

Perrenoud, Michelle Renee. (2015). Attracting and Retaining Middle School Youth Participants in Afterschool Expanded Learning Programs: A Descriptive Case Study. UCLA: Education - Leadership Program 0659. Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/43n287qr>

The purpose of my study was to address the problem of low attendance and growing attrition of middle school students participating in afterschool programs. This study centered on youth and practitioner perceptions of the conditions that foster young people's interest, attendance, active participation, and meaningful engagement in middle school afterschool expanded learning programs funded with After School Safety and Enrichment (ASES) and/or 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) grants. A one-size fits all approach to attracting and supporting youth in afterschool programs is ineffective; focusing on understanding and meeting the needs of this adolescent group is an essential component to supporting and sustaining their attendance. Three elements were found to be keys in fostering enrollment and continued attendance for youth in these programs: (a) alignment between what matters to youth and the content of the activities and program; (b) thoughtful staff recruitment and development processes; (c) meaningful collaboration and shared decision-making between staff and students.

Youth and staff involved in these programs described environments, experiences, and activities which young people were active, both mentally and physically, and engaged in tasks that were meaningful, varied, involved learning, and supported their mastery. Interesting experiences and wide-ranging tasks were favored over routines and conditions that discouraged young people's desires to participate and learn in the hours outside of school. Their perceptions provide insight into three frameworks on effective engagement practices with middle school adolescents during afterschool programs: (a) Convergence of Matterness: A Youth Perspective-Centered Model; (b) Validity of the Learning Experiences Continuum and Process, and (c) Participation-Involvement-Engagement (PIE) Continuum. These frameworks illustrates a shift from traditional approaches of addressing categories in isolation to the connectedness of categories and a confluence of contributing factors, and their relationship to a quality learning experience that further drives attendance by validating and meeting students' expressed needs and interests. Moving students along a continuum from participation to involvement and to the ultimate goal of full engagement is a recommended goal for programs. Reviewing the implications and implementing the recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers will strengthen middle school afterschool programs thus helping to alleviate the attendance crisis.