

THE CHALLENGE OF
SYSTEM BUILDING IN THE AFTER-SCHOOL FIELD:
LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

Sys-tem. n. 1. A set or arrangement of things so related or connected as to form a unity or organic whole . . .

“Thank God we have personal relationships because there is nothing that makes us collaborate.”

A Chicago after-school leader at the outset of the MOST Initiative

“There’s starting to be that coming together, that pulling together.”

Another Chicago after-school leader after 3 years of MOST activity

The heterogeneous, decentralized, and fragmented nature of the after-school field in the United States has long been a mixed blessing. It has allowed a variety of community institutions to find a role as providers, and other institutions, such as cultural and arts organizations, to feel welcome in contributing to children’s experiences. It has kept bureaucracy to a minimum, allowing after-school programs to remain community oriented and rooted and to serve all interested children without having to label or categorize. Yet, as societal interest and investment in after-school programs have grown, these same defining qualities have complicated efforts to develop the after-school field in a coherent way, especially to formulate and implement strategies for addressing common challenges facing the field. Thus, for instance, the tasks of increasing supply and strengthening program quality are often complicated by lack of city-wide capacity for collecting and analyzing information, planning, and priority-setting. Providers cannot find, and sometimes are unaware of, resources that would be

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helpful to their work. Potential funders may not be sure where or how to focus their investments.¹

If the world of after-school programs is to be made more coherent, that process will occur mostly (and is being attempted mostly) at the city level. In this paper, I analyze the tasks, questions, and challenges associated with what can be described as system building in the after-school field, focusing on city-level efforts. My basic arguments are that (a) system building has to be understood as a long-term process, tied to broader field building; (b) though concerted efforts at system building are needed in the after-school field, such efforts have to be respectful of the qualities that make after-school programs a distinctive developmental resource for low-income children (e.g., diversity of sponsorship, large numbers of modest-size programs, strong community roots); (c) no one institution or group can claim authority (or legitimacy) to govern a local after-school system; rather, governance has to be more or less democratic and consensual in nature; and (d) in general, the attributes of well-functioning after-school systems need much more debate than they have received to the present.

The paper draws on my personal experience studying system building in four cities—Boston, Chicago, Seattle, and Baltimore—on my general familiarity with efforts in other cities, and on a small literature on this topic. In Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, Julie Spielberger, Sylvan Robb, and I studied system-building efforts that were part of the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund’s MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) initiative. In Baltimore, Carol Horton and I studied the systemic dimensions of an after-school initiative that was part of the Safe and Sound Campaign, itself part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Urban Health Initiative.²

The Concept of an After-School System

Over the years I have asked many people what the concept of an after-school system meant to them, and what they thought of the after-school system in their city. It was clear from the responses that the concept—with respect both to after-

¹ In this paper I define after-school programs to include those that serve children of elementary and middle school age and that provide a mix of care and supervision, enrichment, and fun, along with some homework time/help. Not included are programs designed or intended to provide primarily academic remediation.

² See Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001, and Halpern & Horton, 2003.

school programming per se and to the idea of service systems in general—evokes varying images.³ Some people thought of particular clusters or types of providers, some assumed the after-school system was an extension of the school system, some said there was no after-school system in their city, some equated the after-school system with particular initiatives or approaches, and some equated the concept of “system” with large public bureaucracies like education or child welfare.

I will discuss the challenge of conceptualizing after-school systems shortly, as a central system-building task. For the moment, the after-school system can be understood as all of the institutions that have a stake in after-school programming within some defined geographic boundary (providers, funders, regulators, resource organizations, and families themselves); the policies, procedures, regulations, initiatives, and norms shaping the behavior, interactions, and relationships among these institutions; and, perhaps, the resource base for providing and supporting after-school programming. While one can consider the elements and functioning of after-school systems at any level, from neighborhood to nation, the city level makes particular sense, for a number of reasons. Cities embody most of the key elements of after-school systems. Different stakeholders, for example, after-school providers and cultural and arts institutions, interact most regularly within the boundaries of a city. Cities tend to have high concentrations of low- and moderate-income families, whose children comprise the majority of participants in after-school programs. And each city has a distinct after-school history and infrastructure, political and institutional culture, and neighborhood structure.

The Current Status of City-Level After-School Systems

Like after-school programs themselves, city-level after-school systems can be seen as very alike or very different, depending on one’s lens. In general, such systems can be said to be decentralized, loosely coupled, open, and heterogeneous. There is no one institutional locus; there are no widely accepted gover-

³ The discussion in these pages deliberately holds aside the large, interdisciplinary field of study known as systems theory. This field encompasses many preoccupations, strands, and ideas but in general treats such concepts as part-whole relationships, the interconnectedness (and interdependence) of things, patterns in relationships, self-organization, entropy, equilibrium, dynamism, complexity, chaos, etc. While potentially interesting, this theoretical frame would have overwhelmed the paper.

nance mechanisms, no overarching goals, policies, or regulations guiding or constraining programs, and no commonly determined decision-making structures or procedures. Boundaries are porous and shifting. Leadership is diffuse and informal, based largely on length of involvement in the field, and, to some extent, self-selected. Different priorities and requirements are stipulated by numerous individual funders and sponsors, often without much attention to what others are requiring (or to the mission of long-standing after-school providers).

In most cities, and in some neighborhoods, there are many kinds and sizes of providers. The largest general categories are private, nonprofit social service agencies (including child care providers), youth-serving organizations (such as Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs), and schools (which sometimes serve as bases for programs run by other community agencies). Parks and recreation departments provide some after-school programming; libraries have begun to sponsor organized programs after school; and churches sponsor some programming and provide sites for programs sponsored by community groups. Surrounding core providers is an assortment of organizations whose mission links them to the after-school field, through provision of volunteers, mentors, tutors, specialists, or other resources in the arts, literacy, athletics, culture, technology, or other substantive domains.

Historically, the majority of after-school programs have been small-scale enterprises, serving anywhere from 10 or 15 to 50 or 60 children daily. (That is changing somewhat with the newer school-based programs, some of which claim to serve hundreds of children daily at specific sites.) Though there are still some drop-in programs to be found, the large majority of after-school programs serve a defined population of children on a more or less daily basis. Providers sometimes operate in dedicated space, sometimes in temporary space, whether in their own buildings or in borrowed or rented space in other institutions, such as schools or churches. Core staff typically have a high school degree and some college credits, work part time, and earn slightly more than minimum wage. In a growing proportion of programs—but still the minority—core staff are supplemented by the volunteers and specialists noted above.

Providing funding or otherwise supporting after-school programs can range from the sole mission to a minor activity for particular stakeholders. In that sense, local after-school systems are reliant on and actually made up of parts of other systems—social services, early childhood care and education, public

schools, parks and recreation, the cultural and arts sectors—that typically are larger, better funded (at least in relative terms), and have their own dynamics and preoccupations. This pattern has a number of consequences. Other systems sponsoring after-school programs may try to bend such programs to their own purposes, as has happened with the public schools. They may apply a licensing and regulatory framework to after-school programs that was really designed for their core services, as has happened with early childhood care. They may assign staff with little background in after-school programming to administer after-school programs, as has happened with some park districts. When these other systems are under stress, their marginal activities—including after-school programs—are particularly vulnerable.

The after-school landscape in some cities is shaped also by large programmatic initiatives, which promote a particular approach, model, or site for after-school programming. Although initiatives bring new resources to a local system and contribute to growth in supply, they tend to be internally preoccupied and often try to create their own reality. Like the larger service systems that sponsor some after-school programming, initiatives often try to bend programs and resource institutions to their own purposes. (Initiatives do eventually begin to turn outward, recognize that they are not working in uncharted territory, and consider where they fit and how they might work with a range of stakeholders, including other initiatives. Often it is late in their funding cycle, as they begin to realize that they cannot sustain themselves without relating to the larger after-school community.)

