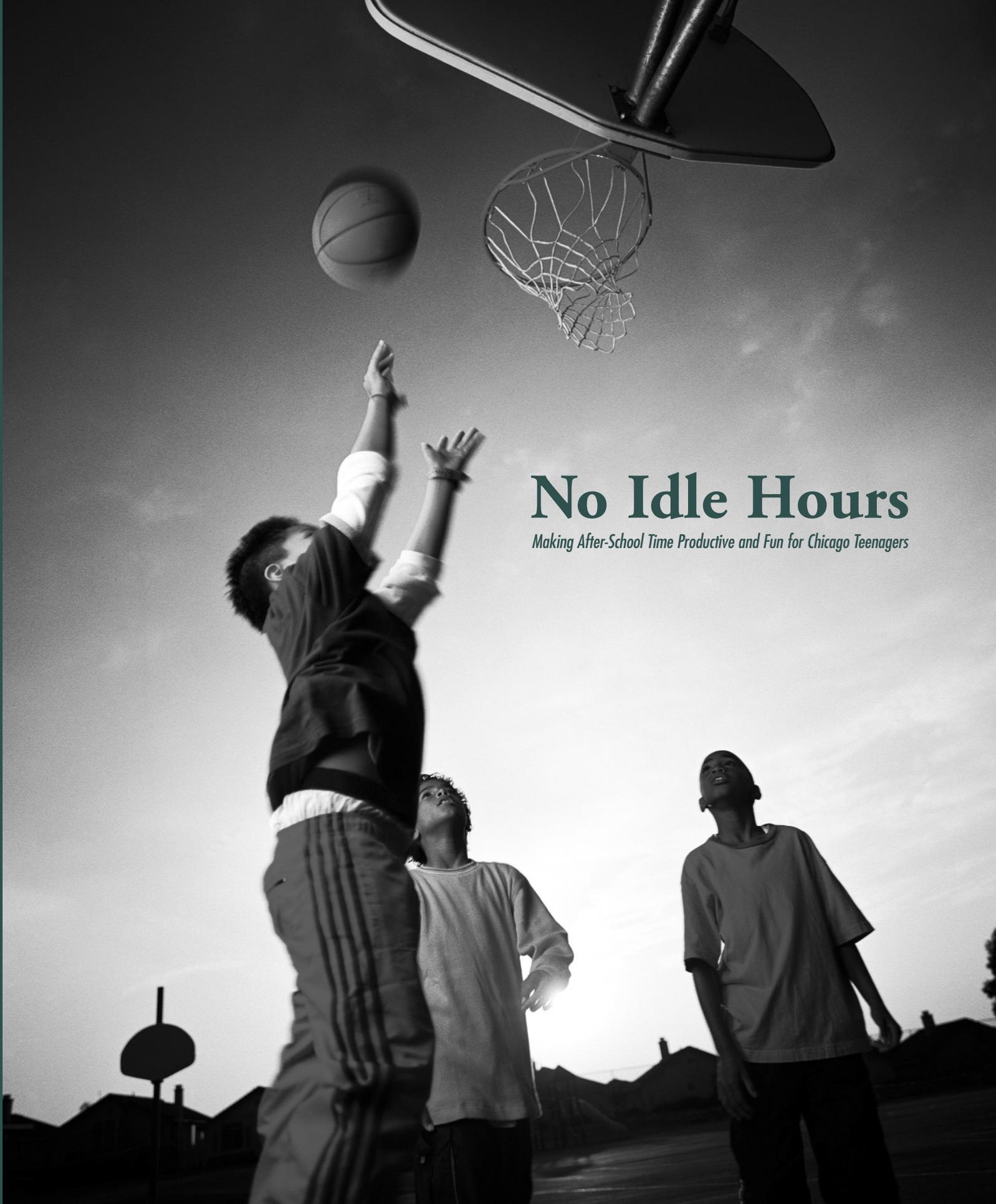


A report to the
After School Project
of the Robert Wood
Johnson Foundation
by *Tony Proscio*

No Idle Hours

Making After-School Time Productive and Fun for Chicago Teenagers



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Executive Summary

ON AN AVERAGE DAY in two dozen neighborhoods across Chicago, some 3,000 to 4,000 teenagers take part in a pioneering after-school program run by After School Matters, a three-year-old nonprofit organization backed by the city's school, park, and library systems, and chaired by Chicago's First Lady, Maggie Daley.

After School Matters offers paid "apprenticeships" in technology, the arts, sports, and communications, in which high school students learn skills that can qualify them for summer or part-time jobs. Instructors in the program are practitioners in their discipline, and the apprenticeships are run as "master classes," with direct coaching for small groups of 20 students each. A related program, less structured and unpaid, provides open recreation, with adult supervision, for teens who are free to drop in and out as they please, and whose only responsibility is to have a good time. Participants in all these programs give them high marks, many return for a repeat experience, and there is some evidence that the word is spreading from student to student, semester to semester.

But apart from the diversity of its curriculum, the experience of its instructors, and the satisfaction of its participants, what makes After School Matters nationally significant is the size of its ambition. Its goal is eventually to offer a rewarding after-school experience to at least half of the teenagers in the public school system — not necessarily through its current programs alone, but in a widening circle of high-quality activities that take full advantage of the city's resources and those of Chicago community organizations.

The fact that this goal seems achievable, in time, has a lot to do with the extraordinary interweaving of the three city agencies that stand behind it: the Chicago Public Schools, the Park District, and the Public Library. The three bureaucracies constitute a huge percentage of the city government workforce, but with little history of cooperation with one another and even some longstanding rivalries. Yet within a year after the idea was first floated, the three organizations were sharing facilities, coordinating staff functions, and contributing part of their budgets to making After School Matters

programs a reality. The bureaucratic artistry that made this happen — which starts, necessarily, in the top ranks of Mayor Richard M. Daley’s administration — is at least as remarkable a story as the design and growth of the program itself.

So is After School Matters’ commitment to teenagers, a group that some conventional wisdom dismisses as too old for after-school programs. What makes that belief wrong, says Mrs. Daley, is that most after-school programs are designed to suit younger children, not older ones — they don’t offer the challenges, use the skills, or present the opportunities for leadership and employment that teenagers want. “That attitude,” she says, “assumes that teenagers are somehow already ‘lost.’...If teenagers are lost, it’s because *we’re losing* them.”

At the three-year mark, After School Matters is still at an early stage of growth — with all programs operating at one-quarter of the city’s high schools and involving, at the time this is written, roughly 4 percent of the total citywide enrollment. Although growth is now expected to accelerate, the program was careful to start slow, ensuring high

quality at its pilot sites for the first few years. Even with a now-established roster of activities, each expansion means recruiting another cadre of accomplished instructors, assembling the right facilities and equipment in each new neighborhood, introducing students and parents to the program, and ensuring the cooperation and smooth interaction of all the participating agencies at each new site. With each stage of expansion, that process becomes a little easier, but it will remain a challenge until After School Matters is operating throughout the city.

Given the difficulties ahead, this report is not a chronicle of proven success, at least not yet. It is, though, the story of an impressive start, against long odds, on a project that very few cities have even begun to undertake. If it succeeds, it could provide a model, or at least a practical working example, for other cities where teenagers have too little to do with their out-of-school time, and the resources to help them have yet to be mobilized.

June 2003



Gallery 37 Apprentice, Spring 2002.

