

All Work and No Play?

Listening to What KIDS and PARENTS
Really Want from Out-of-School Time



A report from Public Agenda

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- Improve out-of-school learning opportunities
- Expand participation in arts and culture.

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Executive Summary

There is compelling evidence that organized, structured activities during the out-of-school hours play a valuable and a highly valued role in the lives of our nation's young people, but low-income and minority families are far more likely to be dissatisfied with the quality, affordability and availability of options in their communities.

These are just two among many important findings in *All Work and No Play? Listening to What Kids and Parents Really Want from Out-of-School Time*, a joint project of The Wallace Foundation and Public Agenda that explores how young people spend time when they're not in school and what youngsters and their parents want from out-of-school-time activities. The study is based primarily on two national random sample surveys conducted in June 2004, one with 609 middle and high school students and another with 1,003 parents of school-age children.

One refreshing feature of *All Work and No Play?* is its examination of the views of students and parents—two important constituencies rarely heard from in the policy debate surrounding out-of-school time. What are the people who actually use out-of-school activities and programs really looking for? Just how much do parents and students rely on out-of-school-time opportunities to enhance academic learning? To what extent are they looking for socialization, playtime or merely a place with adult supervision? Since participation is purely by choice, knowing what drives these consumers is essential for implementing effective policies or creating constructive programs.

The study also provides a wealth of information about the very real challenges faced by low-income and minority families when it comes to finding productive things for their children to do when they aren't in school. Viewing the data through the lenses of income and race reveals a story of the haves vs. the have-nots—a story of too many families under real pressure and not getting the kinds of out-of-school opportunities that could genuinely help their children thrive. Whether or not parents or students are generally happy with their options is strongly influenced by these demographic characteristics.

The primary goal of this research is to provide reliable data on what America's parents and young people want for kids during their out-of-school time and their experiences with it. In effect, we hope to add the public's voice to a debate seemingly dominated by advocates with their own agendas. What follows are the highlights of the findings.



FINDING 1: What Kids Do When They're Not in School

Whether it's sports or the arts or a church group or homework help, organized activities and programs in out-of-school time play a valuable and a highly valued role in the lives of the nation's youth. The vast majority of young people believe that kids are better off when their plates are full and they don't have too much time to just hang out. What's more, youngsters who participate in out-of-school activities give them high ratings for being fun and educational and being good places to make friends. Still, nearly 3 in 10 say they are home alone after school at least three days a week, while about 1 in 5 complain their schedules are too hectic.

The lion's share of middle and high school students today participate in at least some organized activities and programs in their non-school hours.

- Well over half the students surveyed (57%) say they participate in some kind of out-of-school activity or program every day or almost every day, and another 37% say they do so a couple of days a week. Almost 8 in 10 (79%) say they do things both on school days and on weekends.
- Students participate in activities and programs such as:
 - ◆ 66% say they participate in sports activities
 - ◆ 62% are in school clubs or extracurricular activities
 - ◆ 60% do volunteer work
 - ◆ 54% attend religious instruction or a church youth group
 - ◆ 52% take lessons in things like music, dance or art
 - ◆ 52% are in an after-school program at school or another locale
 - ◆ 37% of high-school students have a part-time job
 - ◆ 30% get regular tutoring or extra academic or test preparation
 - ◆ 19% belong to an organization like the Scouts

Most youngsters believe organized activities are good, and they acknowledge that they sometimes need a push to get involved.

- The overwhelming majority of students (85%) say kids who participate in organized activities such as a team or a club after school are “better off” than those who have a lot of time to themselves after school.
- More than 9 in 10 (91%) agree with the statement, “Belonging to a club or team and doing things with other kids gives me a good feeling”—with 67% agreeing strongly.
- Approximately 9 in 10 (89%) agree with the statement, “Even though I might complain about it, sometimes I need to be pushed by my parents to do things that are good for me”—with 62% saying they agree strongly.

Students give great marks to the after-school or weekend activity that they spend the most time doing.

- 92% say they made good friends there
- 86% say they learned a lot
- 85% say they usually have a lot of fun
- 79% say the adults in charge really cared about the kids
- 79% say it was easy and convenient to get to
- 59% say the other kids took it seriously and really paid attention

It is hardly surprising that the majority of young people don't want additional academic work after school. What may be surprising, however, is the relatively high number of students who do.