Most city-level after-school systems lack capacity and mechanisms for city-wide planning, priority setting, information collection, and analysis. There is, thus, little systematic information on a range of issues critical to investment in the field: how much money is being spent on after-school programs, how many children participate in which kinds of programs in which neighborhoods, what the central obstacles to participation might be (e.g., money, information, transportation, scheduling), what programs in that city look and feel like, and what training and technical assistance supports are most needed by providers. Lack of information makes it difficult to deploy financial and other resources effectively (regardless of what criteria one might have). Some low-income neighborhoods are well served by after-school programs; others have few or no programs. Some providers are recognized and valued; others are not. Families are sometimes not aware of programs that might suit their children. Many programs needing

resource supports have insufficient information about what might be available, while many resource organizations are unable to reach programs most needing their resources. In most cities, there is no registry of individuals or local groups that can provide training and curriculum support in specific areas.

With respect to resources, both financial and human, the after-school field operates barely above a survival level. A typical program, for instance, has revenues that cover two thirds to three quarters of costs (Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001). Most cities have few (or no) funding sources for resource and support organizations, facilities construction or improvement, professional development, or other quality improvement strategies. There are, moreover, no mechanisms for marshaling and rationalizing the use of existing resources or for agreeing upon how best to allocate new resources. Some revenues are year-to-year, and providers are accustomed to seeking out what funding they can find at a particular moment and adapting to the (often competing) goals and priorities of multiple funders. Providers and resource organizations rationalize funding as best they can, integrating funding from multiple sources with different aims, priorities, and expectations. But the vagaries of funding make it impossible to plan for more than a year at a time and lead programs to grow or shrink, add or subtract elements for no logical reason.

Strengthening After-School Systems

Envisioning a Well-Functioning After-School System

A variety of system-building tasks can be inferred from the typical characteristics of city-level after-school systems. Some are conceptual, many are practical. One basic task, for instance, is to describe (or agree upon the defining features of) the prevailing after-school system in one's city. The other side of that task is to debate and begin fleshing out a vision of what the ideal local after-school system would look and act like. Such a vision would, in my view, have to reflect some balance between bureaucratic attributes and "antibureaucratic" ones. As models, bureaucratic service systems, with their hierarchical structure, centralized control, strict boundaries, elaborate rules and regulations, extensive record-keeping, and emphasis on standardization and economies of scale, address many system development problems, for instance, creating a sense of order, organization, and accountability. At the same time, in system after system, front-line providers' and clients' experience with bureaucracy has been largely

negative.⁴ Alternative system-organizing principles emphasize—not surprisingly—decentralization, open boundaries, flexibility, ad hoc networking, smaller-scale service units, ease of access and use, and adaptation to community characteristics and individual needs. Policy makers and funders are usually uneasy with this latter set of principles, yet it is worth considering from the outset rather than at a time of great frustration or crisis.

Mobilizing and Organizing Stakeholders

At a practical level, describing the prevailing system and fleshing out principles to guide system development require the creation of structures or bodies through which individual stakeholders can come together to share information, debate important questions (e.g., what after-school programs should be about and what arguments to use to advocate for after-school programs), identify problems needing attention, engage in joint planning, find areas in which to work together, coordinate activities, and make decisions. In some cities stakeholders may choose to become active politically, for instance, forging a political agenda or developing working relationships with and trying to shape the agendas of mayors, city councils, school boards and school superintendents, prominent business people, and so forth. These new structures or bodies may be viewed as providing a governance function, or, less assertively, may be defined as networks, affinity groups, partnerships, and so forth.

Planning, setting priorities, and creating agendas require information, and another key system-building task is to build capacity to define, collect, and analyze information needed for decision-making. Assuming an effort to strengthen the funding base for after-school programming, it is often just as important to develop mechanisms for thoughtful distribution of funds and monitoring of their use.

Building Program Support Capacity

One central motivating purpose—if not the central purpose—for system-building efforts is to strengthen citywide capacity to support after-school programs in their daily work with children. Supporting and strengthening programs often

⁴ Bureaucratic service systems have been justly criticized for being unresponsive, inflexible, preoccupied with rules and procedures, self-serving, and unable to individualize. Meaningless paperwork, excessive categorizing and labeling, undermining participants' sense of agency, and a lack of collaborative spirit have also been cited as problems.

entails an effort to develop or strengthen training and technical assistance intermediaries and the development of strategies to link arts, sports, cultural, or other curricular resource organizations to after-school programs. Other program improvement strategies that may need design and nurturing include licensing, development of program standards, accreditation (linked to standards), work with higher education institutions to develop specialized postsecondary courses and course sequences, development of strategies to reduce staff turnover, and development of facilities and equipment improvement funds.

Building a Sense of Community

Some system-building tasks are more subtle, or at least less concrete. These include, for instance, building a sense of community among stakeholders, a belief that they are part of a common enterprise and have a voice in shaping that enterprise. Other tasks include helping potential stakeholders (e.g., higher education institutions, neighborhood groups and organizations, politicians, foundations, etc.) understand the field and find a useful role and, as implied earlier, figuring out how to relate to and work with overlapping or neighboring service systems, notably child care, education, and parks and recreation. How, for example, will the rules, regulations, and priorities of these systems be meshed with the goals and unique structure of the after-school system? Where might resources be shared or jointly developed?

Table 1 lists the range of system-building tasks faced in most cities.

Stimulating the System-Building Process

In most fields of service, system building occurs in two ways. Fundamentally, it is tied to the broader process of field building, which itself occurs over a long period of time, incrementally and organically. A critical mass of providers is reached; a body of specialized knowledge and methods crystallizes; a profession is declared; providers seek status and recognition (typically through a national organization); a niche in the larger human service environment is sought; public funding develops; funders seek accountability and greater efficiency (i.e., control); rules, regulations, and other elements of bureaucracy develop; and so forth. Established fields like social services (i.e., child welfare, family services) and education went through these processes beginning in the late 19th century, continuing through the first half of the 20th century. The early childhood care

TABLE 1: Key System-Building Tasks in the After-School Field

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a conceptual model or vision of a local after-school system. • Strengthening the funding base for after-school programs. • Developing mechanisms for distributing funding in a coherent, thoughtful, and equitable manner. • Strengthening capacity to collect and analyze information and to engage in planning and priority-setting. • Developing governance and decision-making mechanisms that are clear and have the support of stakeholders. • Formulating a broad, coordinated strategy for supporting and strengthening the quality of after-school programs. • Supporting the development and functioning of intermediary and resource institutions; developing mechanisms to link them to providers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing realistic, flexible quality control and financial accountability mechanisms. • Supporting organizational development for providers (e.g., management, policies and procedures, fund-raising). • Building a sense of community among stakeholders—a belief that they are part of a common enterprise and have a voice in shaping it. • Helping potential stakeholders (e.g., higher education institutions, neighborhood groups and organizations, politicians, foundations, etc.) understand the field and find a useful role. • Figuring out how to relate to and work with overlapping or neighboring service systems, notably, child care, education, and parks and recreation, as well as with the diverse cultural and arts sector. |
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and education field, first cousin to after-school programming, began organizing at an accelerated pace in the mid-1980s and, though much further along than the after-school field, continues to struggle with many important tasks.