LATE ON A TUESDAY AFTERNOON in April, well past the end of the school day, a cast of Chicago teenagers is rehearsing a courtroom scene from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, playwright Horton Foote's 1961 adaptation of the novel by Harper Lee. The stage is in the auditorium of Paul Robeson High School, on the city's south side. All the actors are African Americans. Most of the characters they portray are white segregationists. The unconventional casting adds a layer of complexity — and maybe also of meaning — to Lee's tale of white society coming to terms with race in pre-Civil Rights Alabama.

Something about the teenage actor Jerone, playing the patrician lawyer Atticus Finch, draws a visitor's attention. It isn't Jerone's technical performance — he shows a command of the character and the surrounding tensions, though the courtroom language occasionally trips him up. What's instantly striking is his physical intensity.

Jerone's Finch isn't just defending the innocent Tom Robinson, or wryly subverting a smug racist order, in the understated style of Gregory Peck in the 1962 film. Jerone leans and scowls, his gestures sharp, athletic, and blunt, like a boxer's. At 5'9" and roughly 150 pounds, he doesn't walk across the stage, he thrusts.

Whatever Horton Foote or Gregory Peck might have thought of Jerone's performance, for the young actor the role is plainly something physical, urgent, nearly volcanic.

Afterward, a visitor asks what brought Jerone to the ten-week theater academy, part of Chicago's pioneering after-school arts program for teenagers, called Gallery 37. It's the usual kind of well-meaning visitor's question, intended to elicit the dreams of a talented youth, a star-struck movie or theater buff, or just someone who likes to perform in front of friends. (Some other students in the class do, in fact, confess an inner passion for the stage, though far from a majority.) Despite what seems like a flair for his role, Jerone isn't trying out for a remake of *Fame*. He has no plans for a life in the spotlight. He's a sports enthusiast with dreams of medical school.

Instead, Jerone's simple answer to the visitor's question "what brought you here?" provides a clue to the remarkable depth and reach of Gallery 37 and its growing circle of affiliated after-school programs for teenagers, collectively called After School Matters.

"A friend of mine was in this," he says, referring to the theater program. "And a teacher said I'd be good at it. I wasn't doing anything else. So I signed up."

It's a good inventory of what many of After School Matters' 3,000 to 4,000 students would say in response to the same question. According to a survey by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, most participants give some version of these basic explanations for enrolling:

- **They want to learn a new skill.**
- **They need money or a job (participants get a \$15-a-day "stipend" in most programs, and the majority of the programs prepare students for regular summer or part-time jobs).**
- **They enjoy the activity, whatever it may be. (After School Matters offers programs in the visual and performing arts, technology, sports, and communications.)**
- **Or in some cases, like Jerone, they joined because "a friend was in this."**

The After School Matters academies are not, in short, elite clubs for the gifted and creative. For most students, they are first and foremost an alternative to "not doing anything else" — a chance to be among friends and adults working on something challenging that doesn't necessarily involve tests or grades. In some cases, a semester with After School Matters also offers an alternative to a low-wage, low-skill job, and a way of getting more interesting work down the road. But even among students who see the program as a path

'We have tended to isolate teens — we've walled them off as a big mystery that we never hear about except when there's trouble.... If teenagers are lost, it's because we're losing them.' — Maggie Daley

toward personal development or a better job, most say they mainly chose it because, like Jerone, they consider it a fun place to be with friends.

That response corresponds to a growing body of scholarship on what appeals to adolescents and how young people organize their time. The more the architects of After School Matters learn about what's drawing kids into their program, the satisfaction of those who participate, and the peer-to-peer "buzz" about the opportunity, the more they believe they may be on to something — a rare big-city program aimed specifically at teens, with a real potential to transform the way teenagers spend time after school. If it works, it will upend an edgy conventional wisdom that says that teenagers are the hardest group to engage in after-school programs. Buoyed by the program's rapid growth, leaders of After School Matters now believe they have a shot at reaching at least 50 percent of the Chicago teenagers before the decade is over.

Why teenagers?

CREATING ACTIVITIES SPECIFICALLY FOR ADOLESCENTS — and such a large number of adolescents besides — is hardly the usual way to design an after-school pro-

gram. Most people who support or operate youth development programs prefer to start younger, when children's habits are still forming and their reliance on adults is still mostly intact. Some experts on the topic, usually speaking hypothetically and sometimes off-the-record, even speculate that adolescence may be too late to do much good, at a stage in life when social urges and pressures tend to be anarchic and overwhelming. Some believe that the very teenagers who most need structure and adult supervision will aggressively shun after-school programs. Only the brighter, better disciplined students, they say, are likely to attend in any significant number.

Chicago First Lady Maggie Daley, the chair of After School Matters and the city's chief advocate of after-school programs, has little patience for the doubters. She picked teenagers as her prime target more than a decade ago — precisely because the conventional wisdom said it was a bad bet. "As a society," she says,

we have tended to isolate teens — we've walled them off as a problem, a big mystery that we never hear about except when there's trouble. And no surprise, our high schools are in trouble, too. We tell ourselves, sometimes, that by the time kids are in high school it's too late to affect them, that we might as well

focus on younger kids. And sure, we need to pay attention to younger students. But that attitude assumes that teenagers are somehow already 'lost' — that it's too late to interest them in things, to get them involved in the community. Anybody who has raised teenagers, as I have, knows better than that. Which is why parents get so frustrated with the system. If teenagers are lost, it's because we're losing them, by not giving them opportunities to show what they can do, to be their best, and to have a little fun in the process. So After School Matters is about teenagers. We're starting with the group that has been the most neglected, and we're turning this whole pattern on its head.

Though Mrs. Daley isn't yet in the main stream of professional opinion on the issue, she has experts on her side. Joan Wynn, a research fellow at the Chapin Hall Center and an architect of After School Matters, has spent much of her academic career surrounded by skepticism on the prospects for adolescents in out-of-school activity.

There's a consensus in the field that by age 12, kids' participation in organized programs drops off steeply. And in general, that seems to be true. But there

‘Programming for teens can’t simply be trying to engage older kids in whatever is currently provided to younger ones.’ — Joan Wynn

have been studies of organized programs *for teens*, where when you provide quality programming aimed at teens, aimed at characteristics that engage them, they sign up in droves. What this tells us is, programming for teens can’t simply be trying to engage older kids in whatever is currently provided to younger ones. That’s when their interest falls off. But certain characteristics in programming for teens fundamentally changes the dynamic: engagement in hands-on activities focused on issues that matter to them, where they can make a contribution that ends in a product or performance or some way of demonstrating mastery, that have high expectations and really provide sustained support over time, and where youth have a voice in making decisions, some role in leadership that isn’t simply ‘sit there, be passive, do your homework.’ Design programs that way, and participation isn’t much of a problem.

The first preliminary data from surveys of students in After School Matters programs seems to confirm the point. Participants say not just that they like the program, but more fundamentally, that they want to participate in programs of this kind. A chance to do something they enjoy, be with friends, earn some money

or prepare for a job — all these things do, the student respondents say, draw them into programs after school. It’s significant, too, that the respondents are a cross-section of urban teens — they are, like the overall public school enrollment, overwhelmingly African American and Latino — and that they live in some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods.

