

## Critical Hours Community Use of Space:

An overview of literature, programs and promising practices.

On a typical weekday, children and youth spend about 6 hours in school, and varying amounts of time getting to and from school. But how do they spend their time outside of school? What children and youth do during these 'critical hours': before and after school, evenings and weekends, can have a significant impact on them, their families and communities.

'Out of school' time can be an opportunity for children and youth to develop and enhance physical abilities, social and emotional skills, life long interests and talents. Or not. Researchers have determined that, on average, Canadian youth in grades 6-12 spend over 7 hours each day in front of a screen<sup>1</sup> (watching TV, playing games, social networking or surfing the internet). This leaves little time for the 60 minutes of physical activity that is recommended daily, or for arts, music, reading, homework or service learning.

Many children and youth do take part in organized sports, recreation, arts and educational programming outside of school. But a significant proportion of others cannot. Only 25% of children and youth living on low incomes take part in arts and recreation programs, compared to 75% of their more affluent peers.<sup>2</sup> Affordable, accessible, and high quality community programs can ensure that all children and youth have the chance to socialize in a positive environment, while developing their skills, interests and talents.

Currently, this kind of programming is not widely available in Ottawa. One factor limiting the availability of out of school programming is the lack of appropriate, affordable space. We need to consider how to use existing public and private space more effectively, so that more children and youth can take part in programs that will promote their health and development.

## **Individual, Family and Community Benefits of Out of School Programs**

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### **Benefits to children and youth**

Participation in out of school programs is associated with decreases in risk behaviour and the development of interests and competencies that support learning and achievement in school<sup>3</sup>. Children and youth participating in high quality community programs:

- Are more physically active<sup>4</sup>
- Do better in school, have fewer problem behaviours and drug use, have more self confidence and higher levels of self esteem<sup>5</sup>
- Have fewer school absences and are less likely to drop out of school<sup>6</sup>
- Were less likely to be involved in criminal activity or be expelled from school<sup>7</sup>

### **Benefits to Families**

Most families do not have a parent at home full-time. With close to 70% of Canadian couples both working<sup>8</sup> (not to mention single parents), many of children and youth go home after school each day to an empty house. Many will spend the time watching TV, on the computer or playing video games. A study in the US found that many working parents reported a great deal of worry about their children's after school time. This level of concern was linked to more job disruptions, poor job performance and reduced parental well being. Researchers concluded that providing quality programming for children and youth after school would benefit youth and parents alike<sup>9</sup>.

An evaluation of a New York City after school program found that 74% parents felt that the program helped them keep their job, and that 73% missed less work than previously because of the program.<sup>10</sup>

### **Community Benefits**

"When children flourish, crime doesn't!"<sup>11</sup> Several studies document reductions in criminal activity in neighbourhoods served by out of school time programming. An evaluation of a program in the UK that targeted at risk youth reported a 65% decrease in youth arrests, accompanied by overall crime reductions of 16-27% in neighbourhoods served by the program.<sup>12</sup> In Los Angeles, researchers found that neighbourhoods containing schools with more sports programs had lower rates of youth arrest and teen birth rates than areas with fewer programs.<sup>13</sup> Toronto's SPACE Coalition<sup>14</sup> suggests that such programs can also:

- Offer opportunities for artistic and cultural expression
- Create opportunities for collaboration between community organizations
- Increase chances for newcomers to integrate into the community
- Foster inclusion (allowing children of all income levels to take part)
- Promote volunteerism, community participation and civic engagement

It's clear that high quality out of school programming can provide substantial benefits to children and youth, their families and communities. But what do high quality programs look like?

### **Features of High Quality Critical Hours (Out of school time) programming**

A number of national and international organizations have highlighted the elements that define high quality out of school time programs for children and youth. Organizations frequently cite these key program features as indicative of high quality programming:

- Positive atmosphere (caring, positive relationships)
- Effective, evidence based programming-promoting development in all spheres
- Staff: caring, qualified, appropriate training

- Community partnerships
- Outcome measurement
- Adequate administrative support and processes
- Affordable and accessible
- Promote participation 3-5 X weekly

Many organizations refer to the work of Durlak & Weissberg (2007), who systematically evaluated the impact of programs designed to enhance youth's personal and social skills, and employed evidence based training approaches. They developed a series of program principles that were linked to positive outcomes, like improved academic performance, decreased problem behaviours & drug use, increased confidence & self esteem.

Durlak & Weissberg used the 'SAFE' acronym when describing program principles that were most likely to result in positive outcomes for youth:

Sequence: activities ordered to develop skills

Active: active learning opportunities

Focus: Including at least one program component on personal/social skills

Explicitness: Targeting specific personal or social skills<sup>15</sup>

## **Making high quality programs available to more children and youth in Ottawa**

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As noted earlier, we don't have enough of these high quality programs available in Ottawa. One factor that limits availability, is the lack of appropriate and affordable space for programs. We can learn from other communities that have taken a creative approach to space allocation, making public spaces more accessible to support out of school programming for more children and youth.

### **Policies and practices that promote effective community use of space**

The Ontario Ministry of Education's *Community Use of Schools* program outlines a number of actions school boards can take to support community use of schools, like:

- Low cost or no cost access for non-profit space users
- Help with insurance requirements
- Software to manage allocations/space availability
- Make fee payment easy
- Develop agreements with municipalities

### **Community Use of Space Initiatives we could learn from**

See Appendices A and B for additional initiatives and detail on each one.

- Edmonton SpaceFinder
- The Space Coalition: SPACE (Saving Public Access to Community Space Everywhere)
- Toronto Below Market Rent Program

**Local policies at a glance** (see Appendix C for more detail)

School Board	Policy summary
Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB)	<p>Goal: make school space more affordable and accessible to support healthy lifestyles and communities.</p> <p>Procedure PR.507.CON: Community Use of School Facilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Facilities available through permits and written agreements</li> <li>▪ Reasonable user fees, where applicable</li> <li>▪ Cooperating with the City of Ottawa to allow use of board facilities</li> <li>▪ School staff must plan for their use of facilities before the school year begins</li> </ul>
Ottawa Catholic School Board	<p>Community Use of Schools Program (not a policy)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Board provides access to school facilities for physical activities for youth and adults and nationally recognized non profit fundraising organizations.</li> <li>▪ School facilities available on school operating days when a caretaker is scheduled to be on duty</li> <li>▪ Contact individual school directly to determine availability</li> <li>▪ If space is available, submit application form to the school.</li> </ul>
CECLFCE	
French public	

**Looking ahead**

Children and youth don't get enough exercise. They spend too much time in front of computer and TV screens. Children and youth living on low incomes aren't able to take part in organized sports, recreation or arts programs.

All children and youth need more chances to acquire those 'developmental assets' that will help them thrive academically, socially, physically and emotionally. Out of school time is an ideal time to offer youth these opportunities, and high quality programming is the way to do it. We can make these programs a reality for more children and youth, if we can more effectively utilize public spaces that already exist in Ottawa.

## References

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