

Alberta Recreation and Parks Association

AfterSchool Recreation Initiatives

Executive Summary
2009



Alberta
Recreation & Parks
Association



ARPA (Alberta Recreation and Parks Association) is a provincial charitable not-for-profit organization with a voluntary board of directors dedicated to the promotion of recreation and parks and their benefits to the quality of life of Albertans.

Our Vision...

“A province, and communities within, that embrace and proactively use recreation and parks as essential means for enhancing individual wellbeing and community vitality, economic sustainability and natural resource protection and conservation.”

Our Mission...

ARPA strives to build healthy citizens, their communities and their environments throughout Alberta.

For more information on ARPA, our programs or services, or the benefits of recreation and parks, please visit our website at:

www.arpaonline.ca

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Towards a Comprehensive AfterSchool Agenda

Amid compelling research confirming the urgency of focusing 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. While many participate in afterschool activities and programs, the fact remains that children and youth whose parents work fulltime spend an average of 20 to 25 hours on their own each week.

The Urgency

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. Those behaviours, in turn, are contributing to epidemic levels of obesity and other significant chronic and mental health illnesses and conditions.



This combination of factors is causing a groundswell of concern, both in Alberta and around the world. A growing chorus is calling for quality afterschool programs as a way to use those hours for constructive, healthy activities. In Canada, those advocates include Dr. Kellie Leitch, our nation’s first-ever federally appointed/contracted advisor on healthy children and youth. Given that quality programming during the critical hours can markedly decrease instances of juvenile crime and other anti-social activities while increasing skills, self-esteem, connectedness and overall health, she calls for public sector investment in a comprehensive afterschool program for children and youth, with particular attention to those from low to middle income families.

Dr. Leitch argues for a federal action plan that sets clear standards for afterschool programming, adequately funds program providers, fosters collaboration and leverages existing infrastructure by facilitating access to schools and community recreation facilities after school. She advocates recreation as a crucial aspect of the afterschool mix, noting that those involved in organized and unorganized physical activities are less likely to be overweight and less likely to commit crimes or drop out of school.



Afterschool recreation also offers an important tool for meeting Canada's first-ever national physical activity targets for children and youth, set in 2008 by the federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation. The AfterSchool Agenda has become one of the areas of focus in a four point action plan being proposed by the federal, provincial and territorial ministers at their annual conference in 2009.

Study Parameters

Well aware of that context, Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation (ATPR) and the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation (ASRPWF) is also taking renewed interest in the critical afterschool hours. ATPR and ASRPWF commissioned this study to examine the state of afterschool recreation programming and to identify opportunities for engaging recreation practitioners and allied stakeholders in developing a provincial strategy for action. Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA), with support from ASRPWF, contracted CDC Consultants to complete the research. Study components include:

- review of relevant research;
- interviews with recreation practitioners and others 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, and specifically for ARPA.

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

Emergent Trends

There is no doubt that focused attention must be paid to the critical afterschool hours, when many parents are still at work and idle time so easily turns negative. This research confirms the need to strengthen the current program delivery system and de-emphasize the silo or single sector approach.

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. This approach can help afterschool programs meet the need for accessible and affordable space, a crucial concern since cost and transportation issues often keep kids away. The philosophy behind community schools also encourages the rich interplay of partners that enriches the afterschool experience.

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, about 75% of Alberta municipalities have some form of joint use agreement in place that enables community use of school facilities, but those agreements usually exclude the critical hours and in some cases set rates that are beyond provider budgets. Schools are increasingly providing afterschool activities for their own students, such as intramurals, sports, homework clubs and mentorship programs. Some schools also partner with youth serving agencies such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters, who run onsite mentorship and/or literacy-based programs during the critical hours.

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 underfunded efforts. A systematic review and response is imperative.

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. In part, this reflects a shift in players as recreation pulled back from an historic role as a direct service provider in many communities and others stepped in to provide afterschool programs.



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.

Municipalities are providing some afterschool recreation, most commonly in municipal facilities. Some also extend their reach by collaborating with non-profit organizations. Yet gaps persist. An area of particular concern is outreach to youth. Municipalities offering their own programs focus almost exclusively on facility-based activities. Reliance on a limited number of facilities poses transportation issues, making the programs less accessible. What's more, youth tell us they don't find public facilities, as traditionally run, particularly welcoming.



The many municipal recreation and parks departments whose mandates and funding have evolved to indirect program delivery face even greater challenges in ensuring their children and youth are well-served. With reduced staffing and budgets, they lack the capacity to respond to unmet needs. This challenge is particularly acute in communities with no community-based agencies that can offer sustained, quality afterschool programs.

The recreation sector clearly has an important role to play in ensuring an expanded role for quality physical activity in afterschool programming.

Recommendations

This research identified several specific areas in which ARPA and the recreation and parks sector can work with the provincial government and other stakeholders to support a strengthening of “critical hours” program delivery in Alberta.