Although after-school programs have been part of the human service landscape for well over a century, for most of that time they operated at such a modest level that field-building processes were barely stimulated.⁵ A clearly defined profession never developed; relevant theory, child development knowledge, and methods were never elaborated; funding remained inadequate and erratic; governance and control mechanisms never emerged. Since the mid-1970s, some after-school programs have been implicitly “governed” by the fact of receiving public child care funding, which requires them to meet child care licensing standards. United Ways have historically imposed reporting requirements, intended, ostensibly, to assure quality control (but in practice leading mostly to a kind of numbers shell game). Tentative efforts have begun in a handful of cities, including Boston and Kansas City, to professionalize the field, engaging higher education, improving compensation, and elaborating career paths. Yet after-school

⁵ For a history of the after-school field, see Halpern, 2003.

programs have seemed—and still appear to many as—an expression of community rather than an identifiable part of the human service system.

Over the past decade, as societal interest in after-school programs has increased, field-building processes have accelerated modestly. There is still no recognized after-school profession, and no specific credentials are required to work in an after-school program. Virtually anyone can be hired as a front-line provider, in many agencies without even a criminal background check. There are, nonetheless, a growing variety of community college courses available, and a handful of certificate programs. Large youth-serving organizations (and a handful of large-scale initiatives) have also begun to elaborate their own internal training programs. There remains only modest agreement about the purposes of after-school programs. Yet (in seeming contradiction) there appears to be growing consensus about the types and qualities of experiences children should have in the after-school hours. There are a growing assortment of curricula and resource materials that give substance to after-school work. And since the mid-1990s, there have been a number of efforts to develop and promulgate standards for the field (or for particular local after-school systems), the most notable of which are the NSACA (National School-Age Care Alliance) standards. There remain few signs of bureaucracy or centralized control in the after-school field. Yet as funding has increased, so has funders' desire to control and monitor use of that funding; assure compliance with promises, rules, and regulations; and, in some cases, impose a particular vision.

Deliberate System-Building Efforts

The distinctions between organic and deliberate system building in the after-school field are not straightforward. Almost any investment can be seen to strengthen a local after-school system. When a large youth-serving organization such as the Boys and Girls Clubs or the YMCA develops a quality assurance mechanism or starts a new curricular initiative, these often affect numerous local programs. When a “capacity building” intermediary, like PASE (Partnership for After School Education) in New York City or School's Out Consortium in Seattle, holds a conference, runs a training workshop, provides technical assistance to a provider, or helps disseminate a particular set of curricular materials, those activities are contributing to the strength of the after-school system, even if in small measure and whether or not they are conceived as system build-

ing. When a grant is given to a local child care resource and referral agency to strengthen its capacity to generate data on school-age care, or to a local arts organization to strengthen its capacity to work with after-school programs, those investments, too, are system building. Even direct service funding, such as child care subsidies, leads to strengthening such program-level functions as management or information collection and, in that light, add a modicum of strength to the system as a whole.

At the same time, there have been numerous efforts in recent years to address deliberately one or more system-building tasks in the field. Some have been initiated by private funders such as foundations or United Way, others by mayors, others by key local or national intermediary organizations, still others by the sponsors of key models. These efforts have varied along a number of dimensions: how many system-building tasks a particular initiative has tried to address at once; how many and which kinds of providers an initiative has included; how many and which kinds of stakeholders have had a voice in shaping and governing an initiative; the extent to which an initiative has sought to take the lead or even take over system building within the boundaries of a city; and the extent to which system building has been a central aim or a corollary one.

Because system-building tasks are interdependent, system building should (at least in theory) be most effective when it involves orchestrated work on a number of fronts at once. It is, for instance, easier to convince potential funders to make investments in the local after-school system when good data exist to guide those investments and when the local after-school community has debated and agreed upon where investment is most needed. That in turn requires identifiable convening structures and an active planning and priority-setting process. It is, once again, easier to design a citywide professional development strategy when structures for convening relevant stakeholders on neutral ground already exist and are functioning and trusted. Efforts to build supply require simultaneous attention to issues of accessibility, affordability, and quality, as well as sustainability. Supporting one kind of program improvement strategy, for example, promoting standards, is more useful if there is also an ongoing effort to strengthen capacity to provide training and technical assistance, or if standards are tied to funding.

Most system-building effort has, nonetheless, focused on specific tasks, for instance, convening stakeholders, developing networks or affinity groups, developing a more coordinated financing strategy, collecting information on the

amount and location of after-school provision, developing or better organizing training and technical assistance resources, strengthening a city's professional development activities, and developing support networks among providers. Participants in such activities may or may not see their work in the context of a larger agenda and may not even describe what they are doing as system building. The following illustrate the range and varied ambitions of discrete efforts under way around the country:

- In the Kansas City area, Partnership for Children, a local child advocacy agency, took the lead to create and convene an Out-of-School Time Collaborative, made up of all kinds of institutions—public and private providers, funders, higher education, police and sheriff's departments, community groups, and so forth. The collaborative has been working to create a comprehensive plan for strengthening the regional after-school system.
- Sacramento County in California has developed a Youth Services Provider Network, sponsored by both public agencies and local foundations, through which providers meet every few months for a half-day to share information on resources and discuss key conceptual and implementation issues. The network members have reportedly begun to develop a set of common principles for after-school work and to develop an agenda that would allow them to advocate for greater funding.
- In Boston, 14 funders have joined to create the After-School for All Partnership.⁶ The funders have collectively committed \$24 million to be used over a 5-year period to pursue common goals and undertake selected collaborative activities, while retaining their own "initiatives and investment options." They have created an executive committee and three major working groups, organized around the three major goals of the partnership—learning, expansion, and sustainable financing. Smaller working groups are assembled to work on specific initiatives. These groups and the partnership as a whole are staffed by two people housed at the United Way.
- In San Diego, the city's Community and Economic Development Department has assumed responsibility for fiscal management and monitoring of funding for a citywide after-school program in the schools. This includes developing and monitoring contracts with community-based agencies that run programs

⁶ This group includes the city of Boston, the United Way, the Boston Foundation, Harvard University, a number of corporate foundations, and an organization called Massachusetts 2020.

in the schools, monitoring program compliance (through program reports and site visits), auditing, and so forth.

- In a handful of cities, including Boston, Detroit, and Seattle, the mayor's office has created an office or initiative that plays some convening role and is designed to further particular system-building aims. For example, an initiative in Columbus, Ohio, promoted a locally developed set of standards for after-school programs. Mayors have the prestige and influence to heighten awareness of after-school issues and to bring stakeholders together—especially various municipal agencies—who might otherwise pursue their own priorities. That same prestige and influence can be helpful in addressing systemic problems. Boston's initiative, called Boston 2:00-to-6:00, has worked to create new programming by making it easier for community-based organizations to run after-school programs in schools.

A Growing Role for Intermediaries in System building

Local capacity-building intermediaries play a distinct role in a handful of cities and are beginning to focus more explicitly on system building. Examples include PASE (Partnership for After-School Education) in New York City, School's Out Consortium in Seattle, and the Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD) in San Francisco. Intermediaries run conferences, sponsor forums, provide training workshops and institutes, provide technical assistance to individual programs, serve as resource centers, develop directories of providers and resource organizations, gather data useful to their own and others' planning⁷, serve as information hubs, and undertake advocacy.

Intermediaries sometimes serve convening functions, as well. For instance, CNYD has been gathering basic data on the status of the local after-school system (e.g., on supply, funding, and related indicators) and will be using that data as a basis for convening and fostering dialog on systems issues among private and public sector stakeholders. PASE in New York City actually views itself as “a consortium of . . . youth-serving organizations.” It relies heavily on member organizations (as well as independent contractors) to staff the training, techni-

⁷ PASE has worked with the community mapping project of the local Public Interest Research Group to map the location of after-school programs throughout the five boroughs, classifying programs as arts, literacy, multiservice, youth leadership, or “other.” The resulting citywide and borough-specific maps made dramatically clear the neighborhoods in which programs were highly concentrated, well distributed, or lacking. They also created a picture of the (im)balance in different concentrations among programs.

cal assistance, mentoring, and other activities that it designs and sponsors. It develops networks and affinity groups that are meant to develop their own agendas and take on a life of their own (while remaining under the PASE umbrella). PASE's work is guided by a program council, made up of the directors of well-regarded programs and agencies, that addresses issues internal to its own activities and affecting New York City's larger after-school system.