Filling a void

THE WIDENING NETWORK of After School Matters programs grew from a 10-year-old inspiration for putting a vacant piece of commercial real estate in downtown Chicago to temporary use. Tied up in financial and planning disputes, the absurdly prominent parcel at the core of the city’s business district — designated “Block 37” in the official plat books — had been sitting undeveloped since 1989, a yawning hole in the downtown skyline. “That empty block just made him crazy,” says Maggie Daley, referring to her husband, Mayor Richard M. Daley. What later became the cornerstone of Chicago’s after-school program, Mrs. Daley recalls, took shape partly to soothe the mayor’s frustration over the wasted block of downtown real estate:

There was Block 37, prime commercial property in the middle of the Loop, just sitting vacant. It drove him nuts. Now, I had told Rich when he first became mayor that I wanted to work on teenagers and the arts in the city. So when he started complaining about Block 37, and asking ‘what can we do with this,’ a thought struck me. I talked to Lois Weisberg [the mayor’s commissioner of cultural affairs]¹ and she and I came up with a program we could put right on that block, where kids would be apprentice artists for the summer, working with master artists — right on Block 37. At least it was something productive on the site until a permanent use was decided on. So we put up a tent, and we did it. Soon, of course, we’ll have to stop using that site. But by now, we’ve got year-round activity going all over the city. So when Block 37 is no longer available, the program will go on.

From just a label in the city’s land-use records, the number 37 has since become something of a trademark in Chicago, attached to a widening circle of programs in technology, sports, and the performing and visual arts. Along with the unifying “brand name” of After School Matters, it’s meant to designate the best, most fun, and most unusual things a teenager in

¹ As a description of Lois Weisberg, or her importance to the development of Gallery 37, the official title is completely inadequate. Through a long, varied career, Weisberg has become locally famous for cultivating and expanding on small, off-beat, or obscure people and ideas, making connections among people and ideas that might not otherwise have come in contact. For an admiring description of Weisberg’s career and talents, see Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2000, pages 49-53.

‘I try to help students learn...that thrill, that sense of finding something in yourself that you never imagined.’ — Debbie Maddox

Chicago can do — after school, in school, in the parks, in libraries, and in summer, to this day, under a tent on Block 37.

Fun with a purpose

ALTHOUGH THE TEENAGE ACTOR JERONE and most of his cast-mates at Robeson High School aren't planning on an acting career, many students in After School Matters programs are, in fact, training for a job. For example, the after-school sports apprenticeships, called Sports 37, offer a regimen jointly sponsored by the schools and the Chicago Park District that prepares teenagers to work in city recreation programs. They can qualify for temporary or part-time jobs as day-camp counselors with younger children, as coaches or officials in the smaller sports leagues, or (for the Park District, a real godsend) as lifeguards at city pools. Tech 37, the After School Matters computer academy, trains some students to be aides in public libraries, helping readers use and master the library system's powerful research database and online catalog, or to learn job skills in robotics, web design, and digital video production. Words 37, a new verbal-arts program, hires professional storytellers to train young people to tell stories and read to smaller children during the summers and after school.

But the prospect of later employment, and even the temporary stipend along the way, aren't the only reasons why young people take part in apprenticeships and clubs at After School Matters' 24 schools, or the 16 others that so far offer only Gallery 37 arts programs. A common reason — confirmed in the Chapin Hall survey of participants — is to be with friends and interesting, attentive adults, and to learn something new.

Like Jerone, a majority of the young people in After School Matters come into the program on the encouragement of a friend or teacher. About 28 percent of them, according to Chapin Hall's survey, decided to join partly because that's where their friends are. Sixty percent said they wanted “to learn new skills.” Just under half said they joined the program “to do something fun.”

Actress and after-school theater coach Debbie Maddox watches the seductive fun take hold almost immediately — “the thrill of rehearsal,” as she describes it:

the opportunity to step out of your own life into someone else's, to change who you are, and your whole world, at the snap of your fingers. Rehearsal, even more than performance — the thrill of going from ‘I have no idea what I'm doing in this scene’ to ‘I get it,’ where

you hit the moment when it works — there is nothing to compare to that. Maybe if you're a research scientist, it's like the moment of discovery when you find a cure or prove a hypothesis. But [in the theater] you don't just get it once or twice, you get it over and over. That's what I try to help students learn here — that thrill, that sense of finding something possible in yourself that you never imagined. Once you've felt that, you live in a whole new way.

It was for the sake of that sense of discovery that Mrs. Daley and Commissioner Lois Weisberg created Gallery 37, and with it, the pattern for After School Matters. The point of starting with the arts, Mrs. Daley says, is precisely that they teach a kind of energizing discovery that “draws children out of themselves, into a wider world.”

Diversity and scale

YET SUCCESSFUL AS GALLERY 37 WAS in its first ten years, it remained a program for the creatively inclined — not necessarily the most talented or artistic young people, but unquestionably for youngsters who enjoyed relying on the right-hand side of the brain. Plenty of teens, like people in any other age



group, have other passions, sparked by other kinds of talents. If the promise of Gallery 37 was going to extend to all high school students, or even a significant percentage, it would have to vary its content to suit young people with other skills, interests, and ways of thinking. Sports was one obvious choice. Computer technology was another, especially in the midst of Chicago's high-tech boom (quieter since the tech bubble burst, but still strong by post-2000 standards). Thus were born the idea for Sports 37 and Tech 37. Words 37, the newest addition, is seen as a way of distinguishing the more linear form of creativity typical of the verbal arts from the intuitive or spatial disciplines of painting, design, music, or dance.

Making these ideas real, however, meant rapidly putting together enough playing fields, gyms, pools, and courts for a complete sports program; finding enough computers and lab space for a good tech program; lining up performance space and audiences for apprentice wordsmiths, and

then recruiting qualified athletic and tech professionals and master storytellers to run all the sessions. Although Gallery 37 was born in a spectacular burst of activity in 1991, it took a decade to grow from one summertime tent to a citywide network of programs in 42 schools. Mrs. Daley and the other designers of After School Matters had no intention of waiting another ten years to build the three new components. They needed facilities and equipment, coaches, instructors, computers, and curricula, virtually ready-made.

That seemed to call for a partnership of the city's three biggest networks of suitable programs and facilities: the Chicago Public Schools, the Park District, and the Public Libraries. So in early 2000, Mrs. Daley called together the heads of the three agencies and told them, as one participant remembers it, "We've got to be doing more than Gallery 37 — we need something broader, deeper, richer. More variety, more activities, more kinds of experiences. And the people who hold the key to that are you."

"Sounds obvious, doesn't it?" says a senior official of one of the three systems.

I mean, these are the agencies with everything you need, right? So the trick is to just put them together and get them rolling. OK, great. Now, here's the

challenge: There was no history — none whatsoever — of any collaboration among these three bodies. In fact, there was a historical animosity dating back many years. It had to do with a lot of things, including just plain mutual distrust: 'Your school kids disrupt my parks and libraries,' 'your libraries don't serve my students,' 'your programs aren't run well enough to use my facilities,' all the Balkanization and rivalry you'd expect from longstanding bureaucracies with separate professional credentials, separate unions, separate missions, separate ways of doing business.... We bureaucrats weren't amateurs at this [rivalry] — we'd been practicing for decades.

Left to their own devices, officials from all three systems agree, the bureaucracies could well have fought each other, and After School Matters, to a standstill. Yet three other forces lined up to breach the walls of separation dividing the agencies.

The first was almost purely serendipitous, but several participants considered it crucial: The CEOs of all three systems were friends, or at least close colleagues. Whatever rivalries and distrust may have strained relations at lower levels, the three top officials were in harmony, and liked working together. Personal consultation

‘I know what a parent faces when the school day is over but the work day is not, and that child is out there somewhere at the mercy of the elements.’ — B.J. Walker

among key players, in fact, played a crucial role throughout the formation of After School Matters, and to a lesser extent continues to do so.



