SUN in Multnomah County: Youth Voices in After-School and Case Management Programming

The SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) Service System (SUN SS) Division in Multnomah County's Department of County Human Services (DCHS) promotes educational success and family self-sufficiency through an integrated network of social and support services for youth, families, and community members. SUN SS relies on SUN community schools (SUN CS), which function as delivery "hubs" where students and families can access a suite of educational, recreational, social, and health services.

We conducted a study to gather information about SUN clients' experiences, both with extended-day activities at SUN schools and case management services. The goal was to better understand what works well and what challenges we're facing. In total, we ran 15 focus groups (FGs) at an array of primary and secondary schools throughout all six regions in Multnomah County. Nine out of 11 partner agencies were represented in the study. In an effort to reflect the diversity of FG participants, we chose ethnically diverse peers as moderators. In total, 92 youth in the SUN SS participated in the FGs.

What works

● Homework Club: Almost universally, FG participants viewed Homework Club as a valuable opportunity to receive tutoring and homework help. Many youth reported improved grades after participating. Said one student: "I think that SUN, since they put academics first, helps you put your schoolwork first."

● Activities: Youth valued the array of available activities. From cooking classes to themed enrichment opportunities, there was no shortage of things to do at SUN sites.

●Making new friends: Many participants said making new friends--and spending time with existing friends--was a major draw to the program. Students reported better interpersonal skills after participating in SUN. Some said SUN improved their ability to make good social choices.

"I was horrible in my classes," one student said. "When [SUN] came, they actually helped me and influenced me to choose the right friends to hang around with instead of choosing the wrong people, because the wrong people took me down a road that I don't want to go down."

● Connecting with case managers: Participants in case management programming also emphasized the value of their relationship with their case manager. Youth reported that case managers treat them with respect and kindness, and that their trust is key for their wellbeing and success.

A few quotes from participants noted the importance of case managers:

"I don't think I would have been in school at all if the case managers weren't around."

"[My case manager] has never looked down on me. I've told her some things that I've done that I wasn't proud of, and she's never made me feel like less of a person."

"I've been homeless three times since I've started [case management], and they've helped me find housing, they've gotten me food, boxes, and stuff for my family, they've helped me get completely whole clothing attire, and stuff like that. I lost everything when I went on a road trip. They'll help us with that."
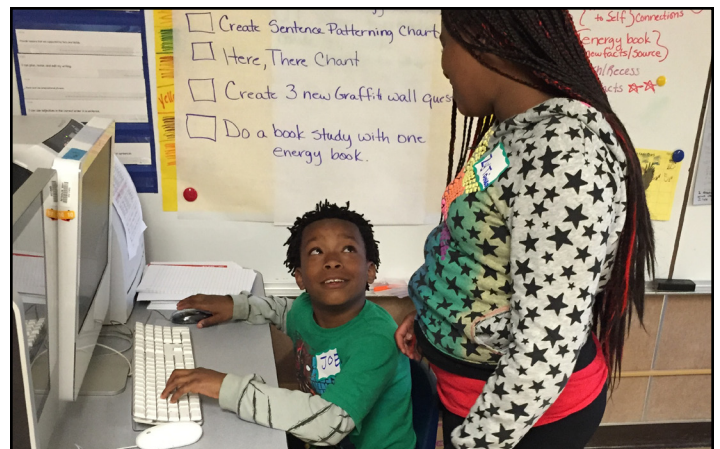
What doesn't work

● The bad eggs: Youth used a variety of adjectives to describe students with poor behavior including "annoying," "bad," "loud," and "rude." Often times, troublemakers did more than just cause disruptions; they also bullied other students. Sometimes, participants noted racist tones.

A quote from a participant sheds light on the issue:

"They bully me, all the kids in my SUN class, except for the girls. They'll tease me about my skin color, but if I talk about it with my teacher she will actually get it to stop."

While some respondents expressed that SUN staff adequately address problem behavior, many felt that SUN staff don't react appropriately to bullying. SUN staff may have much to gain by developing ways to better respond to troublemakers.

Even though some students felt defeated, many offered solutions to curbing other students' behavioral problems. One example: criteria for allowing students into SUN so that certain troublemakers could get filtered out.

● Boredom: One common word we heard from participants was "boring." Specifically, the more academic classes and activities were called out as boring, or not sufficiently challenging. Said one student, "Some classes can be so boring, because the teacher does it so systematically."

● Not enough field trips: Students noted that more field trips would help them do better in school. When one student would broach the topic, others would echo them:

"I literally have not been on a field trip since middle school," one student said. "I think field trips are really important because they show the out-of-school things that you can't learn in school. . . . If SUN could somehow do field trips as a reward, I think that would help kids out a lot."

The freedom to choose

For many FG participants, choice was key to their satisfaction. Participants in case management noted the value of being able to choose a case manager with whom they felt they had a lot in common. In general, students who were personally willing to attend SUN, and who were able to decide on their own whether they would enroll, had more positive experiences in programming. "I came willingly," one participant said. "I begged my mom to let me come to SUN because I was like, 'Okay, cool, it's an after-school program and I want to try it out,' and then I really started enjoying it."

SUN students also noted how important it is for them to pick the activities that they participate in. One student noted a sense of camaraderie among participants:

"You get to pick your group you want to be in. Obviously, the people that are in the same group as you are have something in common with you, so it's easier to get along with them. I think a good thing about SUN is it just gives you a chance to be around people who have stuff in common with."

Other perspectives

● Non-SUN students: Generally, FG participants talked about how other students see SUN as "fun" but also "nerdy." They also expressed feeling alienated, as shown by statements such as, "If you're a rich kid you would have no need for an advocate." Some participants noted non-SUN students seemed to look down upon them, as if there's a stigma attached to participating.

● Teachers: FG participants thought their school day teachers encourage participation in SUN because these programs offer teachers additional support.

● Parents: Participants said their parents have good opinions about programming and think it helps their children do well in school. In addition to the academic gains cited by students, students also expressed how programming also helps working parents by providing a safe place for their children during the day.

"[My parents] are very busy so they love that I'm participating in the program," one student said. They have time to do their things and then pick me up after school."

Needing the basics

● More/better food: Participants sometimes responded by saying they want more--and better--food. Some students noted being disappointed by the food provided as SUN sites. Others talked about needing better supplies (e.g. pencils, research tools, technology). Youth in case management emphasized how they need--and receive--help with meeting basic needs like paying for utilities, food, clothes, and finding paying jobs.