- Given a choice among organized activities that emphasize sports, the arts or academics, just 9% of youngsters take the academic option; 54% choose sports, and 36% would choose things like art, music or dance.
- 61% of students agree that “when the school day is done, the last thing I want is to go to a place that has more academic work,” although 39% disagree.
- About 3 in 10 students say they would very much like an after-school program that provides homework help (32%) or that focuses on academics (28%).
- A majority of students (56%) would be interested in a summer program that “helped kids keep up with schoolwork or prepare for the next grade.”

Most students are content with their typical school-day routine, but sizable numbers are either too busy or spending a lot of time without any adult supervision.

- 75% of students say their day-to-day schedule during the school year was “just about right”; 22% that it was “too hectic with too many things to do”; and 3% that they had too much free time.
- On the other hand, 28% of students say they are home alone after school at least 3 out of 5 days in a typical school week.

FINDING 2: No Particular Place to Go

The vast majority of students draw an explicit connection

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between kids being bored and kids getting into trouble. Half say that they themselves are sometimes or often bored. And while most are involved in activities, many youngsters seem to be at a loss for productive things to do during their leisure hours. The majority say that when they get together with friends, they typically hang out without anything special planned. Most complain that in their community “there’s not much for kids my age to do other than go to school or just hang out.” While

most young people believe their own town could provide more options, they are more likely to point to lack of motivation—not lack of alternatives—as the main reason more kids don’t participate in organized activities.

Boredom and a lack of interesting things to do are widespread among America’s middle and high school students.

- Nearly 7 in 10 students (69%) say that when they meet with friends it’s usually to hang out without anything specific to do.
- Half of the students surveyed (50%) say they were “bored and had nothing to do” when they weren’t in school either often or sometimes during the past school year.
- A majority (58%) say the kids they know complain a lot or some about being bored and having nothing to do.
- More than 1 in 4 students (26%) say they “see people their age using drugs or alcohol” every day or almost every day (high schoolers 35%; middle schoolers 13%).

Students themselves recognize the link between boredom and mischief.

- More than 3 in 4 students (77%) agree that “a lot of kids get into trouble when they’re bored and have nothing to do,” with 40% agreeing strongly.
- More than 6 in 10 students (63%) agree that “my parents would be very upset if they knew some of the things my friends have done,” with 36% agreeing strongly.

- Almost half of students (46%) report that when kids their age get into trouble, it's mostly because "they're bored and have too much time on their hands" compared with 39% who say that "their parents aren't paying enough attention to them" or 11% who say it's because kids "don't know right from wrong."

There is something of a void when it comes to leisure time and having things to do with friends when no activity is scheduled.

- Only 27% of students think their community is doing as much as can be expected when it comes to having enough things for kids their age to do; 72% say it could realistically do much more.
- More than half (54%) agree that "there's not much for kids my age to do other than go to school or just hang out."
- More than 1 in 3 students (36%) admit that when they have free time to do whatever they choose, it usually ends up being wasted.

Most youngsters point to lack of motivation—not lack of alternatives—to explain why kids don't participate in organized activities.

- 71% of students say that when kids don't participate in organized activities after school or on weekends, it's because they are just not interested or motivated.
- 29% say it's because most things are too expensive.
- 28% say it's because most things are too far away.
- 15% say it's because there's nothing right for their age.

FINDING 3. The Haves and the Have-Nots

Most families are content with how their child spends out-of-school time, but low-income and minority families are significantly less likely to be satisfied with their options. On virtually every measure of satisfaction—whether it's quality, affordability or availability of activities—low-income and minority parents are substantially more likely than their respective counterparts

to indicate they encounter problems. Both groups, by overwhelming margins, indicate their communities could realistically do much more for kids and that keeping youngsters busy during the summer is especially tough.

Whether it's quality, affordability or availability, it's harder to find if you are a low-income or minority parent.* Both groups are considerably less likely to say:

- It's easy to find things that are affordable [low vs. higher income: 30% vs. 65%; minority vs. white: 39% vs. 62%]
- It's easy to find things that are run by trustworthy adults [low vs. higher income: 45% vs. 72%; minority vs. white: 45% vs. 73%]
- It's easy to find things that are conveniently located [low vs. higher income: 45% vs. 72%; minority vs. white: 44% vs. 71%]
- It's easy to find things that are of high quality [low vs. higher income: 45% vs. 66%; minority vs. white: 37% vs. 66%]
- It's easy to find things that are age appropriate [low vs. higher income: 47% vs. 73%; minority vs. white: 51% vs. 70%]
- It's easy to find things that are interesting to their child [low vs. higher income: 49% vs. 74%; minority vs. white: 53% vs. 71%]



Concerns about negative societal influences preying on children are magnified among low-income and minority parents.