The second factor was the exceptional interest and power of Chicago’s mayor. Not only was the mayor’s wife behind the idea of Gallery 37 and After School Matters, but the mayor himself has insistently made after-school programs a top priority.² In his 2002 State of the City address Mayor Daley declared it a city priority “every year to provide more high-quality after-school and summer programs so that more of our children can participate in a meaningful alternative that engages them and keeps them away from gangs, guns, and drugs.” That kind of mayoral commitment might be impressive in any city; but it is decisive in Chicago — where the mayor has control of the public schools,

faces no term limits, and at the time this is written, was just elected to his fourth term by a three-to-one margin.

The third and perhaps most potent force against bureaucratic inertia has been the formidable B.J. Walker, the mayor’s “director of human infrastructure.” Behind the exotic title lies what public administration experts sometimes call a “super-cabinet” position of considerable power. Walker, one of a small handful of confidential aides in the mayor’s suite, describes her responsibilities as “sort of a meta-coordinator of all the city resources, programs, and initiatives that have to do with people —housing, the homeless, children, education. I get agencies to work on common problems or to perform on mayoral priorities.” In short, said another city official, “on human service issues, when you’re dealing with B.J., you’re dealing with the mayor — except that she’s the part of the mayor that’s always paying attention to you.”

For more than a year, the thing B.J. Walker was most paying attention to was After School Matters and the complex bureaucratic partnership that the Daleys believed would make it happen.

‘Someone to get things done’

WALKER’S INFLUENCE over city agencies, she says, comes less from her formal power than from the personal attention she gives to the agencies and their issues, as well as from her “instincts” about how big organizations function, what motivates people, and how to anticipate trouble before you’re up to your waist in it. Now in her 50s, Walker’s three decades of experience as a publishing executive, university professor, and state administrator have equipped her with “a pretty good sense of where the land mines lie, and a real driven tenacity against the worst tendencies of the bureaucracy.” One other element of her background made her the perfect choice to move mountains for the sake of After School Matters: “I raised a difficult child. I know what a parent faces when the school day is over but the work day is not, and that child is out there somewhere at the mercy of the elements.”

It would be easy, but wrong, to imagine that the simple fact of mayoral diktat and sub-mayoral muscle could make a program like After School Matters come together. In the messy reality of actual government, bureaucracies have

² Mayor Daley may, in fact, be the first mayor in the country to have personally started his own after-school book club. “He did it sort of on the spur of the moment, when he was visiting schools,” his wife recalls. “In one school, he said to a group of students, ‘hey, let’s start a book club!’ and they snapped it up.” In 2000, the American Library Association picked Mayor Daley’s Book Club — with 1,600 students in 78 schools — as one of six outstanding after-school programs in the country. In 2001, the idea took another giant leap when Mary Dempsey, head of the Chicago Public Library, launched “One Book, One Chicago,” a single book club for all Chicagoans, beginning with Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The Gallery 37 theater instructor at Robeson High School later picked the play of the same name as a way of seizing the momentum of “One Book, One Chicago.” Thus, in a sense, the mayor of Chicago was the original impresario for the brief acting career of Jerone, the teenage leading man in the after-school theater program.

a thousand ways of complying with executive commands without actually pursuing the official goal. In his landmark 1967 study of organizational behavior, *Inside Bureaucracy*, political economist Anthony Downs considered what happens as an executive order is transmitted down the hierarchy from one administrative stratum to the next:

Orders from the top must be expanded and made more specific as they move downward. There are a number of different ways in which these orders can be made more specific at each level, and each official has some leeway in selecting the one he will follow. . . . Because individual officials have varying goals, the purposes the superior had in mind will not be the precise ones his subordinate's orders convey to people farther down the hierarchy. . . . [By the time this process plays out,] a very significant portion of all the activity being carried out is completely unrelated to the bureau's formal goals, or even to the goals of its topmost officials.³

To this day, people impressed by the progress of After School Matters tend to attribute most of its rapid growth to the nearly unique strength of Richard M. Daley. But B.J. Walker, while acknowl-

edging that nothing would have been possible without the mayor's strong support, believes just as strongly that other, less powerful mayors could have done the same thing, given the right administrative follow-through. "He didn't just order it to happen. He assigned someone to get things done, and he gave that person — me, in this case — enough authority and space to move the barricades."

She continues: "The mayor controls the schools, the parks, the libraries. He's the boss. But (a) he's not going to work on this every day, and (b) there needs to be some distance between him and the nuts-and-bolts implementation of this, because he can't take the heat every time we screw something up. So there has to be somebody with his commitment to this, but with more time than he can spend, and some ability to absorb the shocks day-to-day."

To "move the barricades," B.J. Walker used not force but face-time. Spending as much as a third of her workday for more than a year, the mayor's top lieutenant for human services frequently found herself at meetings of employees several ranks below cabinet level, clearing logjams in interdepartmental negotiations on issues normally far beneath the notice of City Hall. One example: liability forms. If students in the after-school program were to

have genuinely seamless access to city parks, pools, classrooms, libraries, and clubhouses, they would be moving around from place to place. Students in a dance or storytelling workshop would need to travel from rehearsal space in a school or park building to a library or senior center. Sports participants might need to be in a school gym one day, a city park the next. They might use school buses, park vehicles, or other transportation. So — which department's liability forms would they have to sign?

The bureaucracy's natural answer was: All of them — and no door could open, no wheel could roll, until every form was filled in. B.J. Walker's answer was: "Ridiculous."

"We can ruin these programs with permissions and paperwork. Everyone loves to spend time on paperwork, because it's so much more orderly than dealing with kids. Yet in the end, [the liability problem] wasn't really that hard to solve. We just brought the lawyers from all three agencies together with lawyers from [City Hall], and we vetted the issue collectively. And collectively we agreed that we could have a single liability policy, with a single form, and be done with it. We all had pretty much the same legal and financial obligations anyway."

It's worth noting that the "we" who

3 Downs, Anthony, *Inside Bureaucracy*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967, pp. 133-136.

'You can't solve every problem by calling the director or the CEO, and quite often you won't even know what the problems are unless you're talking to the people who are actually working on them.' — B.J. Walker

convened the pow-wow of liability attorneys was not a city lawyer or legal aide, but Walker herself. For months at a time, her “constituency” for after-school programs, as she puts it, was mid-level professionals and managers in the far reaches of the city administration. If a school principal or park manager balked at a new procedure or the introduction of a new program, there was at least an even chance that the official would get a call not from a direct supervisor, but from the mayor's office. And most of the time, the call was a friendly one: How can we make this work for you? What do you need to implement this?

“People may not realize how important it is to work the lower ranks,” Walker says.

It really works. You can't solve every problem by calling the director or the CEO, and quite often, you won't even know what the problems are unless you're talking to the people who are actually working on them. That kind of thing is sensitive, though; you have to be careful that City Hall isn't interfering with a department's management. But it really pays off, because now I'm not spending hours of my time every day on this; it's more like 5 to 10 percent. Because now, if there's a problem, I can just e-mail somebody who can fix it.

And when that happens, they're not just getting a call or e-mail from the 'Mayor's Office,' it's me — it's somebody they know, somebody they can work with.”

More carrot than stick

BESIDES A FAR-FLUNG NETWORK of personal connections, Walker's other asset in the effort to launch After School Matters was the fact that the new program offered things the participating agencies genuinely wanted — a fact not lost on the three departments' top executives.