The activities of intermediaries appear to reduce the sense of isolation among providers, create and strengthen ties among stakeholders, and help give definition to the local after-school system. A directory of providers and resource organizations, for instance, has an important defining value, creating a coherence and aggregate identity for a large number of diverse organizations. Intermediaries are often perceived as honest brokers and, from that perspective, are effective agents for convening stakeholders around important issues and challenges. At the same time, the program- and organizational-level capacity-building tasks in the after-school field are so great that they can easily consume—and perhaps should consume—the energy of intermediary staff. Moreover, intermediaries sometimes struggle to figure out whose and which interests they are supposed to be promoting (and responding to).

The Promotion of Specific Models

The promotion of particular models or approaches to after-school provision often entails work on a range of system-building tasks and can effectively create a minisystem within a city's larger one. New York City's TASC (the After-School Corporation), in which an umbrella organization has been created that contracts with community-based agencies and specialized organizations to provide after-school programming in schools, is paradigmatic. It includes such system-building features as strategic planning, raising funds and managing their distribution through a request-for-proposal (RFP) process, development of internal training and technical assistance capacity, mechanisms to link after-school sites to external resources, and collection and analyses of data for quality control/accountability purposes. LA's Best, a citywide program working in more than 100 schools in Los Angeles, has also developed a number of these systemlike attributes. It has an infrastructure that includes separate divisions for governance and operations. Functions of the former include fund-raising, advocacy, coordination with other initiatives, and development of various "partnerships." The operations division does grants management, data collection, qual-

ity control, training, and technical assistance, the last two through “activities consultants,” traveling supervisors (one per every five schools), and external training partners.

Both TASC and LA’s Best have also been distinctive in the attention their leaders have paid to the political dimensions of the system-building process. That leadership has worked hard to cultivate strong relationships with elected officials, school leaders, the business community, and other citywide elites. These relationships have had both benefits and some costs. For instance, preexisting relationships have been critical in times of fiscal stress. They have been helpful in getting stubborn problems addressed, for example, opening up school facilities to community-based organizations. At the same time, such relationships have required a high degree of responsiveness to external agendas.

Specific program models like New York City’s Beacons Initiative (which has now been disseminated to other cities, most notably San Francisco) also have had to address system building as they have grown. Like TASC and LA’s Best, the organizations promoting the Beacons in each city (e.g., the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York and, until recently, CNYD in San Francisco) have had to help foster and manage relationships between schools and community-based organizations, develop quality assurance mechanisms, develop capacity to do site-level training and technical assistance, develop mechanisms to rationalize funding from numerous funders, bring stakeholders together to plan, and so forth.

In general, system building through promotion of a specific approach or model has strengths and limitations. It stimulates new resources for the local after-school system as a whole and may provide a new funding source for community-based organizations and intermediaries. It creates a locus or “center” for cross-program functions. It creates a recognizable “brand” that may be easier to sell to some potential funders and site-level hosts, and it may raise the general visibility of after-school programming. It creates a standardized framework for minimal quality standards. Having a program model with defined requirements and components makes new program development somewhat more straightforward.

At the same time, model-specific initiatives tend to be only moderately inclusive. Providers and resource organizations that are not grantees, and therefore do not benefit from an initiative’s efforts, may feel little or no investment in its success. The leaders of such initiatives (sometimes including funders) are, naturally, committed primarily to growing the particular initiative or model. Even

when leaders are committed to the goal of strengthening the overall after-school field, they are usually preoccupied with the need to constantly raise large amounts of money for their own initiative and with the challenge of maintaining quality while “going to scale.” The immediate demands of managing direct services—developing and reviewing RFPs, monitoring grantee compliance and performance, organizing training, working with struggling grantees to improve services, and so forth—consume enormous time, energy, and attention, distracting initiative leadership from longer-term tasks.

Case Studies in System Building: MOST and Baltimore’s After-School Strategy

As implied earlier, there have been only a few multifaceted (or integrative) system-building efforts in the after-school field, and those few have faced major constraints. On the following pages I describe two initiatives, one ended, one ongoing, that can be said to fit this category, although both are still only partial in scope, if not ambition. Funding for both was extremely modest. Key stakeholders remained on the sidelines. Key tasks remained in gestation.

MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School-Time)

In 1995, the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund (WRDF) launched a three-city (Boston, Chicago, and Seattle) after-school initiative that would demonstrate both the possibilities of and constraints to system building in the after-school field. The fund’s conceptual partner in this initiative was the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST, known at the time as the Wellesley School-Age Child Care Project). The goals of MOST were to contribute to the supply, accessibility, affordability, and quality of after-school programs, especially for low-income children, and to strengthen the overall coherence of the after-school system in each of the three cities. The fund’s and NIOST’s conception of after-school programs as a city-level system was a breakthrough for the field. This would be the first time anyone had asked how the pieces of the after-school system were working together and how different pieces might be better linked to lead to richer experiences for children.

MOST was launched in each city with a yearlong planning exercise involving a wide cross section of stakeholders. Participants created an action plan that would guide an initial 3-year implementation phase. The fund provided \$1.4

million over the 3 years to each participating city, of which \$200,000 was designated for facilities improvements. The cities combined their WRDF grants with matching public and private dollars leveraged with those grant funds. In each city, MOST funds were channeled to community foundations, which then contracted with a lead agency (or agencies).⁸

The lead organizations in each city oversaw a multifaceted implementation strategy derived from the original plan, and priorities were set anew each year. This strategy involved two sets of activities. The first was to create reasons, opportunities, and structures to bring stakeholders in the after-school program system together—to share information, coordinate activities, forge new links, do joint planning—and generally to develop citywide strategies for addressing the challenges facing after-school programs as a collective. The second set of activities, focused directly on the goals of supply, affordability, accessibility, and quality, involved provision of funds directly to after-school providers (to increase “slots,” open new sites, provide subsidies to families and address other accessibility issues, improve facilities, support a variety of program improvement activities, add new program elements, etc.) and to resource organizations (to provide training, technical assistance, curricular resources, specialized instructors, information and referral, etc.). Table 2 summarizes the wide range of strategies implemented in one or more of the cities during the first 3 years of the initiative.⁹

In the service of having MOST become an after-school convener in each city, the lead agencies created two sets of collaborative structures: some kind of governance or oversight group and some number of domain-specific working groups or committees. The former tended to be responsible for reviewing and refining the original strategic plans, identifying emergent needs, and setting priorities each year. The latter, sometimes led by one or more members of the oversight group, were responsible for planning in their respective areas (e.g., supply-building, affordability, new program development, curriculum, professional

⁸ The lead agencies were Parents United for Child Care in Boston; the Day Care Action Council in Chicago; and a collaborative of four organizations—School’s Out Consortium, Child Care Resources, the Human Services Department, and Seattle Central Community College—in Seattle.

⁹ Although I lack the space here to discuss MOST efforts focused directly on supply-building and program improvement, MOST yielded many valuable lessons regarding these two tasks. A detailed description and analysis of MOST strategies and the lessons learned from them can be found in Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb (2001), and, more briefly, in Halpern (2003).

development, inclusion, resource development, etc.) and, in some cases, for deciding about distribution of funds. Membership in both types of groups was voluntary and consisted of varying combinations of providers, staff from resource and support organizations, staff from licensing agencies, other city agency officials, community leaders, parents, and others. MOST lead agency personnel “staffed” many of the committees formed.

