



The State of Children in Afterschool

Like all managers I interviewed last fall, Keoshia, site manager for YouthQuest at Durant-Tuuri-Mott Elementary School, agreed that over 50% of this year's students were behind academically. For that reason, the team at DTM Elementary afterschool is focused on math and literacy. However, for Keoshia and her team at DTM, the children's socio-emotional skills are about the same as usual. This year was about picking up where last year left off in terms of socio-emotional skills – and then staying on those academics.

Indeed, when you step into the lunchroom with DTM's 60 students and 7 staff, it's hard to tell the difference from prior years. The kids look happy, they typically respond to the first request for quiet, and they reciprocate the parent-like warmth and care that DTM staff provide. This is a long-standing program with connections to families, a tight staff team (an average of 6 years of experience), and by the time of our October 2023 observation, already had a working program culture in place that was right where they wanted it.



Caption: Keoshia Cook with Durant-Tuuri-Mott Staff just Before dismissal.

Another program that, like DTM, received one of the highest quality scores this past fall was Mt. Morris High School, where site manager Zach T. sees the same pattern with their group of almost 30 adolescents. Everyone is struggling a bit on the academics, but their tight program culture produced a near two-hour role playing game that was the highlight of youth leadership in our fall round of data collection. For both of these programs, the story is that the pandemic was tough, but we made it through. The program culture is strong, and the young people and families keep coming back.

However, these two exemplary programs “picking up where we left off last year” were neither the exception nor the rule. Program cultures went in a very different direction at about 25% of the program sites we observed. Again, we’ve observed all of these sites for four years, and everything has been exemplary.... What was going on for these 25% of programs in fall 2022?

A Post-Pandemic Shock

For the 25% of programs in fall 2022, a much higher percentage of children entered with severe developmental and academic delays. The general wisdom was that these were children whose parents withheld them from participation in school and afterschool during the prior year – in some cases having gone two, or in some cases three, years without participating in-person in an educational setting.

From the observations we completed in October and November 2023, two things were true for me as an observer: (a) There was a substantially increased proportion of children with socio-emotional and academic skill delays compared to prior years, and (b) for many of those struggling children, the socio-emotional and academic skill delays were more severe than I’ve ever seen in over two decades of observation.

Even with expert staff giving it their all, a couple of unsustainable things were happening: The setting was reaching moderate chaos numerous times during the session. Staff were constantly engaged in 1-on-1s with children struggling emotionally and behaviorally... and the other students, who were also struggling to keep it together, were more frequently joining the fray than they otherwise might have. Second, staff were spending a lot of energy in response to these repeated emotional and behavioral events. In our opinion, something had to change, or children were going to get seriously injured and/or really talented staff were going to quit.

This is an excerpt from a discussion memo that we, as a group, presented when agency staff at the state department of education asked what we were seeing in the field:

When student behaviors require immediate adult responses, that student is likely to be in what we refer to as a “narrow and constrain” mental skill state, a socio-emotional skill set that is largely non-conscious, endures through time, and severely limits mental and behavioral options for the child.

The pinch point for afterschool standards is that the appropriate response to these children requires one-on-one structure. Afterschool programs are not typically staffed to provide these 1-on-1 responses for more than 5% of children at any given moment. This fall (2022), the proportion of children in narrow and constrain skill states was as high as 40% at some sites. We estimate that anything over 10% is associated with light chaos, and anything over 20% brings moderate or greater chaos. Further, in the 20% or more condition, safety is difficult to assure beyond a ratio of 1 to 6.

Specific indicators of narrow and constrain skill states (i.e., low socio-emotional skill levels) were of four types:

- Frequently observed post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTS; subclinical): Emotional overflow, extreme clinginess, hyperarousal (can't keep body in activity space), hypervigilance (can't stop worrying about others), negative self-talk, violent and/or sexual talk and pretend, verbal bullying, self-silencing. These behaviors typically lasted for most or all of the session for individual children.
- Expressive language delays: Children who understand adults and peers but have a hard time communicating back; using non-verbal vocalizations to communicate (growling when angry). These children are attractors for verbal bullying by peers and are often understandably frustrated when trying to communicate.
- Lowered academic efficacy: On average, staff estimate that over 50% of children at their sites are behind where their teachers want them to be right now and likely not getting positive messages in school.
- Staff exposure to traumatic experience: On average, 85% of site staff report invasive thoughts related to child and family experiences this year, reflecting the severity and frequency of needs/hardships that afterschool teachers are encountering.

Responsive Policy and Programs

Program directors were in a dilemma at the sites where higher proportions of children were presenting with severe socio-emotional skill delays. The “moments of moderate chaos” programs were either going to have to (a) exclude the kids who can't self-regulate sufficiently, to assure safety for all students in the setting, or (b) relax attendance requirements and allow lower youth-to-adult ratios where necessary. In an example of evidence-driven and compassionate leadership by our state agency, requirements were relaxed with guidance to continue focusing on the most in need.

Enlightened leadership also came from sites. As annual improvement goals, site managers (independently of each other) chose nearly identical areas of focus: First, for children in narrow and constrain skill states, the focus was on helping those children learn and practice strategies that support “return” to a calm and open state of mind and body – what we call a “broaden and build” skill state. Not consequences, not exclusion, but strategies to be more emotionally resilient and mindful in moments of reactivity when strong emotions and behavior are flowing.

Second, and for the rest of the children, the goals were focused on helping “bystanders” intentionally exemplify and promote the program culture and norms (e.g., written community agreements, written program values). Both networks were planning more effort to communicate the desired program culture and values, i.e., the program's purpose, what should be happening in the setting, and what the student's role is.

Pre-pandemic, we could count on program cultures to replicate program norms year to year with returning students. Following the pandemic, these bets may be off for a few years.

Attachment-Aware, Trauma-Informed (AATI) in Afterschool

This was the state of things in fall 2022. In mid-January, 2023, we asked all 25 site directors the following question: How are the narrow and constrain state kids doing? Are they quickly catching up on those socio-emotional skills for keeping bodies in place, maintaining focus, using our words etc.? Or is this

going to be a long haul for this group, with the “catch up” or recovery phase lasting into subsequent years. To a person, all agreed that for many of these children it will be a multiple year effort. Several reported that things had not really changed much developmentally since late October for some children.

What does it mean? One thing that it means is that the converging stressors during the pandemic years – amped up “social determinants of health” for many families – have produced an interruption in socio-emotional skill development for a substantial enough group of children that we may need to do some things differently, at least for the next few years. Note that as a confirmation of traumatic events happening with children, we asked staff if they were worrying about child and family hardships. About 85% said yes to this indicator of vicarious trauma.

Another sign of interruption was the subject of technical assistance that emerged from entry interviews at the 25 sites during the fall 2022 round of observations. This is another excerpt from the memo for our state DOE:

Finally, as part of the feedback process to individual sites this year, we’ve addressed best practices for: Verbal bullies and victim self-confidence, addressing expressive language delays, addressing negative self-talk in the moment, mindful responsiveness in the moment, coldness is the opposite of warmth and has faster effects, swearing and sexual language, violent video games, how to do on-on-ones with a child in a narrow and constrain skill state, how to do a behavioral agreement with an individual student, etc.

These are not the same kinds of requests as in prior years – and reflect the reality of what afterschool teachers have to be able to engage with if they are to meet the goal of socio-emotional skill growth.

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