One example is lifeguards. A perennial problem for big cities with public pools, the national shortage of lifeguards had sent New York City in 2002 searching for experienced swimmers as far away as Eastern Europe, importing Polish and Ukrainian university students, among others, to stand guard at city pools and beaches. “Nobody on the East Coast knows how to swim,” a Brooklyn lifeguard told *The New York Times*. “In the '70s, if a school had a pool, you had to pass a swimming test to graduate. Now pools are empty all year. Cool is basketball and maybe baseball and football. Not swimming.”

Chicago's Park District, even more

than New York's, constitutes the nation's biggest municipal job market for lifeguards every summer. And most years, a portion of its 1,200-plus jobs go empty. As on the East Coast, according to Park District Superintendent David Doig, too few Chicagoans know how to swim, much less how to pass the battery of emergency-response tests required of lifeguards. The city's 24 miles of lakefront and roughly 100 pools, including both indoor and outdoor, are an annual struggle for the Park District to keep staffed (New York, by contrast, has 53 pools and 14 miles of beaches). Most of the time, swimming hours need to be restricted and closing times juggled to stretch the limited lifeguard staff across as many neighborhoods as possible.

So when After School Matters brought the Park District and the Chicago Public Schools together to create Sports 37, part of the deal was that it would teach high school students to swim and train them to qualify as lifeguards. The benefits would be nearly universal. Teenagers would get a shot at a choice summer job, the Park District would have a new source of potential recruits, and After School Matters would have the kind of activity that Joan Wynn and other scholars say is ideal for teenagers: “where they can make a contribution,...[with] some way of

‘We didn’t spend a lot of time studying. We didn’t need to do a needs assessment and run regressions. It’s intuitive. We just started doing it.’ — David Doig

demonstrating mastery, high expectations and...some role in leadership.”

Superintendent Doig, who is a fan of after-school programs anyway, needed no persuading. “This was like a ‘duh.’ We have a chronic problem; they have a solution...We didn’t spend a lot of time studying. We didn’t need to do a needs assessment and run regressions. It’s intuitive. We just started doing it.”

Benefits — but with a cost

LIFEGUARDS WERE an especially vivid example of how Sports 37 benefits the Park District, but they weren’t the only example. The program also trains teenagers to serve as day-camp counselors in city parks and as coaches and officials for teams of younger kids. But these benefits came at a cost: The Park District at first had to recruit or supply most of the coaches, trainers, and instructors to work with the teenage apprentices (more recently, participating adults have come from community organizations and the school system). The park system has to make its clubhouses, grounds, and pools available, with maintenance supervision, for classes and training. More complicated still, it has to weave these responsibilities into the related after-school activities of

the public schools, with considerable integration of the two systems.

Students in swimming classes or learning to be lifeguards, for example, often train in their own school pools — which, in many poor neighborhoods, have sat unused for years. The school thus has to fill the pool and supply the facility — at additional cost to the cash-strapped Chicago Public Schools — while the Park District supplies the instructors and some of its scarce lifeguards. (Where a participating school has no pool, the Park District or a nearby school may supply a training venue.) Similarly, students training to be day-camp counselors or coaches spend part of their after-school time training in school gyms, part in park clubhouses or playing fields, supervised by school or park personnel or, often, by specially recruited “masters,” including officials of the National Basketball Association, whom the Park District hires to teach officiating skills.

All this bureaucratic crossover and sharing of responsibility is a profound change from anything most city employees have ever experienced. Many people doing similar work, or sharing responsibility for the same students, have in most cases never worked together before, continue to report to different supervisors, represent different levels of seniority in

their separate systems, and follow different schedules during the rest of their work day. The idea of Sports 37, to use Doig’s word, was “intuitive.” The implementation was anything but.



Yet to the likely astonishment of some public administration experts, Sports 37 was up and running within a year. That feat required more than the usual attention from Doig and his top staff. Not all administrators took to the idea, and one or two needed to be strong-armed or reassigned to ensure cooperation. A few decisions were admittedly improvised and, as Doig puts it, “we’ll definitely be tinkering with it as we go along.” Still, a challenge that many M.B.A. textbooks consider among the toughest an organization can face — integrating alien bureaucracies around a hybrid set of responsibilities and goals — was accomplished in a matter of months, not years.

Barely a year after the program began,

Principals would 'look across town at the better-off neighborhoods, and there'd be all kinds of things going on after school. And these principals would be sending their students home, in many cases, to nothing.' — Arne Duncan

53 alumni of Sports 37 were on the job as Park District lifeguards at close to \$10 an hour, with the majority of those expected to come back again the next year. Meanwhile, as this is written, 50 to 60 more students have passed the lifeguard test and roughly 100 are expected to join the ranks in the summer of 2002. In short, within 24 months, the total number of lifeguards recruited and trained in Chicago after-school programs will exceed the number that New York City had to fly in from overseas. The difference is that on Labor Day, the new Chicago lifeguards won't be heading home to Warsaw or Kiev. Most will be back on the job year after year.

'Some basic equity'

RECRUITING LIFEGUARDS for the Park District is surely the most obvious story of how After School Matters benefited one of its participating agencies. Other such stories were more subtle — and in some cases, agency officials weren't exactly overwhelmed by the alleged benefits at first. Arne Duncan, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, recalls a battle-weary principal at one high school who bluntly regarded the after-school "opportunity" as a burden — one whose main consequence would be to

lengthen the principal's normal workday by at least three hours. As Duncan explains it:

There's no question that, in a typical school, this is going to involve more work for the principal, the engineer, the janitorial staff, the security staff. And at this particular school, the principal had been around for awhile. He'd seen 50 of these great reform ideas come and go, and he wasn't keen on sweating blood over another one that wasn't going to amount to anything...But today he's a believer, one of the most enthusiastic people we've got. And why? Not just because he feels it's worth the extra work, but because it's helping to create some basic equity that didn't used to be there.

Principals in these neighborhoods are all running schools that, before Gallery 37 and After School Matters, had little or nothing for their students [in the after-school hours]. They'd look across town at the better-off neighborhoods, and there'd be all kinds of things going on in the schools or in the community after school. And these principals would be sending their students home, in many cases, to nothing. And it's safe to assume those same students would be coming back the next day worse off

than the kids across town. Now, that's something that *matters* to a principal — not just out of compassion, but also because nobody likes to see what they work hard to accomplish all day long just get un-done in the next few hours.

Other advantages also started to appear, reassuring some principals that After School Matters would be good for them and their schools even in the daytime hours. In one or two schools, a particularly visible benefit came in the form of new computers, broadband connections, telecommunications support, and electrical upgrades for classrooms where the Tech 37 program would operate in the evenings. All that equipment, purchased and installed for After School Matters, would then be available to the school all day long as well. Schools that never, or rarely, had a working computer suddenly had an entire computer lab, with high-speed connections and up-to-date software. "I walked in there the first day," said one teacher, "and thought, I must have fallen asleep and woke up on the North Side."

The prospect of "basic equity" has meant a lot to parks and library officials as well. Parks chief David Doig has even made it a point to chisel away some of the class barriers that have made certain sports

‘With a 40 percent dropout rate in the public school system, we have to give students reasons to go to school every day, and we can’t kid ourselves that those reasons are going to be purely academic and intellectual.’ — Arne Duncan

alien in the inner city — activities like golf, tennis, and yachting. Yes, yachting.