TABLE 2: Summary of MOST Strategies

Building supply and improving access

- Funding the start-up of new programs, focused largely on underserved neighborhoods and/or underserved populations, and providing technical assistance to those programs for a minimum of a year
- Funding the creation of satellite sites for existing programs
- Partially or fully subsidizing new slots in existing programs
- Providing funds to make existing slots more affordable
- Providing grants to allow programs to hire more staff
- Funding facilities improvements that would increase capacity
- Preparing programs and their staff to be able to serve disabled children (thus increasing access to after-school programs for those children)
- Collecting information on and addressing transportation-related obstacles to access
- Public education efforts to raise awareness of the need for more after-school programs
- Developing and disseminating information for parents on the availability and location of programs
- Generating information on the distribution of existing programs and supply, for planning purposes

Program improvement

Investing in facilities, equipment and materials:

- Funding facilities and equipment improvements (e.g., rehabilitation or reorganizing existing space, building new space, fixing up a playground, refurbishing gym floors, purchasing gym equipment, purchasing air conditioners, upgrading wiring, etc.)
- Providing grants for the purchase of curricular and learning materials (e.g., science packets or books or art supplies, camera equipment or computer software)
- Supporting technical assistance on facilities- and space use-related issues (e.g., help from an architect or space design planner)

Investing in individual program staff:

- Supporting the creation of post-secondary courses, and trying to encourage higher education institutions to develop specialties in after-school programming
- Subsidizing tuition for post-secondary courses
- Sponsoring conferences, workshops, and training events
- Support for mentoring of new staff by experienced staff
- Funding on-site training on specific topics
- Supporting the development of standards or competencies for staff (including development of school-age certificates)
- Supporting efforts to develop career lattices or pathways

In addition to forging governance committees, MOST created a variety of new venues whose immediate purposes varied (from training to information-sharing to addressing particular problems, such as transportation or inclusion) but whose larger effect was to thicken the web of connections among stakeholders. These venues included directors' roundtables, 1-day conferences, training workshops focused on specific issues (e.g., creating a balanced schedule, group man-

Program improvement continued

Investing in/working with programs as a whole:

- Promoting “quality” standards, and funding programs to undertake structured self-assessment guided by those standards (set by and linked to an accreditation system sponsored by the National School-Age Care Alliance)
- Supporting long-term and short-term technical assistance, focused on programs as a whole or on particular issues (e.g., inclusion, classroom design), sometimes linked to grants for other purposes (e.g., program start-up grants)
- Providing grants to start new program components or activities (e.g., a choir or photography club)
- Developing mechanisms and providing funds for linking “curricular” resource organizations (e.g., in arts, sports, culture) and after-school programs, or providing funds for them to manage their own RFP process
- Helping link organizations that provide volunteers to after-school programs
- Developing resource libraries
- Creating mutual support networks among after-school programs, and support for collaborative efforts between programs

System building

- Bringing together different stakeholders in the after-school system, in committees and working groups, for joint planning, priority-setting, and information sharing
- Nurturing leadership within the after-school community, by involving a variety of people and organizations in the governance and implementation of MOST
- Working to expand stakeholders' understanding of the diversity of the after-school system
- Facilitating the creation of new working relationships, collaborations, and networks
- Encouraging public institutions to support school-age care
- Broadening the funding base for school-age care
- Engaging in public education and advocacy
- Using MOST funds to leverage other resources for supply-building, improving access, and program improvement

agement, arts programming, active indoor games), and neighborhood-level provider networks. When practicable, meeting sites were rotated among programs within a neighborhood or across neighborhoods, giving staff a first-hand sense of other programs in their community. Many kinds of MOST activities in fact served the dual function of addressing immediate needs—for example, helping link arts specialists to front-line providers, addressing transportation issues, and helping programs develop plans for facilities improvements—while simultaneously creating new links among stakeholders that would help with longer-term tasks.

LESSONS FROM THE MOST INITIATIVE. Although MOST would continue for a second 3-year period, a number of lessons about system building emerged from the first 3 years' efforts (see Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001).¹⁰ To start with, MOST demonstrated a hunger among stakeholders within the after-school field for opportunities to come together, share, learn, debate, and, not least, experience some external validation for their mission and efforts. Ongoing planning for MOST and, as time passed, joint concerns about survival of new services and other activities brought together local leaders and representatives of different segments of the system on a sustained basis. The regularity and long tenure of these committees allowed for the gradual building of relationships and mutual understanding. The likelihood of coordinated action increased. The head of child care and school-age care programs for the Chicago Housing Authority told the author and his colleagues that her role on the MOST governance committee was helpful because "I know we're going to see each other once a month, that alone. Do you know what it would take just to coordinate the effort to bring us [program and agency heads] in proximity to each other?"¹¹

The debates within MOST committees about whom to target and fund gradually broadened stakeholders' perspectives on who belonged in the after-school field. MOST also brought new voices into the local after-school debate. In Seattle, for instance, where key figures from the public and private sectors already worked together closely, concerns centered around increasing the involvement of underserved and underrepresented communities in decision-

¹⁰ The Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund chose not to continue evaluating the initiative after the first 3-year period.

¹¹ Comments of MOST participants taken from MOST field notes.

making about after-school resources. Seattle MOST strove to give underserved communities a voice in after-school system governance, in part by including representatives of these communities in its principal governance body, the Community Oversight Group.

Because decision-making structures with some legitimacy were already in place, relationships among key stakeholders already existed, and information about providers and their support needs was available, the after-school community was able to respond quickly and effectively to opportunities (and threats). For example, in Chicago the Park District was overhauling its approach to after-school programming during the first phase of MOST. Working through the MOST staff development committee and lead agency staff, the Park District was persuaded to link its own initiative to a number of MOST activities, particularly training. In Seattle, the MOST oversight committee was enlisted to help shape proposals for use of funds generated by the Families and Education Levy, a special tax whose revenue was devoted to children's services and that was up for voter renewal.

In spite of the need to start from scratch in creating both a clear identity and a measure of legitimacy, MOST itself came to be recognized as an honest broker. Planning, priority-setting, decision-making about use of funds, and other governance activities were genuinely collaborative, and efforts were made to reach and involve as many stakeholders as possible. Stakeholders reported that distribution of resources was reasonably rational and equitable, within the purview of the resources MOST controlled. Participation in MOST helped some stakeholders feel less isolated, others to become more aware of the service and support needs of particular groups of children or particular communities, and still others to develop a broader vision of who and what belonged to the after-school system. Providers became aware of new resources for their work. New working relationships emerged in each city, sometimes through the committees, sometimes brokered by the lead agency, sometimes stimulated by MOST grants (e.g., a series of grants to link curricular intermediaries to programs). MOST helped very different kinds of organizations develop partnerships that would have been unlikely in the natural course of events, for example, a local park district office and an ethnic self-help organization.

The limitations of the MOST Initiative were due partly to its limited size and leverage, partly to the structure of the field itself, and partly to strategy.

Although the relatively flexible resources provided by the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund were helpful to a resource-starved field, they proved too modest either to alter the priorities and behavior of many key stakeholders or to seriously support the program improvement strategies that emerged. Some major providers and key resource and support organizations in each city remained at the margins of the initiative, for different reasons. Getting large public (and, to a lesser extent, private) organizations to see themselves as part of an external enterprise proved a slow process. Large providers sometimes had an “inward” focus, acting by their own distinct logic and tending to view themselves as unique. A large provider such as the YMCA might prefer to go to a funder as itself, rather than as part of a large, diffuse initiative. Both large and smaller providers recognized the need for greater coordination, yet also expressed some concern about loss of control and about the potential for “oversight” by some (e.g., community representatives) who did not understand the after-school field. They were also worried that new policies and standards would not be accompanied by the resources to make them achievable.

