

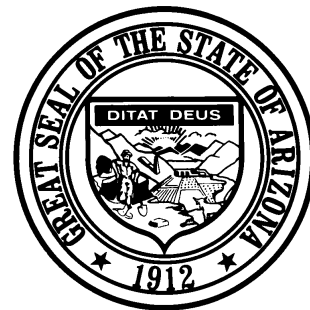
What Is the Need for School-Age Care?



Lessons From
Two Communities

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Children's Action Alliance (CAA) is a non-profit, non-partisan research, education and advocacy organization. Through research, publications, media campaigns and advocacy, CAA works to promote the well-being of all of Arizona's children and families. For more information or to order additional copies of the report, contact CAA at:

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Introduction: Another Tool for the ‘Tool-Kit’

In 2001, Children’s Action Alliance (CAA) developed a resource for community groups interested in exploring the need for care for school-age children. Titled “School-Age Care Tool Kit: A Guide for Measuring Needs in Your Community,” the resource provided step-by-step advice to community organizations on how to identify the need for programs for school-age children and how to assess existing program resources available in the community.

More recently—and with a Safe and Drug Free Schools grant provided by the Governor’s Division of Drug Policy (CFDA 84.186)—CAA identified two Arizona communities to serve as “pilot sites” to conduct an after-school needs and assets assessment.

After a number of discussions, CAA decided to focus its efforts on undertaking needs and assets assessment pilots in Tucson and Scottsdale. CAA staff worked with individuals and organizations in each community to develop and pursue the needs assessment. Organizations in each community embraced the idea of being a pilot site and enthusiastically began work on the project. CAA provided advice, acted as a sounding board, participated in meetings, and reviewed survey instruments and drafts.

This report is designed to augment the Tool-Kit by providing case studies of the pilot projects in Tucson and Scottsdale, summarizing lessons learned, and providing the tools and instruments used in both communities.

Pilot Site: Vail School District

In January 2002, Children's Action Alliance (CAA) approached Southern Alliance for Youth—a coalition of public and private providers of after-school services in the greater-Tucson area—to determine if members of the Alliance were interested in undertaking a needs and assets assessment of after-school care in Tucson. After discussing barriers and opportunities presented by such a project, they decided that attempting a needs and assets assessment of all of Tucson would be too time consuming and resource intensive. Yet, recognizing the importance of this kind of information, the members discussed the possibility of one organization conducting an assessment for a smaller geographic area.

Some members remained wary of the time and resources such a project would demand and others suspected they would have difficulty garnering the support necessary to successfully complete the project. Rosemary McCain, Director of Community Services for Vail School District, stepped forward and volunteered to take on the project. Rosemary noted that as Director of Community Services it was within her purview to undertake needs assessments. In addition, she noted that Vail School District was about to conduct a survey of parents on a broad variety of issues.

Survey of Parents: In the Spring of 2002, Vail School District planned to send a consumer satisfaction survey to every parent in the district. Ms. McCain decided that the best way to gather information on parent needs for after-school services was to attach a special one-page questionnaire onto the already existing consumer satisfaction survey. After reviewing examples of other surveys, Ms. McCain drafted a questionnaire and asked CAA to review the format and questions.

To ensure that she had buy-in from other Vail School District staff, Ms. McCain discussed this project with her staff and the District Superintendent. She gathered their opinions on ways to improve the survey.

To build community support, Ms. McCain relied on her existing community collaboration—a coalition of religious leaders who had been gathering quarterly to talk about school-community issues—as a sounding board for the project. At its regular meeting in late February 2002, this group discussed the needs and assets assessment project and reviewed a draft of the survey. In addition to religious leaders, Vail School District invited City of Tucson and Pima County program representatives to participate in the discussion. Participants made several important clarifying points and suggested ways the survey could be improved. (*Appendix A*)

As Vail was most interested in identifying the need for after-school programs for young children, Ms. McCain decided to send the survey to parents of elementary and middle school children. Approximately 1,200 surveys were sent to

parents in the Vail School District in March 2002. Parents were asked to return the survey to the school in a self-addressed, stamped enveloped.