“We have the largest harbor system in the country,” says Doig, “and that’s an asset the whole city should enjoy. So last summer, we took kids on sailing classes. Most of them worked in our day camps four days a week, then on Fridays we gave them the day off to learn sailing. It was part of their regular duties, so it gave them a reason to try something that a lot of them probably never would have considered.” Similarly, the Park District gives Sports 37 participants free access to its golf classes during part of the day, an increasingly popular opportunity thanks to the rise of Tiger Woods.

In poorer neighborhoods, says Doig, “there’s been a tendency to concentrate on the ‘core’ sports — football, basketball, baseball. Most won’t have a volleyball program, or track and field. Many don’t have soccer. And a lot of schools are struggling just to maintain the few they have. At a typical Chicago public high school, they have at most a dozen sports. Meanwhile at New Trier in North Chicago [a nearly all-white suburban high school], they have something like 64 sports, including hockey, fencing, and boating.” Even if they can’t afford to run golf and fencing programs for every Chicago public school student, Doig

argues, schools and parks can at least help to de-mystify these sports for students who, someday, “may find it helpful — or maybe just fun — to play a round of golf now and then.”



A public policy on fun

IT’S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE to talk with anyone for very long about After School Matters without hearing the word “fun.” The program is serious business, its leaders all point out, but its success depends heavily, maybe decisively, on how much fun it is. The word — in fact the very issue — has been known to raise eyebrows, as when members of Congress in 1994 decried proposals to spend federal anticrime money on Midnight Basketball as “pay for play.” But in Chicago’s official after-school circles, fun is considered a *sine qua non*. “If they don’t enjoy it,” says schools CEO Arne Duncan, “they probably won’t come.

And if they aren’t coming, it doesn’t much matter what we offer.”

Many proponents of after-school programs tend to spotlight their intellectual and social benefits. That’s partly to increase their political appeal, no doubt, and partly a genuine desire to help students perform better in school. And there is some research to suggest that participating in after-school programs might help to boost academic performance — though the data are still a long way from conclusive on that score. Other advocates connect after-school programs with other serious public-policy goals, like reducing crime, improving social development, and fending off harmful influences like (in Mayor Daley’s words) “gangs, guns, and drugs.” All of that is fine with the Daleys and other leaders of After School Matters. But first, it has to be fun. And in Chicago, that is a cornerstone of the public policy.

“Look,” says Duncan, “with a 40 percent dropout rate in the public school system, we have to give students reasons to go to school every day. And we can’t kid ourselves that those reasons are going to be purely academic and intellectual. I didn’t go to school every day because I was excited about trig and biology. I did it because I wanted to be on the basketball team. If we have an after-school

program that students enjoy, something they look forward to during the day, that can change how they think about the next day, and the next year, in school. But if we just sit them down after school and give them more of what they got all day long, we aren't changing anything."

So alongside the arts and sports and tech apprenticeships, the skill training and the job preparation, After School Matters also offers a pure-fun program called Club 37, a no-obligation after-school sports program in gyms and park clubhouses, open to any student any day. The only rule in Club 37 is to have fun. But even here, the fun has a purpose: Club 37 activities are all supervised by attentive adults, and they all take place near other After School Matters programs. Beyond the pure enjoyment, the theory of Club 37 is that (a) at least the kids are safe, which is more than many of them could say otherwise; (b) they are with an adult whose example or friendship might be valuable to them; (c) they're interacting with one another, which by itself contributes to social development; and (d) this could be a first step toward a more organized after-school activity later on.

Apprenticeship and income



OTHER AFTER SCHOOL MATTERS PROGRAMS are much less free-wheeling than Club 37, and intentionally so. The other programs are officially called "apprenticeships," and are run as master classes — just like the original Gallery 37 arts program that created the model. In Tech 37, most instructors are professional freelancers in the telecommunications industry or work for tech-related nonprofit groups. Sports 37 leaders may be teachers, coaches, league officials, or others with hands-on experience in the sports they teach. And all the artists in Gallery 37 and Words 37 are practitioners, just as were the artists under the original tent on Block 37 in 1991.

Along with the professionalism of the instructors goes a professional approach to the training of the students: Participants are expected to attend regularly and

to perform, not just listen — and they receive a stipend of \$15 a session, or \$450 for a full semester. The stipends serve several purposes, beyond the obvious one of encouraging students to keep attending. They also create an environment of high expectations and reinforce the idea that the program is meant to lead to better-paid employment. Meanwhile, the paycheck offers a rare opportunity to earn at least a little money while acquiring marketable skills.

Organizers of the program recognize that the stipends present a political risk. Some critics would surely consider the idea another case of "pay for play," even though little of the "37" apprenticeship regimen allows for playtime. (Club 37 is the only pure-play option, and it pays no stipend.) Others might argue that the stipends, albeit justified, are unaffordable as the program grows toward its much bigger enrollment goal. The architects of After School Matters, including the mayor and Mrs. Daley, say they understand these concerns — and the question of affordability sometimes worries them too, of necessity. But they believe the stipends are too valuable — both to the program and to the participants — to give up on them without a fight. Says schools CEO Arne Duncan:

'A network of out-of-school activities can — in fact has to — reach at least half the teenagers in a relatively short time, and should be reaching more than that.' — Joan Wynn

We have focused this program on our most impoverished communities, and we've done that deliberately. That's where we need to succeed, and that's where the schools and the students need to see success. But with that come some basic realities: These kids are under pressure to bring money in, not just for their own pockets, but for the family, and for necessities. So in the out-of-school hours, your main competition is with things that bring in money — not just dead-end jobs, but gangs and drugs. We've got to compete with that. We've got to be able to say to a student, "this can be fun, and you'll learn something, and you'll get to try new ideas and new activities — *and* you won't have to go without income."

Growth and diversity

THE AMBITIOUS GOAL of After School Matters — to have at least 50 percent of the students in Chicago Public Schools involved in some after-school activity by 2005 — is not as far-fetched as it seems. On one hand, the apprenticeships and clubs operating in the spring of 2003 involved at most 4,000 students on any given day — just over 4 percent of the Chicago Public Schools' total high school

enrollment of 96,189. About 2,200 of the participants are in the more structured apprenticeship or "master-class" programs; the remainder — necessarily a rough estimate — are in Club 37, whose open-door policy means that participation will vary from day to day. Those numbers are still far short of the goal, construed narrowly.

But that's the wrong way to construe it, according to Joan Wynn of the Chapin Hall Center. "Our aim is not to create the universal answer to every kid's out-of-school time," she says,

but to fill in the gaps — and they're huge — where kids have idle time, and communities have nothing, or very little, for them to do. That's a big part of the challenge, supplying those gaps. But After School Matters is not the whole picture. Community organizations, churches, sports leagues — they all have other things that kids can be doing. They're not in every neighborhood, and they're often not in the neighborhoods that need them most. That's where we have work to do. But if you talk about After School Matters as part of a much wider network of out-of-school activities, then that whole network certainly can — in fact, has to — reach at least half the teenagers in a relatively short time, and should be reaching more than that.

Although After School Matters can't supply every student's needs for after-school activity, it does see a need for a wider and more tightly woven network of options — a citywide partnership that includes the menu of '37' programs, plus those of schools and community groups and of larger nonprofit organizations like Y's and Boys and Girls Clubs. Some of these programs, especially those operated by smaller organizations, could use some help in recruiting students and adults, organizing or improving programs, and measuring quality and results. That may be an opening through which After School Matters begins to reach more neighborhoods, not necessarily with immediate programs of its own, but through cooperation with programs that already exist elsewhere. In the meantime, that would allow time for the '37' programs to deepen their reach in neighborhoods that have few, if any, alternatives.