MOST also developed varying relationships with resource and support organizations—some excellent, others more tension-filled. MOST was in part a new resource and support organization itself, and this led to a degree of wariness among some existing organizations, such as Child Care Resource and Referral agencies. One source of confusion was whether MOST was a direct provider of support—whether, for example, its role was to sponsor training and/or professional development and to serve as a resource center for curriculum materials, or whether it should facilitate such activities. In fact, MOST played both kinds of roles.

The hedged commitment of a few larger providers, the confusion about appropriate roles, and the strained relationships with a handful of intermediaries were symptomatic of a larger problem of identity. MOST lead agency staff and key stakeholders were ambivalent about whether they were better served by promoting MOST as a long-term sponsoring vehicle for system building or by assuming that the goal was to make MOST itself disappear, leaving presumably self-sustaining structures in place. If MOST was the engine for system building, how could it—and why would it—strive to disappear? When MOST went to new foundations to ask for support, what was it asking for? And when MOST’s collaborators and partners went to seek funding, what was their responsibility to MOST?

At a practical level, using volunteer committees for system building required a serious commitment of time and energy from lead agency staff. To the range of daily tasks that went with managing a large initiative, they had to add preparing for meetings, following up on decisions made, working with individual committee members, and coordinating among committees. Committee members found that building consensus on a range of issues was time consuming and sometimes exhausting. Executive tasks such as planning, priority-setting, communicating, coordinating, collecting and analyzing information, decision making, and, in some cases, distributing and monitoring the use of new resources proved to be burdensome tasks for volunteers, even when they had the backing of staff. One participant in Seattle's oversight group noted, "We've had a very rich discussion and . . . I think that it is kind of beneficial for us to all be working in that kind of pressure, but people are tired. It's a very exhausting process and way to do business."

Many MOST committees lost energy and participants over time. The excitement and sense of purpose waned, there was less formative work to do, and tasks became more administrative in nature. The MOST coordinator in Seattle explained, "There was lots of good energy around [at the start], but it kind of fell flat . . . there was a division between people who were ready to be more task oriented, get more involved in some sort of project planning, [and those who] were more interested in just doing the big picture of public policy, decision making . . ." Some committees were eventually combined. Decisions that earlier in the initiative were made by the committees later came to be made by lead agency staff, out of necessity. Some who had volunteered their time for 2 or 3 years wondered why new people were not stepping up to relieve the burden of carrying the initiative. It was especially difficult to keep scores of small programs and agencies engaged in broad "system-building" tasks.

A final challenge faced by MOST staff and collaborators was balancing the demands of overseeing MOST's multiple strategies and managing its many specific grants and activities with finding time to think, to sort out what MOST's appropriate role should be and how the work should be done. By the 3rd year of Phase One, lead agencies in all three cities were becoming more strategic and less preoccupied with the minutiae of implementation. They recognized the need to set priorities among the many activities that MOST had promised in its early plans and initiated during the first 2 years. They balanced the difficult tasks of attending to plans and responding to unexpected opportunities and events. And

especially by the 3rd year, MOST staff and collaborators in each city had become aware of the need to take advantage, as best they could, of changes set in motion by other actors and forces.

Baltimore's After-School Strategy

Baltimore's After-School Strategy, still under way, bears similarities to MOST. Like MOST, it has focused principally on improving program quality and building supply, and it has had a system-building spirit and a citywide lens. As with MOST, the After-School Strategy's program improvement and supply-building efforts have themselves strengthened the underpinnings of the local system. At the same time, Baltimore's After-School Strategy has not focused to the same degree on creating and nurturing collaborative governance structures, committees, and working groups. The lead agency has also played a less active role than those in each MOST city. Baltimore's lessons for system building are more indirect, yet also speak to the intertwined nature of system-building tasks.

The After-School Strategy is a component of the Baltimore Safe and Sound Campaign, itself part of Robert Wood Johnson's Urban Health Initiative. Begun in late 1995, this ongoing initiative is intended to improve the health and safety of children (as measured by key indicators of children's well-being) in each of five cities through a broad, collaborative, communitywide effort over an 8-year period. In early 1998, after a 2-year planning phase, Robert Wood Johnson committed \$1.2 million to each city for 4 years, with gradually decreasing grants over an additional 4 years. Baltimore's After-School Strategy has been a central component of its efforts under this initiative. (Other components in Baltimore include early childhood family support, literacy, and reduction of gun homicide. Baltimore arrived at these priorities through a "consensus-building" process that included street-corner conversations, community meetings, and a citywide assembly.)¹²

The goals of program improvement and supply-building on a citywide scale almost by definition required stakeholders to consider systemic questions. In

¹² In Baltimore and, perhaps, in other cities, stakeholders appeared to believe that if enough children and youth were reached with developmentally supportive services, it would be possible to move citywide indicators in such areas as school achievement and high school graduation, juvenile delinquency, and teen pregnancy. As a corollary, if one could demonstrate the human and economic benefits of investments like after-school programming, that would convince business and political leaders to substantially increase financial commitment to such investments (mobilizing public/political will on behalf of children), in part or whole by forcing big public systems to shift existing resources from the "back end" to the "front end."

addition to defining what these two goals actually meant, Baltimore stakeholders had to consider what program improvement strategies to adopt, which providers to include, what infrastructure existed and what might need to be created, how to make key policy and implementation decisions, and how to develop the information needed to make decisions. The strategy's goals also required concerted effort to increase the local funding base for after-school programming, along with development of criteria and mechanisms for distributing new funding, both important system-building tasks.¹³

Safe and Sound chose not to concentrate on development of formal after-school governance mechanisms early in the initiative. Its staff assumed that leadership and governance would emerge and coalesce over time. In lieu of a governance group, Safe and Sound constituted an "ad hoc" after-school strategy team, composed largely of senior-level staff from local funders, service providers, and one external leader in the field (whose role was to link the team's efforts to the larger body of work in the field). Over a 6-month period, the team elaborated an action plan that included developing local standards for after-school programs; directly funding a wide array of programs and requiring them to work toward achieving standards as a condition of (continued) funding; developing an initiative (later called the A-Teams) to provide skilled instruction and apprenticeship in arts, sports, and academics in both generic after-school programs and in separate settings; and establishing a new training, technical assistance, and network-building intermediary (later known as TASI, or the After-School Institute).

An approach to building supply was also fleshed out, focused both on creating new slots and on more fully utilizing existing ones. Funding for new slots would be directed to neighborhoods where the need was greatest, based on analysis of the amount and distribution of existing supply and on indicators of child risk and well-being in different neighborhoods. Baltimore's after-school programs were seen to have a long-standing problem with underutilization of existing program capacity, due to underenrollment, dropping out, and erratic

¹³ In order to support program improvement efforts and build new supply, Safe and Sound pursued an aggressive fund-raising strategy, and over a 4-year period managed to secure some \$25 million in new funding. Private funds were raised from the Open Society Institute of Baltimore, the Baltimore Community Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation; public funding was secured from surplus TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), the Baltimore Department of Social Services, the mayor's office, the Police Athletic League, and a state program called the Maryland After-School Opportunity Fund.

attendance. Improving program quality would be one key to addressing this problem. Establishing a data collection and management capacity capable of clarifying existing capacity (i.e., holding aside new funding, how many children existing programs should be able to serve), determining the extent of underutilization, and, eventually, monitoring attendance would also help address it.