- 46% of low-income parents say they worry that "hanging out with the wrong crowd" might lead their child astray vs. 28% of higher-income parents. [minority vs. white: 37% vs. 28%]
- 39% of low-income parents say the best reason for children to be involved in organized activities and programs in their non-school hours is to keep them busy and out of trouble vs. 23% of higher-income parents. [minority vs. white: 35% vs. 25%]
- Just 37% of low-income parents say that making sure their own child is productively occupied during non-school hours

*Low-income parents reported annual household income of less than \$25,000 per year; higher-income parents reported \$50,000 or more. Minority parents include those who identify as either African American or Hispanic.

is something they have under control, compared with 60% of higher-income parents. [minority vs. white: 48% vs. 56%]

By overwhelming margins, low-income and minority parents indicate their communities could do a lot more for kids.

- Almost 2 in 3 low-income parents (65%) say their community could realistically do much more when it comes to having enough things for elementary school children to do, compared to 46% of higher income. [minority vs. white: 71% vs. 46%]
- When it comes to having enough things for teens to do, substantially larger proportions of low-income and minority parents agree their community could realistically do much more [low income vs. higher income: 85% vs. 65%; minority vs. white: 83% vs. 67%]

The majority of parents—regardless of income or race—say the summer stands out as the most difficult time to find productive things for kids to do, but keeping youngsters busy during the summer is especially tough for low-income and minority parents. They are more likely to say:

- Their kids “really don’t have enough good options” for things to do during the summer months [low vs. higher income: 63% vs. 43%; minority vs. white: 62% vs. 44%]
- They are concerned that they won’t be able to afford things their child would want to do during the summer [low vs. higher income: 76% vs. 42%; minority vs. white: 62% vs. 50%]
- They are concerned that their child will be bored during the summer [low vs. higher income: 65% vs. 48%; minority vs. white: 65% vs. 46%]
- They are concerned that there will not be enough options to capture their child’s interest during the summer [low vs. higher income: 57% vs. 38%; minority vs. white: 62% vs. 38%]
- They are concerned that they will have trouble finding child care during the summer [low vs. higher income: 31% vs. 13%; minority vs. white: 25% vs. 13%]



FINDING 4. More Time on Task?

Despite increased pressures on students to reach high academic standards, relatively small numbers of parents are looking for greater emphasis on academics in their child’s out-of-school time. That’s not to say parents don’t put a high priority on schoolwork—they do—but homework help or additional time spent on academic subjects is not the first thing parents have in mind when they think about their child’s free time. Kids, most parents say, need time to relax and just be kids. Once again, low-income and minority families are exceptions; both groups are considerably more likely to want activities that emphasize academic learning.

More academics does not top the list of things parents are seeking in their child’s out-of-school activities.

- Other than safety, what’s the best reason for kids in general to be involved in organized activities and programs when they’re not in school? Asked to choose among the following four options, only 15% of parents say the best reason is to improve how well kids do in school; 41% say it’s to develop interests and hobbies; 27% to keep kids busy and out of trouble; 16% to have fun.
- While more than 1 in 3 parents (34%) say they’d go out of their way to find an after-school program for their own child that provides supervised homework time, another 37% say this would be “nice but not essential,” and 28% say it would not be important to them.
- When parents are asked to choose which of these three programs would be the best match for their own child, the results are about evenly split among a program that provides “extra academic preparation and skills” (37%), athletics/sports (32%) or things like art, music or dance (29%).

Parents don’t automatically jump to “after school programs” as a tool for helping their children reach higher academic standards.

- Even among parents who think that the public schools in their community are raising academic standards and expectations for students, only 14% say the best reason for kids to be involved in activities during non-school hours is to improve how well they do in school.
- Similarly, only 17% of parents who say their child needs extra help in academic subjects point to improving schoolwork as the best reason for a child to be involved.
- A modest majority of parents (54%) agree that “kids get more than enough academics during the school day, so after-school programs should focus on other things that capture their interest,” compared with 38% who say, “Since schools are putting so much emphasis on standardized tests and higher academic standards, kids are better off in after-school programs that focus on academic skills.”