Information on After-School Opportunities: While the survey was in the field, Linda Jones of Vail School District Community Services worked with CAA to develop a short telephone questionnaire that could be used to collect information on existing after-school programs in Vail. Vail District staff compiled an initial list of programs and asked community leaders to suggest other opportunities for youth that should be documented. As Vail is a small, rural community there were only about 23 out-of-school opportunities that were initially identified. These ranged from formal after-school programs offered by the Vail School District to informal drop-in programs operated by non-profits to occasional recreation opportunities such as a Tae-Kwon-Do club. Vail and CAA staff called these programs to collect information on the youth served, program structure, and schedule of services. Staff also asked program operators about their perceptions of the need for after-school opportunities in Vail. (*Appendix B*)

Results of the Survey: By the end of April 2002, the parent surveys were received at the Vail School District office. In the final analysis, Vail received 417 surveys—a 35% response rate. Interestingly, the general consumer-satisfaction survey that went out to all parents had only a 20% response rate.

After the surveys were collected, Vail staff tabulated the results. Over a three day period staff coded the surveys and entered the data using a spreadsheet computer program. This enabled them to summarize the findings and identify trends. CAA reviewed the initial summary, discussed additional analyses, and made some adjustments and refinements. (*Appendix C*)

Next Steps: At the next meeting of the community coalition—held in early May—Ms. McCain presented the results from the parent survey and CAA staff presented results from the program survey. The coalition was struck by three factors: First, the large percentage of children—particularly middle school-age children—who are going home alone after school. Second, the large percentage of parents who said they did not have enough information on after-school opportunities. Third, the relatively small number of opportunities for middle school-age children in the after-school hours.

After a robust discussion of the results and potential action steps, the group decided that they should sponsor a Town Hall on after-school issues for middle school-age children. In years past, this coalition had sponsored a broad-based parenting conference. The coalition decided that instead of holding the parenting conference they would encourage a focused community discussion of after-school issues.

Town Hall: The coalition decided that the best time to hold the Town Hall was in late summer—after school had started, but before youth were deeply engaged in activities. The purpose of this Town Hall was to inform parents of the results of the survey and talk together about how to improve after-school opportunities for youth in Vail. The Town Hall was scheduled for late August.

Vail School District staff and coalition members pursued a variety of outreach activities to ensure that parents knew about the meeting. The School District sent home flyers announcing the town hall. In addition, youth received an invitation to attend special activities that would be held on the night of the Town Hall. In the invitation, young people were encouraged to bring their parents to the Town Hall meeting while they participated in the special activities. Coalition members—mainly local church officials—spread the word in the congregations.

Ms. McCain knew that in order to get parents to attend a week-night event at the school she needed three important ingredients: a timely issue, food, and activities for youth. The timely issue—after-school programs for middle school children—was already in place. Vail, with support of funds from the Governors' Office of Children and Youth, provided pizza and drinks. In addition, Vail School District organized four special activities for youth—"mad science" experiments, arts and crafts, sports, and child care for younger children. About 100 people participated in the Town Hall.

While Vail School District did not actively seek media attention, they did provide copies of the flyer and survey summary to local journalists. This generated media interest in the needs and assets assessment being undertaken by Vail School District. The week prior to the event, the Arizona Daily Star printed an article about the parent survey and forthcoming Town Hall meeting. In addition, an Arizona Daily Star reporter attended the Town Hall and prepared an article on the event that appeared in the newspaper the following day.
(Appendix D)

The evening began with a University of Arizona professor, Christine Bosworth, discussing why it is so important to have appropriate activities for children in the after-school hours. Professor Bosworth reviewed research and provided statistics on youth engaging in risky behavior in the after-school hours. After a brief discussion of the Vail School District parent survey, participants were broken into small groups to discuss three questions: What do they think youth are doing in the after-school hours? What resources are out there for them? What can we do as a community to address this problem? After an hour of small group discussion, participants were asked to rejoin the larger group and talk about their conversations. At the end of the Town Hall, participants were informed that the community coalition was meeting the next day to determine what action steps should be taken.

This event generated much interested from parents and community members. Ms. McCain reported receiving several calls from parents who attended the Town Hall offering to volunteer in an after-school program. For example, one parent offered to show middle-school youth how to cook and another offered to help with field trips.