The Family League of Baltimore, one of 24 local management boards statewide, was recruited to serve as the operational arm of the strategy. These boards were created by the state legislature in the early 1990s to help stimulate human service reform and rationalize the human service system (child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, welfare) by bringing public agencies together to plan, set common goals, and better coordinate their activities. (They are also allocated a certain number of public dollars for these functions and have periodically been used as the funding vehicle for innovative grants programs.) Although after-school programming was a new area of involvement for the league, its experience with contract management made it a logical choice for overseeing distribution of money raised from different funding streams. The Family League worked closely with Safe and Sound to develop a plan to assure coherent use of new funds and to design contracts and a contract management system that would further the program improvement and supply-building goals of the After-School Strategy. It has also served as the design base and clearing-house for data collection and analysis.

The implementation of standards was, in many respects, placed at the center of Baltimore's program improvement efforts. An informal standards work group fleshed out two sets of standards, the first largely reflecting NSACA's framework and the second, a new set of substantive standards.¹⁴ The work group also developed accompanying indicators that a standard had been met and a workbook to guide self-assessment. Using standards as a program improvement lever required consideration of a variety of issues with systems implications—how to assess where programs stood at the outset, what help programs would need in order to make progress in achieving standards, whether

¹⁴ Organizational standards focus on human relationships; indoor environments; outdoor environments; safety, health, and nutrition; and administration. Program standards are divided into two sections: activities and program areas. Activities standards cover daily schedule structure, opportunities for youth choice, organizational integrity, and material supports. Program standards are divided into six subtopics: cognitive development, recreation, workforce development, artistic development, civic development, and open time.

expectations of progress and achievement would be the same for all programs or individualized, how much progress programs would have to demonstrate each year, how to measure progress, what the consequences would be for lack of progress, and how to mesh the standards with requirements of various funders and the internal policies of different provider organizations.

A subgroup of the After-School Strategy team fleshed out the implementation approach to the use of standards and to improving utilization. The group initially decided that programs funded under the strategy would be required to fully achieve the Baltimore standards within 3 years (a decision that was later modified). Funding would be set aside, or designated, for program improvement efforts and would also be tied to progress on program improvement (as well as to compliance with other contractual commitments made, for example, with respect to attendance). Each year, programs would assess themselves as to where they stood in meeting standards. In the contracts that they signed with the Family League, they would indicate which standards they would focus on in the forthcoming year and how much it would cost to do so. Periodic reports during each contract period would indicate progress and problems. Funded programs also had to commit contractually to enroll a predefined number of children and maintain a predefined attendance rate, as well as to participate in a management information system that focused on attendance reporting. They would also have to make a contractual commitment not to use new funds to replace existing ones; in effect, they had to create new “slots.”

During the first 3 years of implementation, some 50 provider organizations with 90 after-school program sites were funded within this framework, through one of four funding streams, and for periods of between 1 and 3 years. (This diverse group of sponsors is responsible for slightly more than a third of all after-school programs in Baltimore.) Safe and Sound and the Family League jointly prepared RFPs and oversaw proposal reviews. The Family League oversaw contract management and monitored compliance and progress. A team of four contract managers, one per funding stream, attended to the unique requirements of each funder while assuring a common approach toward program improvement and supply-building across funding streams.

The A-Teams initiative supplemented the larger effort to require programs to work toward and achieve standards. The Baltimore Community Foundation provided \$2.5 million over 3 funding cycles to 30 agencies to offer enrichment in arts, athletics, or academics (thus, the *A*) at their own sites or at those of other

ongoing after-school programs. Grant funds had to be used to serve middle-school children residing in Baltimore's "highest risk" neighborhoods. The projects developed by A-Team sponsors were designed to meet at least three times a week for 8 weeks. Instructors had to be certified in some appropriate manner to be skilled in the domains in which they were working. And children served had to be provided "regular opportunities to practice, master and publicly demonstrate" their new skills.

Finally, the newly created After-School Institute provided support to after-school programs in their own improvement efforts. (Modest support might be a more accurate description because, in addition to a director and office manager, TASI had only two full-time staff members to work with the 90 funded program sites, as well as almost twice that number of nonfunded ones.) TASI carried out its capacity-building work through four mechanisms, open to and largely free of charge for all after-school programs in Baltimore. These were monthly "network meetings" (which funded providers were required to attend), periodic training events and workshops, short-term technical assistance to individual programs, and informational resources. Network meetings typically had a central topic, such as staff turnover or use of volunteers, selected by an informal "program committee." They also included time for smaller discussion groups and announcements. Training events likewise were thematic, focusing on such topics as infusing literacy into after-school programs, advancing youth development, and preventing adolescent pregnancy. Technical assistance, provided mostly at the request of individual programs, was brief and catch-as-catch-can.

EMERGENT LESSONS. Although Baltimore's After-School Strategy is ongoing, it has already yielded a number of valuable lessons. For one thing, with funding as leverage, it is possible to develop and secure buy-in to a citywide program improvement strategy. Using the Family League as a base to forge a coherent, coordinated approach to managing different funding streams was important to the linkage of funding and program improvement effort, guided by standards. Baltimore has also been distinct in its emphasis on data as a basis for making funding decisions and monitoring the effects of those decisions. Less progress has been made in developing a broad strategic vision of the after-school system as a whole and in nurturing effective leadership and governance mechanisms for that system.

Linking a new grant-making initiative to a defined set of standards, tying standards to an active contract management process, and setting aside funding

for efforts to achieve standards have presented both predictable and unpredictable challenges. The time frame imagined for programs to achieve standards was unrealistic. Program improvement is an inherently slow, uncertain process in the after-school field. In Baltimore, an inclusive funding strategy required that the standards be interpreted for a diverse group of programs, from small and fragile single-site providers operating barely above survival level, to youth-serving organizations with their own quality frameworks, to local sites of large bureaucracies, which sometimes had to be kept as part of the initiative for political reasons. The program improvement challenge was heightened by the social and institutional context in which many programs operated—large numbers of very vulnerable children and families, difficult neighborhood conditions, long-term disinvestment in many neighborhood institutions, and so forth. These conditions complicated after-school programs' daily work and, ironically, tend to dilute the impact of new resources.¹⁵

Baltimore's supply-building strategy and efforts have met with mixed success. Improving utilization—especially attendance—proved just as slow and stubborn a problem as improving quality. Seasonal factors (early darkness, weather), flux in children's lives, reluctance to work with more vulnerable children, lack of resources to follow up on enrolled children who have not been coming, and other factors create a complex causal story. The idea that better quality programs would attract and hold more children may or may not be simplistic but has, at any rate, been held hostage to the slow pace of program improvement. While some programs were able to assure that After-School Strategy funding did not replace existing funding, many others were not. As has long been customary—and necessary—programs used the new funding to replace lost funding from other sources.

Finally, Safe and Sound's neglect of the task of nurturing a governance group left something of a leadership vacuum for the After-School Strategy. After the ad hoc strategy team disbanded, there were no forums for providers, resource organizations, community leaders, regulators, funders, and other stakeholders

¹⁵ In addition, few programs, other than the handful that served as A-Team sites, have had the wherewithal to develop strong components in the arts or sports—their staff simply did not have the specialized expertise and experience necessary for teaching in these areas. And although the A-Team strategy of supporting cultural, arts, and sports organizations to bring specialists into programs made infinite sense, it too was undermined by the minimal level of functioning of some after-school providers, which could not or would not help the specialists who showed up at their door.

to come together on a regular basis to build relationships, discuss the challenges facing the after-school community, debate what program improvement strategies were needed and how those should be implemented, talk about money, continue to analyze and shape the strategy, and so forth. The assumption that leadership would emerge organically was not borne out, suggesting that there is no substitute for the kinds of labor intensive processes that characterized MOST.