Envisioning such a network puts After School Matters on sensitive terrain, which it will have to navigate carefully over the next few years. On one hand, the program brings formidable resources, both actual and potential, to the challenge of galvanizing a truly citywide after-school industry. It has the city's official backing; wide-ranging experience with different kinds of programs and activities;

The goal is to bring in not only a caring adult, but also a distinctive set of interests, skills, and activities that will create a unique experience for the student — in which the instructor is not just an expert, but a fan and a promoter.

credibility with instructors, mentors, and administrators; and a fundraising reach that is still growing. On the other hand, it is exactly the kind of big, celebrated new program that struggling community organizations and longstanding nonprofits tend to distrust: championed by Chicago's financial and cultural elite, lionized in the media, and most of all, anointed as a City Hall initiative, with no less than the First Lady as chair. Seen that way, any attempt by After School Matters to organize and support other after-school programs could sound a bit like "we're from the government, and we're here to help you."

For that reason, among others, After School Matters has been careful and deliberate about reaching out to other organizations, coordinating and sharing resources, and building an after-school network. Eventually, Mrs. Daley says, "there will be a great benefit to all of us in working more closely together." But in the meantime, by setting a goal that is probably beyond the capacity of any one organization to reach, After School Matters sends two related messages: It has set its own sights high, and its vision is one in which many others can — in fact need to — take part.

The networking has begun. Beginning with a Summer Youth Initiative, After

School Matters has enlisted more than 100 community-based organizations to provide apprenticeship and internship positions for 2,500 teenagers across the city. As a first step toward a year-round common agenda, the Summer Initiative provides a kind of laboratory for collaboration and building trust, and starting to form relationships that could continue to grow after school begins again.

Recruiting the 'Masters'

SEEN AT AN OBJECTIVE DISTANCE, the quality of an after-school program depends on dozens of moving parts, including the adequacy of the facilities and equipment, the care with which activities are planned and administered, the level of security, availability of transportation, and the variety of topics and activities in which kids can participate. From the perspective of the participants, however, most of these elements are visible only indirectly. What really counts, for them, is the quality of the participating adults.

Gallery 37 started on the model of a master class, and the idea has carried over into After School Matters' other programs. The instructors and coaches are, first and foremost, accomplished practitioners. A minority are full-time teachers; most

spend their days at jobs that have little or nothing to do with coaching teenagers. Quality, for students in After School Matters, begins with an instructor who speaks from experience and who has come to the program specifically as a way of encouraging young people and cultivating their talent.

To find such adults, After School Matters advertises, encourages word-of-mouth solicitation, contacts sports and arts organizations and participating corporations, and recruits through the Internet. The web site invites adults not only to become instructors, but to submit ideas for activities they could lead. Some apprenticeships — for life guards or league referees, for instance — require a set curriculum leading toward a fixed set of skills. Others, though, like communications, computer technology, or the arts, could take many forms, depending who leads them. When After School Matters recruits an instructor, the goal is to bring in not only a caring adult, but also a distinctive set of interests, skills, and activities that will create a unique experience for the student — one in which the instructor is not just an expert, but a fan and promoter.

When theater coach Debbie Maddox introduces students to the "thrill of rehearsal," she is putting them through

Achievement and passion alone don't make a good instructor. The program has to find adults who are also good with adolescents, able to plan activity that fills a semester, and available from 3 to 6 pm three days a week.

an experience she knows firsthand, from her regular work life. Tech instructors help students design web pages by tinkering with the same design elements the instructor uses professionally. Participants in Words 37 perform stories that they write or choose themselves, but the techniques come, in large part, from the repertoire of a master storyteller, who is also their instructor.

For After School Matters instructors, personal achievement and passion for the subject are as much a qualification as any formal credential. But achievement and passion don't necessarily make a good instructor. In fact, the program has to find adults with a rare combination of qualifications: people who are not only experienced in their subject and infectious about it, but also good with adolescents, able to plan and carry out activity that exactly fills a semester, and available from 3 to 6 p.m. three days a week. Starting in just a handful of schools, the program recruited instructors who already met the basic requirements, or who showed a natural ability and could rise to the challenge with minimal training. (Even then, coordinators for the various "37" programs have occasionally had to replace instructors between semesters if the chemistry was wrong.) But at 24 schools and grow-

ing — with 74 more high schools yet to be served — it will need an expanded recruitment and training program big enough to fill new slots while still managing turnover in old ones.

Interpreting outcomes

IN LESS THAN THREE YEARS since it was organized, After School Matters has made much more progress in organizing programs than in collecting data. That's natural, to some extent — the program prides itself on placing action ahead of theory, and as a result, on leaping organizational hurdles in record time. But even the program's most pragmatic, action-oriented supporters had expected to have more numbers and measurements in the first three years than have, in fact, materialized. As this is written, aggregate data on enrollment and participant satisfaction are beginning to come in. But numbers on daily attendance, student attitudes toward particular activities, and comparisons of performance school-by-school or program-by-program, are still sketchy or nonexistent. As it turns out, the practical obstacles to collecting reliable data have been nearly as tough as the obstacles to setting up a program in the first place.

At one point, for example, program

administrators and researchers from Chapin Hall had hoped to track students' daily participation by using electromagnetic ID cards, which participants would swipe through a reader on their way in and out of the programs. Data from the readers would then have told exactly which enrollees attended, at what locations, on which days, and which ones persisted in the program for how long. If a particular program was losing students at a higher rate, or if a particular day of the week showed above-average absences, the programs' coordinators could try to intervene or, at a minimum, factor the results into the planning of the next semester's activity.

But the card-readers proved unworkable. Not only did students tend to mislay the cards or forget to use them, but many participants never left the building between the normal school day and the start of after-school activity. So there was no point of "entry" at which to swipe a card. Paper surveys, manual head-counts, and interviews have supplied some of the missing information, but they require much more human effort, and the information consequently comes in more slowly, with less ability to use data in "real-time" management. A new online attendance system now tracks participation for each two-week pay period, but can't yet

pinpoint attendance on a given day.

Even so, as data start to come in, the results are encouraging. Most important, the data are forming a partial answer to the question most often raised about any program with such a rich array of activities: Is After School Matters “creaming”? That is, are the students in the program the least needy by some standard — the brightest or most talented kids, the ones with the most engaged parents, or those who would have done something constructive after school anyway, program or no?

At a minimum, it’s clear that the program overwhelmingly serves minority students — 76 percent of applicants are African American and 18 percent are Latino. But that isn’t so remarkable, given that the schools in which it operates have nearly all-minority student bodies. More significant are the results of reading achievement tests, which show no significant difference between students who go on to enroll in After School Matters programs and those who don’t.

In the 18 schools with the full range of programs in the Fall of 2002, 16.5 percent of the applicants were enrolled in special education — only a shade lower than the schools’ overall rate of enrollment in special ed, 18.5 percent. In four of the 18 schools, special-ed enrollment

in After School Matters was equal to or greater than the school-wide percentage. Roughly 10 percent of the students in the structured, skill-building apprenticeship programs have known learning disabilities; 2 percent are classified as mentally handicapped, and 1.5 percent as having emotional and behavioral disorders.

Still, much of this information relates to applicants, not participants (partly for the obvious reason that applicants all fill out the same form, more or less at the same time, so that information is complete and comparable). Data on participants — those who actually show up from day to day and take part in organized activities — are harder to collect and interpret over time, but survey information is now being compiled on students’ satisfaction with their experience and the result they believe it’s had for them.