Implementation: The day after the Town Hall, community leaders met to discuss the event and identify next steps that could be taken to act on the issues raised in the Town Hall. The coalition decided to undertake three activities:

- 1) Disseminate information to parents about existing after-school activities. Vail agreed to prepare a booklet that will be distributed to parents describing current after-school activities for youth.
- 2) Examine successful programs for middle school youth to determine what might be appropriate in Vail. Ms. McCain plans to conduct site visits to area after-school programs and interview program directors about various issues. Coalition members have been invited to attend these site visits.
- 3) Develop programming. After reading the results of the parent survey, Vail School District officials decided that some programming for middle school children needed to be in place for intersession (Vail schools are on a modified school year calendar). As a result of the Town Hall, Vail committed to working with community partners to develop programming at both of its middle schools by January 2003.

Since the Town Hall, Vail School District and its community partners have begun to act on these recommendations. For example, the coalition prepared a listing of programs available for middle school-age children in the community. (*Appendix E*) This was sent to the parents of every middle-school student in the District.

In response to the need for more programs, Vail School District organized a variety of activities—sports, arts and crafts, computer technology—for about 30 middle-school age children to participate in during the school's intersession. These programs were offered Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The program was fee based and low-income children received a subsidy through the Arizona Department of Economic Security. In addition, Vail School District and the YMCA have applied for a grant to bring "Citizen Schools" to the community. Based on after-school programs in the Boston-area, Citizen Schools' key components include community connections, leadership development, accessing technology, and improving writing, data analysis and oral presentation skills.

Pilot Site: Scottsdale

In early 2001, Hugh McGill, Outreach Coordinator for the City for Scottsdale, heard a presentation by Karen Ortiz of Children's Action Alliance regarding a recently developed guide to after-school program needs and assets assessment. During this presentation Ms. Ortiz noted that her organization was looking for sites to pilot test this project. Mr. McGill knew that after-school issues were of concern to parents in Scottsdale and that his department was looking for ways to increase community collaboration. Mr. McGill thought that being a pilot site might enable the City and School District to work together to learn more about after-school needs and actively collaborate with community members to develop solutions.

Project Planning—Mr. McGill set out to develop a project that would capture a broad range of information on the need for after-school services as well as the characteristics of families looking for after-school care. He knew that a survey would be an effective way to collect this information, but that attempting to survey all parents in Scottsdale schools—a District with approximately 27,000 children, 20 elementary schools, 7 middle schools and 5 high schools—would be a daunting, if not impossible, task. In March 2002, after consulting with colleagues at the City of Scottsdale and the Scottsdale School District, he decided to survey a sampling of parents and then augment this information with input from after-school service providers.

Mr. McGill planned to meet with providers of after-school care services after the completion of the parent survey. He hoped to use this group as a sounding board for the survey data and to strategize about outreach efforts.

The Parent Survey—Mr. McGill reviewed various after-school needs and assessment surveys developed in other states. From these samples he chose a variety of questions and added a few more to better reflect the issues he was interested in capturing. The draft survey developed by Mr. McGill covered issues including the kind of care currently used by families, the kind of care they would like for their school-age children in the out-of-school hours, and information on family characteristics. CAA staff reviewed the survey and made suggestions regarding wording and format. (*Appendix F*)

Mr. McGill decided to survey a sample of about 5,000 parents with children in Kindergarten, first, third, fifth and seventh grades in at least one elementary school and one middle school in each of the five district complexes—or about 10-14 schools. Mr. McGill believed that this would provide a wide variety of information on experiences in different parts of the School District.

Project Approval: To develop and distribute a survey of this magnitude, Mr. McGill knew he needed the full support of the School District. To build that

support he met with several district staff including the Director of Service Learning, an assistant superintendent, and a School Board Member. These individuals questioned the purpose of the study and were concerned that the information could lead to negative portrayals of specific schools and the school district. Mr. McGill and Children's Action Alliance staff met with a school board member to explain the purpose of the collaboration and the survey. Based on suggestions from this meeting, the survey was revised and a new date for meeting with the Superintendent of the Scottsdale School District was set.

Based on the school district's negative experiences with previous surveys, Mr. McGill was advised that to be successful, the project would need the support of the school principals. The draft survey instrument was revised several times. In April of 2002, the principals discussed the project and reviewed the survey instrument. The principals cited a number of concerns with the survey instrument and wanted these issues addressed before they approved distribution of the survey. Because of their concerns and the approaching end of the school year, they decided to table the project until the 2002-2003 school year.

During the summer of 2002, Mr. McGill refined the survey instrument and planned for a roll-out of the project in the fall of 2002. In August 2002, he was informed that some of the principals had great concern over the amount of resources necessary to distribute the survey, the cost of incentives, and the use of the final survey data. Ultimately, the principals rejected the plan to distribute the after-school needs assessment through the schools.