Conclusion: The Challenge of System Building

Through both organic processes and deliberate initiatives, system building is well under way in the after-school field. In most cities, infrastructure is slowly developing, as is a thickening web of linkages and relationships between providers and resource organizations. There is more convening going on than in the past, somewhat more dialog among stakeholders, more strategic partnerships, and more attention among funders to systemic issues. Basic information on after-school provision has been gathered in a number of cities and is beginning to be digested. At the same time, the system-building activity discussed in this paper points up a range of questions needing sustained conceptual and empirical attention. These pertain to the nature of after-school systems and to system building itself, to the challenges inherent in strengthening provision, and to the questions of how best to conceptualize and elaborate governance structures for local systems and how best to integrate new friends and advocates into the field.

What, for instance, is the measure of a well-functioning system? How many system-building tasks have to be addressed simultaneously, or in what order or priority should they be addressed? What kinds of investments make sense in a field characterized by large numbers of relatively small programs that simultaneously lack adequate resources, are inefficient in using the resources they have, and may lack capacity to absorb new resources, including technical assistance and curricular enrichment? Who can and should take the lead role as convener and agenda setter in system building? And how should an individual, group, or institution for this role be selected? Should planning, priority-setting, and decision-making be broad, collaborative, democratic processes or more closely held ones?

Although I have tried to clarify it in this paper, the very idea of an after-school system remains difficult to bring into focus. The way of looking at and

thinking about after-school systems that I have proposed needs debate, argument, and revision, as does my conceptualization of system-building tasks. Not everyone would agree with me that the heterogeneous, patchwork, and cottage industry–like qualities of the after-school field are as much strengths as limitations. Not everyone would see value in labor intensive, largely voluntary governance structures with little political clout. Some might prefer a single institution as locus for the field, a much clearer definition of the social problem addressed by after-school programs, or a more explicit advocacy agenda.¹⁶

Some observers have argued that because there is so much to do and so little to do it with, after-school system-building efforts have to be far more strategic than they have been up to the present. That in turn may mean focusing investment on particular types of providers or program models, or particular program improvement strategies. It may imply being more attuned and responsive to shifting policy and funding priorities. Currently, for instance, most politicians and funders view the schools as the logical base for growing the after-school field, and urban children’s academic difficulties as the problem to which after-school programs are a logical response. I would argue that it is critical to keep supporting a variety of kinds of institutions in the after-school field, even at the cost of some efficiencies, in part to serve as a counterweight to the hegemony of the schools; in part because smaller, community-based providers are an important part of the fabric of low-income communities; and in part because such providers fill microgaps in provision.¹⁷ I would also argue—and have argued in all of my writing over the years—that viewing after-school work through the lens of children’s academic difficulties not only fundamentally

¹⁶ A student at Brown University recently examined the development of after-school programming in Boston as a political and public issue, to interesting effect. See Restuccia, 2002.

¹⁷ The schools’ involvement has heightened an already pressing need for settings in which stakeholders can discuss what low-income children’s experiences in after-school programs should be like and what those experiences should be about. In addition to heightening the need for dialog about philosophy, the growing involvement of schools has heightened dilemmas of power and control. Community-based providers have often found that such terms as partnership, collaboration, and “shared accountability” mask a very unequal relationship when it comes to philosophy and goals, rights to space, control (if not supervision) of after-school staff, assuring security, and locus of accountability. Even more worrisome, history is replete with programmatic movements—for example, summer school, vocational guidance, and, more recently, early childhood education—that have started out as partnerships with schools and eventually found themselves coopted.

distorts what after-school programs are about developmentally and socially, but also is, in practical terms, a no-win proposition.

Like program improvement and expansion strategies, governance-related strategies will have to be city-specific. With respect to conveners, for instance, some have felt that community foundations make the most sense; others favor United Ways; still others, mayors' offices. Funders have used their leverage to create all kinds of committees and working groups, some of which have in fact come to work as a kind of local "center" for after-school activities. With respect to decision-making, what seems clear is that given the heterogeneous and loosely coupled nature of a city-level after-school system, no one institution or group can claim authority (or legitimacy) to govern it, in the strict sense of the word. Stakeholders with independent power, whether because they control funds, because after-school work is only a small part of their mission, or because of sheer size, will give up only a measure of autonomy.

Governing the after-school system really means taking a lead role as "shepherd," convening a diverse collection of individuals and institutions, seeking areas of common ground where individual clusters of stakeholders can work together, holding stakeholders' attention, mobilizing stakeholders around opportunities and threats, and so forth. (Sometimes a city primarily needs a group or place to bring those involved with various initiatives together, to share what they are doing and try to encourage some coordination.) In part because of power imbalances and in part because individual stakeholders will give up only so much autonomy, governance in the after-school field has to be more or less democratic and consensual in nature.

Specific initiatives have to wrestle with governance issues that parallel the broader ones faced by cities as a whole. In creating governance, planning, and priority-setting bodies, they have to decide whether to engage in a broad, collaborative, democratic process or a more closely held one. That means, in part, deciding what is negotiable and what not. In general, the mission, goals, and assumptions of a particular system-building initiative have to be both clear and partly open to negotiation in order to secure buy-in of stakeholders. This creates a tension, well-illustrated by the Seattle MOST coordinator, who noted that "MOST is a city-wide initiative that anyone can participate in as long as they support the goals we are trying to achieve and the values and approach we have chosen to use" (Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001, p. 215).

System building in the after-school field has been both enriched and complicated in recent years by the presence of new friends and stakeholders from the

corporate and political sectors. These new players usually bring a very different perspective to system building, one that includes a “can do” philosophy and little patience for uncertainty, process, complexity, and nuance. They often bring energy and focus to system building. At the same time, they tend to be unaware that they are entering an arena with a long history; they tend to dismiss the inherently loosely coupled, shifting nature of local after-school systems and the uncertainty of results from particular investments; and they may have a need to be recognized and given credit for what many view as common and cumulative accomplishments.

It is, finally, critical, for those committed to investing in and promoting after-school programs to understand that the field is still near the beginning of what will be a 10- or 15- or 20-year process. This is a field that, though not without strengths, has been undernourished for a long time. It is unquestionably frustrating for an initiative that has contributed new resources to come to feel—as have the funders and leadership of some recent initiatives—that its investment and effort has made barely a dent in the quality and aggregate capacity of local programs. Yet the investments made by such initiatives are filling in the fragile foundation of the field. The MOST and Baltimore initiatives found that even modest investments stimulate programs to strengthen management functions and reflect on the work they are doing with children, effects that may not be obvious to funders. Moreover, current system-building efforts are part of a larger narrative that is well over 100 years old now. It is critical, as well, for proponents to accept the inherent patchwork quality of a field with diffuse boundaries and different kinds of organizations, each having some but not all of the strengths needed to meet children’s developmental needs. The after-school field needs a strong enough sense of self to allow it to negotiate the range of external pressures it always experiences.

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Contributor

Professor Robert Halpern is professor of child development and director of the Research Council at Erikson Institute. One of the nation's foremost historians in the field of human services, Halpern has written extensively on social theory, program evaluation, and parenting support programs. His current research focuses on the evaluation of after-school programs for poor children and their families. Halpern's most recent books are *Making Play Work, The Promise of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children* (Teachers College Press, 2003), *Fragile Families, Fragile Solutions: A History of Supportive Services for Families in Poverty* (Columbia University Press, 1999), and *Rebuilding the Inner-City: A History of the Neighborhood Initiatives to Address Poverty in the United States* (Columbia University Press, 1995). Professor Halpern received his doctorate in international developmental education from Florida State University. In addition to teaching at Erikson, he is also a faculty associate at the Chapin Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

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