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Study outlines urgent need for “critical hours” recreation programming

EDMONTON, AB – A strategy for providing sustainable, quality children and youth programming during afterschool hours requires a collaborative multi-stakeholder/government approach, according to a study released by the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA) examining the state of afterschool recreation programming in Alberta.

With the support of the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation, ARPA contracted CDC Consultants to identify opportunities for engaging those in the recreation field and related stakeholders in developing a provincial strategy to tackle the “critical hours” issue. The study was commissioned in response to the pressing need for current research and analysis on how the afterschool hours can optimize a student’s physical, social, emotional, and academic development.

“The hours between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. are a critical time in the daily lives of children and youth. In the recent past, serious social problems have emerged during these hours—increased levels of juvenile crime, growing levels of physical inactivity, poor nutrition, and high levels of antisocial behaviour,” said Dr. Tim Burton, President of ARPA. “Yet at the same time, recent local initiatives throughout North America have demonstrated that these hours have enormous potential to enhance the lives of children and youth through afterschool recreation programs, extracurricular arts, music and recreation activities, and projects designed to generate positive youth engagement in a wide range of community initiatives.”

Presently, numerous barriers inhibit the delivery of quality afterschool programming. Two of the most significant barriers include inadequate resourcing to fund and staff afterschool programs, and the provision of transportation to and from programming sites. A blend of support from local school districts and community agencies, as well as federal, provincial, and municipal governments, is essential to design and expand programs that meet local needs.

“We know that the more positive adults a young person has in his or her life, the greater the likelihood that young person has of enjoying a successful, positive future,” said Heather Cowie, Chair of ARPA’s Children and Youth Committee. “Afterschool programming is a way for our children and youth to build positive relationships with adults, peers, and their community. Afterschool programming creates opportunities for exploring new interests, building leadership skills, and provides a safe place in which to thrive.”

Please visit www.arpaonline.ca/rr/res/AfterSchoolReport.pdf to view a full version of this report.

ARPA (Alberta Recreation and Parks Association) is a provincial, not-for-profit, charitable organization made up of volunteers committed to building healthy citizens and communities in Alberta through recreation and parks. Serving Albertans since 1952, ARPA members include community and public recreation agencies, educators, corporate, elected members, volunteers, and student members.

For more information on ARPA, visit www.arpaonline.ca or contact 780-415-1745.

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Afterschool Recreation Initiatives Report

Toward a Comprehensive Afterschool Agenda

A recent study commissioned by the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA), with support from the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation, assessed compelling research confirming the urgent need to focus on the health and wellness of our children and youth. An expanding body of evidence tells us that one of the most promising responses is a comprehensive afterschool strategy.

What students do in the afterschool hours – that critical block of time between the final bell and when many adults come home from work – has profound impact on their physical, social, emotional and academic development. Yet the dynamics of family life mean that many children and youth are without adult supervision for hours at a time.

Besides raising safety concerns, unsupervised youngsters are engaging in a wide range of unhealthy and even high-risk behaviours after school, during what is becoming known as the “critical hours.” Researchers regularly report measurable increases in juvenile crime, antisocial behaviour, inactivity, screen time and poor eating habits.

Study Components

- Review of relevant research;
- Interviews with recreation practitioners and other individuals/groups providing afterschool programs at local and provincial levels;
- An online survey sent to 120 municipal recreation departments;
- A macro analysis of community/school joint use agreements in Alberta;
- Review of promising cases and extrapolation of best practices;
- A discussion forum to review the research and consult on next steps for the sector.

Best Practices

In research, case studies and interviews, the following key elements surfaced repeatedly as best practices in afterschool programming and infrastructure.

Frontline programming and delivery

1. Caring, committed adults
2. Qualified, well-paid, stable staff
3. Purposeful, organized and varied activities
4. Age-appropriate activities for youth as well as children
5. Community engagement
6. Affordable and accessible programs

Supportive infrastructure

1. Enabling public policy and sustained funding
2. Enhance what works rather than duplicating
3. Strong partnerships and networks

Backgrounder

Barriers to Delivery

While there is certainly a state of readiness to explore the afterschool agenda in Alberta, there are areas that need to be addressed in order for afterschool recreation initiatives to move forward:

- Increase awareness around the opportunities to improve the afterschool landscape for children and youth in the recreation and parks sector, as well as allied sectors;
- Address transportation barriers to afterschool programs, particularly in rural areas;
- Enhance financial resources at multiple levels to support initiative growth;
- Increase the availability of safe spaces in which to run the programs in; and
- Establish a provincial network and partnerships to work towards building overall supportive infrastructure.

Trends

One of the emergent themes involves networks and collaborative strategies, which are proving effective in enhancing both provider capacity and advocacy. A related trend is the move toward community schools, in which schools become hubs for community services, including afterschool programs.

Alberta does not yet have a provincial strategy encouraging community use of schools, although the Provincial Commission on Learning identified this need and a recent AUMA resolution urges the province to adopt a community school concept and supportive program.

Across Alberta, dedicated agencies in the education, social services and non-profit sectors are busy providing afterschool programs. Yet they are unable to meet the need, leaving unserved children and youth in many communities. The absence of a provincial strategy for building and equipping the network of community-based agencies required for a comprehensive afterschool agenda sets the stage for numerous ad hoc, overlapping and under-funded efforts.

Recreation's Role

The importance of recreation as a component of afterschool programs of all types became evident in the literature and throughout the interview process. Even in programs where recreation is not the main focus, organized and unorganized physical activities can play an important and complementary role by attracting participants, fostering active lifestyles and encouraging teamwork.

Yet opportunities to fully integrate recreation into the programming mix are being missed, in part because recreation is absent at many decision making tables regarding the critical hours. Given escalating concern about epidemic child obesity and inactive living, given recreation's power to enhance healthy and holistic development, it is crucial to address recreation needs and potential as part of a larger review of afterschool needs.

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