By extremely wide margins, low-income and minority parents are considerably more likely to want activities and programs that emphasize academic learning. Both groups are more likely to say:

- Their child needs extra help in school [low vs. higher income: 67% vs. 44%; minority vs. white: 61% vs. 45%]
- They are concerned their child will fall behind on academics during the summer months [low vs. higher income: 60% vs. 32%; minority vs. white 56% vs. 33%]
- An after-school program that provides supervised homework time is something they would go out of their way to find [low vs. higher income: 52% vs. 28%; minority vs. white 56% vs. 27%]
- That since schools are putting so much emphasis on standardized tests and higher academic standards, kids are better off in after-school programs that focus on academics rather than on other things [low vs. higher income: 45% vs. 35%; minority vs. white 55% vs. 33%]
- The best match for their own child would be an activity or program that focused on “providing extra academic preparation and skills” rather than sports or the arts [low vs. higher income: 39% vs. 35%*; minority vs. white 56% vs. 32%]

Activities and programs that focus on learning appeal to low-income and minority students as well as parents. These students are more likely to say:

- They would be interested in a summer program that helped kids keep up with schoolwork or prepare for the next grade [low vs. higher income: 69% vs. 51%; minority vs. white: 79% vs. 49%]
- They would “very much” like an after-school program that focuses mainly on academic preparation [low vs. higher income: 39% vs. 24%; minority vs. white: 45% vs. 23%]
- They would “very much” like an after-school program that gives you time to do homework and has an adult around to help if you need it [low vs. higher income: 36% vs. 29%; minority vs. white: 45% vs. 29%]
- The best reason for kids to be involved in activities after school and on weekends is “to improve how well they do in school” [low vs. higher income: 20% vs. 9%; minority vs. white: 23% vs. 8%]

FINDING 5: Where Parents and Kids Differ

Both youngsters and parents see out-of-school activities in an overall positive light, but a few differences in outlook are worth noting. Some are predictable and probably even natural, but the study did unearth several areas

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where the contrast between what parents think and what young people actually say is more troubling. For example, most parents say their own kids don’t do much hanging out at the mall; yet more than half of kids say they do. And while some parents count on cell phones to know where their kids are, uncomfortably high numbers of youngsters admit they’ve told their parents they were in one place when they were really in another and that they don’t always answer their cell when they know it’s their parents calling.

Parents and youngsters are equally likely to think there’s a potential for danger on the Internet. But parents, for their part, may be surprised to learn the extent to which they underestimate their child’s Internet use.

- The Internet is seen as “a negative and potentially risky thing to be doing” by about 1 in 5 parents (19%). The same proportion (19%) of youngsters who use the Internet acknowledge that something has happened on it that would upset their parents if they knew about it.
- Almost 2 out of 3 parents (65%) say their child uses the Internet at home to surf, play games and chat—compared with more than 8 in 10 middle and high school students (82%) who report doing so—a 17-percentage-point gap.

*This difference is not statistically significant.

The overwhelming majority of parents say their own child doesn't use the mall as a hang out—but most middle and high school students would disagree.

- 81% of parents of middle and high school students believe their child does not hang out at the mall, but well over half of the students surveyed (56%) say they do.
- According to more than 4 in 10 young people (44%), the mall is the place where you would be sure to find the greatest number of kids after school or on weekends—compared with 29% who say most kids can be found at a playground, 13% at a local shop or restaurant or 8% at a community center.
- Of those who do frequent the mall, 27% of kids say they have seen things happen there that would upset their parents if they knew about them.



- 6 in 10 parents (60%) view the mall as a place “with a lot of potential for bad things to happen.”

When it comes to cell phones as a way to keep children safe, parents may be indulging in a false sense of security.

- Among parents whose child does have a cell phone, more than 6 in 10 (62%) find that they give their child more freedom to move from place to place, because the cell phone allows them to check in with each other.
- Among young people who have a cell phone, almost 1 in 3 (32%) say they have used it to tell their parents they were in one place when they really were at another.
- Also, almost 1 in 3 (32%) say there have been times when they did not answer the cell phone when they knew it was their parents calling.