In addition to the objections voiced by the principals, Mr. McGill encountered other barriers in moving the project forward. Members of his collaboration expressed concern over the process of the collection and the summarization of the data. Some groups did offer their services, but others were concerned about the pureness of the sample and the community's reaction to the information collected.

Revised Plan: In mid-August 2002, Mr. McGill began talking with supporters at the City and School District about alternative ways to survey parents about after-school needs. He investigated having the city print and distribute the survey directly, but budget constraints made this approach impossible.

As of late 2002, Mr. McGill still hoped to undertake this project and was examining alternative methods to collect the data. He was also looking at adding members to the collaboration who could assist in moving the project forward. The District Administration continues to support this project. Plans for distribution are tentatively scheduled for August 2003.

Pilot Projects Lessons Learned

The Scottsdale and Vail pilot projects provide helpful examples of what it takes to undertake a needs and assets assessment in a local community. While these projects were undertaken by different entities, in different parts of the state, and with different ultimate results, they provide a number of shared lessons that are important for others to learn before undertaking similar work. The lessons learned include:

Build on Existing Efforts—Rather than spend time creating new committees or new processes, include this project in already existing efforts. For example, one reason Vail was able to implement the parent survey was because they built on an established community collaboration and added the parent survey to an already existing consumer satisfaction survey.

Obtain Support of School Districts and School Principals—Because this kind of project relies so heavily on the participation of schools—for identification of parents, for distributing surveys, etc.—the project should work with school officials on every facet of the plan. It may even be more efficient for an arm of the school to be the lead agency on this kind of project. Regardless, making sure that all levels of school administration are supportive is essential.

Engage the Community—While a project like this might be done by just one entity—the School District or City, for example—it will be more effective if community partners are engaged. Partners can add information and a variety of perspective to the project. In addition, engaging community partners will demonstrate that the project has interest outside of the sponsoring agency.

Identify Advantageous Timing—In both Vail and Scottsdale, early fall was identified as a time that would be most effective to distribute a survey. It was believed that this is a good time to distribute the survey because after-school issues are on parents' minds and families may be more willing to participate in a survey or community discussion.

Pilot Test the Survey Instrument—To gauge if the survey developed will provide desired information, share a draft of the survey with a small number of parents before fully distributing the survey. Pilot testing the questionnaire will help uncover errors and clear up any confusion before the survey instrument is sent out to all recipients.

Secure Adequate Resources—As with any research project, it is necessary to have adequate resources to ensure the project's success. Local pilot sites needed financial resources to produce and distribute the survey, for return-mail postage, and to hold community meetings. In addition, pilot sites donated in-kind resources such as staff time and meeting space. It is important for sites to think through what kinds of resources they will need and how they will be

secured before undertaking a needs and assets assessment project.

Target Survey Resources—In determining how many parents to survey, find a balance between a large number of potential respondents and the resources necessary to obtain a significant response rate. While it may be advantageous to survey all parents in a community, it may not be an effective use of time or resources to undertake the follow-up necessary to ensure that many parents respond to the survey.

Secure Technical Assistance—Community agencies seeking to undertake a needs and assets assessment benefit from technical assistance. This technical assistance can come in the form of getting help conceptualizing the project, reviewing survey instruments, setting up data analysis protocols, providing comments on drafts, and providing guidance on how other localities have conducted needs and assets assessments.

Link to Broader Efforts—Local needs and assets assessment projects are more likely to be undertaken and be successful if they are tied to statewide efforts to improve after-school services. This linkage is necessary to provide direction, support, leadership, momentum, and connections to other after-school needs and assessment projects. In addition, local projects may find it useful to have the backing of a statewide effort in persuading local programs and institutions to participate.

Conclusion

The experience of these pilot sites can help inform future efforts. First, it is clear that successful projects must be led by a school or school district representative—someone who has decision-making authority as well as ties to the broader after-school services community. Second, this effort should build on existing community coalitions rather than try to create a coalition just for the purposes of the needs and assets assessment. Third, entities conducting the needs and assets assessment need additional resources—such as staff time and funds for producing, distributing and collecting the survey—to ensure that the project operates smoothly and does not overly burden the sponsoring agency. Fourth, entities undertaking a needs and assets assessment benefit from the advice and support of a central organization, like Children's Action Alliance, as well as other sites engaged in the project.



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