

“After the Bell”

A free opportunity for middle school youth to participate in enrichment activities through the support of community organizations and businesses, Merrill Area Public Schools and Lincoln County UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development.

Need:

Whether school is out for the day, or for the summer, the time children spend in out-of-school activities has an enormous impact on their health and well-being. The programs children engage in can play a key role in their ongoing learning by providing opportunities for exploring interests, and gaining important lifelong skills such as problem solving, conflict resolution, teamwork and leadership as well as positively connecting with adults.

A growing body of research suggests that after-school programs can also have positive effects on outcomes such as, motivation, engagement in learning, expectations of success, and social competencies. After-school programs keep youth out of trouble by providing safe and structured time during critical afternoon hours. Overall, the research shows that children who are supervised and engaged in structured activities are less likely to participate in high risk activities. For middle school students, being supervised after-school reduces by half the risk that they will smoke, drink, or abuse drugs. Furthermore, after-school programming provides an important ingredient to parent's employment stability. Lincoln County's relatively high rate of parents in the workforce means that children are less likely to have a parent waiting for them at home after school. This was confirmed in a fall 2004 survey of Prairie River Middle School students, where 65% of students surveyed (226 out of 348 students) indicated that there was no adult at home right after school some time during the week. After-school programs benefit the entire family by giving parents peace of mind about what their children are doing after-school, consequently helping them to balance work and family responsibilities. From educators to law enforcement to parents, there is universal agreement that after-school programs reinforce student learning and provide safe havens and enrichment opportunities during non-school hours.

Response:

The “After the Bell” steering committee facilitated by UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development staff planned and launched the first “After the Bell” program on November 29, 2004. This committee included representatives from T.B. Scott Library, Prairie River Middle School, Merrill Park and Recreation, Child Care Connection, Boys and Girls Club committee, Merrill Forward Together Healthy Community Initiative, Homework Assistance Program, local church, 4-H and the After School Book Club, Social Services, the Merrill Police Department and middle school age youth. This committee continues to meet quarterly and provides on-going support for the program.

The “After the Bell” program provides a safe place for middle school students to learn new skills. “After the Bell” operates from right after school to 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday at the Prairie River Middle School on days school is in session. Students do not need to attend the program each day to participate. The program is supervised each day by two-three adult supervisors with assistance from high school students involved in 4-H, the Octagon Club and National Honor Society.

Each day the program offers students a place to play board games, do homework, make crafts, visit with friends and have a snack. In addition, community volunteers (youth and adults) provide special programs. Programs have included learning to knit and crochet, nutrition and cooking, learning about money, health and fitness, learning to babysit, sewing, ceramics, visual arts, yoga, environmental education, basketry, community service activities, sign language, and visits from a variety of local agencies to learn about the work they do. Some adults and older youth come on a weekly basis or monthly basis to offer programs.

Youth completed several service projects including making dog and cat treats for the Humane Society,



“Pillow Patrol” project where youth made pillowcases and stuffed them with toys that were given to HAVEN for distribution to youth throughout the county,



knitting infant hats to donate to Aspirus Birthing Center,



sewing “rice hot packs” donated to Harbor House to be used by their residents

and working with the 4-H Ambassadors to increase recycling at area schools. Through these efforts youth involved are able to identify needs in the community, what they can do, become connected to the community, feel good about the projects they have completed and give back to the community that has made this program possible.

Outcomes:

During the 2007-08 school year, 100 different youth participated with an average of 19 youth participating each day. Twenty-three youth who participated in the program on a regular basis completed a participant evaluation at the end of the year.

The majority of participants who responded to the participant evaluation indicated that the “After the Bell” enrichment program provided them with a place to go after school where they felt a sense of belonging (i.e. positive relationship with adults involved, feel welcome and safe while at the program), provided them with opportunities to learn new skills (i.e. learn new skills, be creative and share what they have learned with others), develop more independence (i.e. opportunities to choose and plan activities in the program) and allowed them to participate in service to others (i.e. community service projects, helping others in the program).

A majority of participants who indicated they had participated in the fitness, nutrition and cooking programs indicated that their participation in these programs helped them increase their level of exercise, helped them develop healthier eating habits and they learned how to prepare healthy food items for themselves and/or others.

Some quotes from Students about the program:

“It’s fun.”

In reference to the fitness, nutrition and cooking program... “It was very fun!”

Some quotes from Middle School Staff regarding the “After the Bell” and “After the Bell Plus (tutoring) programs:

“Thank you for all your efforts! Some of these students are hard to reach—you’ve really helped them.”

“Both of these students improved tremendously with the help of the “After the Bell Plus” tutors.”

What is Needed to Continue the Program in 2008-09:

The “After the Bell” Steering Committee is beginning plans to offer the program from September 8, 2008 through June 9, 2009 (143 days the program would be offered).

In order for the “After the Bell” program to be offered the following funding/support is needed.

- \$3,000 Snack supplies and program supplies
- \$6,800 Hire an individual to provide daily supervision and coordination for the program (12-15 hours per week for 36 weeks)
- \$3,200 Hire a second individual to assist in providing daily supervision for the program (8 hours per week for 36 weeks)
- In-kind Use of the auditorium lobby and additional rooms as needed at the Prairie River Middle School
- In-kind UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development Agent will continue to serve as the overall supervisor of the program.
- In-kind Community volunteers (older youth and adults) to teach/lead enrichment programs

Total Funds Needed for the “After the Bell Program” equals \$13,000

*** The Merrill Area Public School is working to secure funds to continue the “After the Bell Plus” tutoring program during the 2008-09 school year. These funds will be used to hire a coordinator for the tutoring program and tutors.*

A good investment—research clearly demonstrates that after-school programs are a wise investment. From a cost-benefit perspective, every \$1 invested in youth development opportunities and supports results in a return on investment of \$10.51.

Overview prepared by Debbie Moellendorf, UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development Agent for Lincoln County. For more information e-mail Debbie at deboorah.moellendorf@ces.uwex.edu or call 536-0304.

Source: Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, A Wiskids Policy Brief, Fall 2006, “School’s Out! Out-of-School Time Key to Children’s Success”.