



# **Effective Characteristics of Programs Working to Close the Achievement Gap for At-Risk Youth**

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July 2005*

- 1. Programs need to be comprehensive and combine a variety of services in order to have the largest impact** (*Characteristics of Effective Urban College Preparation Programs, 2000*).
- 2. Programs should start as early as possible, especially when working with low-income students.**
  - Research has found that “at least half of the reading gap that exists between Black and White students at the end of grade 12 can be attributed to the gap that exists when students enter 1<sup>st</sup> grade” (*Addressing the Achievement Gap, 2002*).
  - It has also been reported that “across a variety of grade levels, instruments and subscales . . . low income explains the bulk of the variance in academic achievement (12–29%) when compared to ethnicity (0.6%)” (*Addressing the Achievement Gap, 2002*).
- 3. Students should participate in stable, good-quality child care programs that include a family component.**
  - Better-quality child care was even more strongly related to better math skills and fewer behavior problems when children had less highly educated mothers. In addition, the study found that children with closer teacher-child relationships in child care had better classroom social and thinking skills, language ability, and math skills, and that these benefits also lasted through the second grade (*Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997, cited in Roditti, 2000, ch.29, What Works in Child Welfare*).
  - The stability and continuity of care for infants is critical because it can predict developmental outcomes. Children with more changes in child care arrangements are more likely to be insecurely attached, less competent with peers as toddlers, more withdrawn and aggressive in preschool, and have more social and

cognitive problems when they enter elementary school (*NICHD, 1997, cited in Roditti, 2000, ch.31, What Works in Child Welfare*).

- In discussions of resilient children, child care is considered to be an important protective factor for children who are exposed to dangerous situations. Child care provides opportunities for children to interact with adult role models who are warm and caring, and it offers a safe environment with a clear structure, predictable experiences, and developmentally appropriate opportunities to develop self-esteem and coping skills through academic and/or social achievement (*Garbarino et al., 1992, cited in Roditti, 2000, ch.32, What Works in Child Welfare*).
- Preschool programs that include a family component seem to yield higher cognitive gains for children than preschool programs that lack services for families (*no.31, cited in McCroskey & Meezan, 1998, Family-Centered Services*).

#### **4. Programs should incorporate reading activities and tutoring, even if their emphasis is non-academic.**

- When reading instruction and tutoring were integrated into a summer camp context, disadvantaged first-grade children from schools whose reading test scores were below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile made significant gains compared to students who did not attend the summer intervention (*Schacter, cited in Primer on Summer Learning Loss, Johns Hopkins University*).

#### **5. Students should be exposed to knowledge within a cultural context.**

- “Students learn by building new knowledge on the foundation of knowledge they possess . . . using the context of a child’s culture is important and basic, not an add-on” (*Addressing the Achievement Gap, 2002*).

#### **6. Students should have opportunities to develop relationships with a mentor.**

- Youth with mentors are likely to have fewer absences from school, better attitudes towards school, fewer incidents of hitting others, less drug and alcohol use, more positive attitudes towards their elders and towards helping in general, and improved relationships with their parents (*Trends, Child Research Brief, 2002*).
- Research found that ninth-graders who entered the mentoring program with the lowest GPAs improved their grades in school significantly and, two years after high school graduation, were more likely to attend college than similar youth in the control group (*Trends, Child Research Brief, 2002*).

#### **7. Students should participate in programs that emphasize non-traditional learning opportunities such as art, sports, community service, field trips, reading for pleasure, and educational games.**

- Adolescents who participated regularly in community-based youth development programs (including arts, sports, and community service) have better academic and social outcomes—as well as higher educational and career

aspirations—than other similar peers (*McLaughlin, 2000, cited in Fairchild & Boulay, 2002, Summer Learning Loss a Policy*).

