styles, inclusive leadership — operating from the bottom up and the top down, from inside and outside of government — is necessary in order to move an out-of-school agenda.

**TASK #7:  
Ensuring consistent, meaningful youth engagement in decision making at the program, organization and city levels.**

Where are the young people? We asked this question, often repeatedly, in each of the GRASP cities. In conversations clearly about young people, it took concerted effort and deliberate focus to ensure that GRASP encouraged conversations with young people. Youth engagement is generally strongest at the program level. In each of the GRASP cities, we encountered individual programs that put young people in organizational decision-making roles, paid staff positions and meaningful volunteer roles. However, this commitment to youth engagement is not systematic; it varies dramatically among organizations, and appears to be strongest outside of the public delivery systems in which many young people spend their time. Just as important, program-level youth engagement does not consistently translate to engagement in citywide decision making. Few young people sit on the boards of citywide agencies and intermediaries, or have significant power in coalitions or on cross-organization committees. Few play important roles on the staff of citywide organizations or are invited to important convenings and conferences. In fact, we are not aware of a single major citywide out-of-school delivery system in any of the GRASP cities that includes young people in significant organizational decision-making roles.

Why are young people so seldom involved in the out-of-school decisions that affect them? In the GRASP cities, straight-out resistance to youth involvement is not the problem. Instead, institutional realities of schools and other entities limit youth engagement. Involving young people is hard work and requires sustained commitment. And youth engagement is simply not at the top of the priority list. Responding to these obstacles

and to the current reality in cities, it is important to reaffirm several “non-negotiables” that arise from the GRASP experience and from the Forum’s ongoing work focused on youth engagement and action:

- Youth engagement is critical at every level — in programs, in community issues and in city-level decision making.
- A variety of roles — as planners, decision makers, paid staff, volunteers, board members, frontline youth workers, researchers and “experts” — can and should be available to young people.
- While different sorts of engagement are appropriate for different age groups and populations, all children and youth can play a role.
- Youth participation cannot be segregated as an issue apart from the other tasks facing cities — young people deserve a role in staffing, program quality issues, planning, funding and the range of other citywide out-of-school challenges.
- Young people need consistent supports and clear pathways in order to become involved and stay involved.

### **TASK #8:**

#### **Building public will and constituency engagement in order to support stakeholder involvement, promote public commitment and awareness, and leverage meaningful action.**

When James Traub (1999) of the *New York Times* wrote that “parents should be more worried about how youth spend their time outside of school than inside of school,” his words matched the tenor and tone of public opinion around the country. The media’s continued warnings about unsupervised youth, policy makers’ weariness with the pace of school reform, and families’ growing challenges in addressing the needs of their children for supervision and stimulation — these are the conditions that set the stage for a national after-school movement. Public will is remarkably strong: eight out of ten voters believe access to after-school programming is extremely important, and 67 percent of all voters agreed

that they would pay more taxes to support and provide after-school programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2001).

The challenge for cities, then, is not to build general commitment. Their task is to focus, leverage, sustain and mobilize the strong but often vague commitment that already exists.

- **Focus.** Perhaps the most critical challenge facing advocates is to help broaden public will — now strongly behind after-school programs — to support opportunities throughout young people’s development and waking hours, focusing on civic, vocational, social and physical development as well as academic achievement. At the same time, advocates should be careful not to reinforce widespread negative perceptions of youth as they build the case for out-of-school investments.
- **Leverage.** By aligning inside advocacy strategies (building support among elected officials, building capacity inside government to move an agenda) and outside strategies (grassroots youth and citizen engagement), advocates can create the context for real change. Advocates can also learn to leverage communities’ existing commitments — to school reform or civil rights, for instance — to fuel public will for out-of-school programming.
- **Sustain.** In the context of national crises and other front-burner issues, it would be easy for the momentum of the after-school movement to fade as quickly as it has grown. The goal of advocates should be to build the same consistent, lasting support for out-of-school opportunities that public education now appreciates — where the debate is about how to make the best investments, not whether to invest.
- **Mobilize.** Advocacy is not, in the end, about commitment and awareness; it is about participation and action. The growing number of youth and community organizing efforts rallying around out-of-school issues points the way — build the power of young people, community members and community-based organizations, and support for out-of-school opportunities will be secure in the long haul.

**TASK #9:**  
**Developing planning and visioning processes, structures and products that build alignment, intentionality and comprehensiveness within out-of-school programming.**

In nearly every one of the nation's cities, increased activity and resources are bringing new commitment to the out-of-school hours. Yet, the vision — the picture of what youth outcomes these programs should impact, what an effective out-of-school opportunity looks like, and what a city dedicated to providing such opportunities should have in place — remains unclear. Asking stakeholders to put on paper their assumptions about the end goal of their efforts revealed competing priorities, different goals and often an unclear focus. Perhaps more importantly, city-level visions for the out-of-school hours are seldom supported by shared plans or planning structures that ensure the existing efforts are headed in the same direction.

Planning and visioning efforts face common challenges. How do you sustain the level of commitment and alignment that comes of a one-time planning event and ensure that new planning efforts build on what has come before? Are the structures in place to provide continuity and move to action? Equally importantly, how do communities ensure that the planning includes the right mix of stakeholders, as few existing tables have seats for the relevant players? How broad is the vision? Is it focused on workforce opportunities, gang reduction, or a broad agenda of what young people need and can do? These are the critical questions for cities attempting to build a coordinated agenda in the out-of-school hours.

**TASK #10:**  
**Strengthening mapping, monitoring and research systems to collect, analyze and disseminate information about programs, providers, funding and young people.**

Effective city-level systems for mapping and tracking activities during the out-of-school hours are few and far between. In many cities, only the roughest estimates of the number of programs, or number of dollars invested, are available. Obtaining

information about the ages of youth served, the days and hours of operation, and the range of services, opportunities and supports provided by programs is even more difficult. Data linked to individual young people — either about their out-of-school experiences or their progress in meeting basic learning benchmarks — are almost never available outside the narrow academic measures collected by schools. While data are often available from the larger, publicly funded programs, it is often kept and reported in distinct formats for distinct purposes, not lending itself to macro observations or consistency across sites or delivery systems. Geographic issues contribute to this challenge, as different publicly-funded programs often must take into account different delivery areas.

The challenges inherent in setting up such systems were echoed consistently throughout our conversations with city leaders. So was the fact that having such a system in place is critical in that it enables cities to engage in productive planning and decision making, to advocate for the importance of after school opportunities, and to assure access. Unlike the child care field, there is no national structure that is charged with tracking and monitoring out-of-school programs, such as the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. The GRASP process clearly indicated the need for additional data collection horsepower at the city level.

Excerpted from: Tolman, J., Pittman, K., Yohalem, N., Thomases, J., & Trammel, M. (2002). *Moving an Out-of-School Agenda: Lessons and Challenges Across Cities*. A publication of the Greater Resources for After-School Programming (GRASP) Project. Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc. Available online at [www.forumforyouthinvestment.org](http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org).



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