► Get the word out that the “critical hours” must be top priority

Develop and launch a strategy to build awareness among recreational professionals, other afterschool providers and political leaders about the urgent need for quality afterschool recreation in every community. The resulting campaign

might include forums, seminars and dialogues inviting multiple stakeholders to discuss how recreation and parks departments can engage the AfterSchool Agenda in their own communities. The conversations that ensue will focus attention on the need for more resources – dollars, people, training, spaces and places – to support and link all quality afterschool providers in every community.

► **Advocate for an MLA Committee to draft a coordinated AfterSchool Agenda**

Urge the provincial government to strike an MLA Committee involving ministries mandated to oversee children, recreation, education, health and social needs to study this crucial issue and draft a coordinated Afterschool Agenda. Background that committee's work with a survey of Alberta municipalities and stakeholder agencies that confirms and maps the programs already addressing "critical hours." Examine existing relationships, challenges and outcomes with the intent of strengthening rather than duplicating the excellent agencies already doing good work with children and youth in the out-of-school hours.

► **Showcase the benefits of integrating recreation into afterschool programming through pilot projects**

Work with Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation and other government ministries to launch a pilot program that entices municipal recreation and parks departments to take deliberate steps toward integrating recreation into community afterschool programming. Choose pilots that focus not only on direct recreation delivery, but also on equipping community agencies to integrate quality recreation-based activities into afterschool programs. Encourage the pilots to explore innovative outreach programming that engages more young people in healthier lifestyles within and beyond recreation facilities. Explore linkages with the ACE (Active, Creative, Engaged) Communities initiative to encourage a community development approach. Use learnings from pilot communities to create a province-wide business case and framework for shared recreation and education responsibilities that can be applied to all afterschool programming in Alberta.



► **Coalesce an AfterSchool “Critical Hours” Network/Consortium**

Experience in other jurisdictions demonstrates the value of out-of-school networks that are community-based yet strongly supported by provincial and other funders. Alberta urgently needs to develop such a model. Ensuring the network is holistic and realistic will take cross-sectoral leadership from government and from provincial organizations with ties to frontline service. The ARPA Children and Youth Committee is well equipped to initiate dialogue with involved sectors, agencies and ministries to determine the consortium’s most appropriate structure and function.

► **Lobby to include recreation in provincial children and youth development funding**

Work with Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation and Alberta Children and Youth Services to build understanding that recreation has power to enhance child and youth development and should be funded as such. Enshrining the concept of “healthy child development through recreation” would enable afterschool programs to receive support from the most appropriate funding source, whether FCSS (Family and Community Support Services), recreation or both. Providers such as Boys and Girls Clubs and smaller municipalities would no longer need to disguise their recreation offerings to obtain FCSS and other child development funding. Communities would then be in a better position to maximize resources through a program strategy that meets both development and wellness requirements.

► **Promote excellence in afterschool programming**

With Alberta Children and Youth Services, explore the possibility of recognizing HIGH FIVE® quality assurance principles as part of the School-Aged Care Accreditation Program demonstration sites scheduled for fall 2009, to ensure that afterschool providers receive recreation-specific professional development. This research confirms that recreation activities are often part of afterschool programs regardless of the delivery agency. As a certified delivery agent for HIGH FIVE® in Alberta, ARPA is in an ideal position to provide training to other sectors to ensure the quality of the recreation enjoyed by our children and youth.

► **Make community use of schools a guiding principle**

Advocate with Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation, Alberta Education and allied stakeholders to adopt community use of schools as a guiding principle, and to establish a cross-sectoral enabling body. This significant step would address one of the greatest challenges for afterschool program providers: finding affordable, accessible and appropriate space. A financial incentive to keep schools open after hours appears to be helpful, but is not sufficient in the Alberta context. While cost is clearly a concern for some communities, the larger issue appears to be the availability of sufficient space, particularly immediately after school. The children and youth of this province will surely benefit from a made in Alberta “Community School Initiative” that puts priority on engaging and influencing all children and youth in purposeful activities, including quality recreation, during the critical afterschool hours.



► **Ensure the sustainability of an accessible quality afterschool system that incorporates recreation**

All of the above recommendations depend on public investment that is adequate, dependable and appropriate to Alberta’s needs. This research strongly confirms the importance of ensuring full access to quality afterschool programming during the critical afterschool hours. Although providers from the recreation and parks, education, social services and non-profit sectors are busy providing quality programs, unmet needs persists. Of particular note for this study, recreation and parks departments are not able to meet afterschool demand, especially for youth focused programs that are truly welcoming and accessible. ARPA and other stakeholders must advocate for ongoing core funding to support a strong afterschool network of community-based providers whose members are equipped to tap recreation’s potential for healthy child development.

Summary

Given growing recognition of the need for quality recreation-focused afterschool programs, the time is now to re-engage the recreation and parks sector in working with others to ensure that all Alberta and youth have access to quality experiences in the significant block of time after school.

It is in everyone's interest for ARPA to advance the recommended solutions with its members, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, with allied stakeholders and with the Province of Alberta so that the role of recreation and municipal service providers is properly positioned in the emerging area of critical hours programming.

The presence of the recreation and parks sector at the table will help to ensure that recreation and parks achieves its potential as a powerful force for holistic development in a time when the health of coming generations is at risk.

A full version of this report is available online at www.arpaonline.ca