- Low-income children who spent 25 to 35 hours of their non-school hours each week in engaged learning (such as reading for pleasure or playing educational games) received higher grades in school than their more passive peers (*Clark, 1988, cited in Fairchild & Boulay, 2002, Summer Learning Loss a Policy*).
- Better-off children also did things in the summer that were different than what they did during the school year—they attended day camps, took swimming lessons, went on trips, visited local parks and zoos, and played organized sports, to name a few (*Entwisle, 2001, Keep the Faucet Flowing*).

**8. Students should participate in programs that are engaging and promote feelings of accomplishment.**

- It is not the number of contacts the participants had with an intervention program that matters, nor the exposure of children and parents to activities; rather it is the interest in and mastery of program activities and experiences that are critical for the success of an intervention in promoting development (*Meisels, 1992, Zero to Three*).
- Coaches need to encourage children to enjoy themselves: engagement is key to learning, and engagement can be difficult to achieve if summer programs are perceived as punitive (*Entwisle, 2001, Keep the Faucet Flowing*).

**9. Students should participate in programs regularly, regardless of their success level.**

- Even maltreated children who demonstrate wellness at one point in time may subsequently experience difficulties. Therefore, periodic ‘booster interventions’ may be required to help maltreated children attain cumulative protection from these potentially disruptive influences (*Cicchetti et al., 2000, The Development of Psychological Wellness in Maltreated Children*).

**10. Students should be surrounded by and associate with other students who have high educational goals.**

- Student achievement is strongly associated with the educational backgrounds and aspirations of other students in the school (*Addressing the Achievement Gap, 2002*).

**11. Students should work with teachers and program staff who have high expectations for them and who provide them with individual attention.**

- Research has found that “teachers’ expectations about students’ ability appear to be the single most influential student characteristic affecting their behavior” (*Addressing the Achievement Gap, 2002*).
- Children learn from people they bond to (*Addressing the Achievement Gap, 2002*).

- Students whose teachers spent more time individualizing the curriculum and working with students outside of class had greater learning gains than students in classrooms where teachers spent less time adapting the curriculum and providing individualized attention (*Primer on Summer Learning Loss, Johns Hopkins University*).

## **12. Students should be enrolled in rigorous and challenging high school courses.**

- A key predictor of college success is the quality and intensity of high school coursework—it more important than class rank or scores on college admissions tests. This is especially true for students of color and students who were previously classified as low-achieving (*Thinking K-16, New Frontiers for a New Century, 2001*).

## **13. College preparatory program support should include:**

- Closely monitoring students' selection and successful completion of courses, beginning as early as junior high school
- Workshops to teach students how to take notes, study, and complete homework assignments
- Courses that focus exclusively on students' preparation for each required exam
- Programs geared towards learning and achieving that provide students with encouragement, understanding, and structural support
- Encouraging parents/caregivers to discuss education goals with students
- Peer support opportunities for students who have graduated from programs and are attending four-year institutions
- Programs using students' cultures and backgrounds (race, class, gender) in a positive manner in their curricula, teaching methods, and learning activities
- Encouraging prominent community members to work with students to help them realize that their college attendance is part of a community pattern, preceded by earlier college graduates and to be followed by others heeding their example
- Programs to help students negotiate the mass of paperwork to secure funding, including reproducing tax forms and preparing applications for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), Pell Grants, and scholarships
- Programs to help students explore additional avenues for support, such as local community grants, professional organizations, corporate sponsorships, and endowed private scholarships
- Programs to teach students how to look critically at a university's student body and policies to determine its cultural milieu, and how to ask tough questions about retention rates, financial aid, and the climate
- Programs offering college visits, college summer enrichment programs, after-school programs on college campuses, or the use of college facilities (library, etc.)

- Programs to teach students about social norms, values, and expected behaviors necessary for college admittance and persistence
- Programs to teach about the realities of racism, classism, and sexism that exist on college campuses
- Programs providing staff with up-to-date training on high-school-to-college transition issues, high school graduation requirements, college admissions requirements, remediation policies, student remediation options, and culturally responsive curricular and teaching strategies (*Characteristics of Effective Urban College Preparation Programs, 2000*)

*Full bibliography available upon request.*