Most significant is that the students feel their time with adults has been productive: 90 percent say that instructors helped them learn new skills; 75 percent report that instructors held their interest; 81 percent credit instructors with encouraging them and making them feel comfortable in the activity they were practicing. Satisfaction levels seem to carry over across all four component programs. For example, at the end of 2001,

- **75 percent of Tech 37 apprentices rated themselves highly on designing, publishing, or building products using computers;**
- **88 percent of Words 37 apprentices reported that they had improved their ability to speak in front of an audience, and 90 percent said they were now better at expressing their feelings in words;**
- **86 percent of Sports 37 apprentices say they now know how to be fair when teaching sports, that they know appropriate drills to run with different age groups, and that they know how to teach the fundamentals of a sport;**
- **94 percent of Gallery 37 apprentices feel able to express themselves through their chosen art form, and 85 percent say the program introduced them to arts institutions in their field, like museums or dance companies.**

None of this proves what many observers surmise, and what the organizers of After School Matters in fact deeply believe: that the program has filled a yawning void in students’ after-school hours, and provided constructive activity to students who would otherwise have done nothing or may have landed in trouble. As data trickle in, they do strongly suggest those things — especially when combined with even a cursory tour of the neighborhoods where After School Matters operates: communities with few businesses to offer jobs, no community centers or civic organizations to offer

‘We’re looking for the kids who need a teacher or some adult to say, “You know what? I think you ought to try this.”... That’s who’s going to get us the enrollment we need.’ — Kristin Eckberg

recreational or volunteer programs, nor even any safe havens where just “hanging out” would at least be secure and inviting.

Within these communities, the program has gone to extra lengths to make sure its recruitment reaches young people who would be the least likely to sign up on their own. Bright or eager students will naturally join, and the program is better for their participation, but the annual sign-up drive includes a special mobilization aimed precisely at the students who wouldn’t normally come forward without encouragement. In the weeks before the drive starts, After School Matters and the heads of participating city agencies hold rallies at participating schools aimed not at students but at teachers, principals, and counselors. As part of her pitch to school personnel, Kristin Eckberg, communications director for After School Matters, urges teachers to seek out the loners, the discouraged or troubled, or students they suspect simply don’t have anything constructive to do.

“Part of my appeal to them is that this is not a program just for the best and the brightest,” Eckberg says.

We need to find the kids who aren’t going to look at a poster or find the web site and just sign up on their own. We’re looking for the kids who need a

teacher or some adult to say, ‘You know what? I think you ought to try this. I bet you’ll be good at it.’ It might be a teacher or a counselor or an assistant principal — every school has its own system. One school has a park specialist who happens to know every kid in school by name. He roams the halls after school and he can say to some kid, ‘You’re not up to anything right now, why don’t you come with me and let’s see what’s going on.’ He’s our secret weapon at that school. That’s who’s going to get us the enrollment we need.

Other parts of city government help too. Chicago’s Department of Human Services operates YouthNet programs in every police district, coordinating community services, law enforcement, after-school programs, and other youth development efforts, and point unserved young people toward programs that can benefit them. “YouthNet works with kids who might be on the verge of criminal behavior, or might just be hanging out in dangerous places,” Eckberg says. “Because they work closely with the police, among other programs, they find kids someone might be worried about, kids on the fringes who might really enjoy After School Matters but would probably never come here on their own.” YouthNet

programs operate on site in several of the schools in After School Matters.

To the naked eye, these efforts seem to be working. Speaking at random to visitors, participants in “37” programs tell stories of siblings murdered or injured in street violence, relatives imprisoned or addicted to drugs, parents working multiple jobs or otherwise unavailable for most of the day. Are those conditions widespread among the students who participate in the program? Do such problems affect participating students to the same degree that they affect others? Is the program offering a really effective remedy to these conditions? With After School Matters barely approaching its third birthday, the answers aren’t conclusive yet.

But even for much older organizations, real answers, in the form of scientific proof, are hard to come by. The definitive evaluation of a program for youth — the 1995 study of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America by the nonprofit firm Public/Private Ventures — explains one reason why really conclusive evaluations are scarce. That evaluation was groundbreaking, both in the thoroughness of its methodology and the strength of its findings. Young people were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, their behavior was monitored for a follow-up period of 18 months, and the

'In these neighborhoods, who isn't in need? It's not just that these areas aren't wealthy, it's that they don't offer...much of an opportunity to learn skills and find work.' — Arne Duncan

results were rigorously measured and compared. But the cost — approaching \$4 million, with all the research included — would be prohibitive for many programs. And creating a truly randomized experiment, in which a selection of young people are deliberately denied service, would be hard for most organizations to swallow.⁴

But the results of Public/Private Ventures' work were remarkable, and to this day they define, in capital letters, what a good relationship with a caring adult can achieve. In several statistically significant ways, young people who had a Big Sister or Big Brother had markedly better results than those in the control group. Among other things, participating youngsters were substantially less likely to start using drugs or alcohol, to engage in violence, or to skip school. Grades were slightly better, and even subtler signs of trouble, like lying to parents, were sharply down.

Not surprisingly, After School Matters has no plans to create a control group by randomly barring students from their programs. But even with other methods, the cost of a reliable evaluation will surely be high. In the meantime, Chapin Hall researchers are helping the staff design sur-

vey and data-collection techniques that will track experience in the programs, document conditions around the participating schools, and otherwise lay the groundwork for an evaluation. Chapin Hall and After School Matters are also seeking grants to mount such an evaluation, though at the time this is written, in early 2003, a sluggish economy has made grants for research even scarcer than normal.

There's no disputing the importance of a sound evaluation, both to funders and to the program's leaders. Yet no one at After School Matters seems particularly in doubt about at least one aspect of such an exercise — the question of whether the program is “creaming” less-needy youngsters. As Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan put it, “In these neighborhoods, who isn't in need? It's not just that these areas aren't wealthy, it's that they don't offer much that's constructive to do, or much of an opportunity to learn skills or find work.” In that kind of environment, Duncan argues, it doesn't matter much how gifted or well-behaved or diligent a student is, because when the final bell rings, even the most accomplished student is going into the same world of boredom or ambient danger as is one who has

fewer advantages. Service to any student, gifted or challenged, sociable or withdrawn, motivated or discouraged, is an opportunity to build strengths, and a shield against harm, that otherwise would not exist.

You don't need a randomized experiment to see this point clearly. You just need to ask. Down the hall from Jerone's theater workshop at Paul Robeson High School, Gallery 37 offers a painting class for 18 students. One of the apprentice artists, Ronnell,⁵ a clever, talkative youngster with obvious talent for painting, exchanged jokes and stories with a visitor while he worked. From the lively, mature conversation, Ronnell hardly seemed to be someone experts would designate an “at-risk youth.” Asked what he would have been doing if he weren't in this workshop, he answered, “Drawing.”

“You prefer to draw?” the visitor asked.

“No, I'd rather paint. But you can draw anywhere, you don't need nothing special. Painting's messy.”

“Where would you draw, usually? At home?”

“No, at my friend Shawn's house.”

“Is Shawn here too?”

“Uh-uh. He's in jail.”

4 Big Brothers Big Sisters of America agreed to this practice, after considerable soul-searching, only because it did not affect the number of children who would ultimately get a mentor. The program would have had to say No to at least as many young people anyway, study or no study. The network of local Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies never has enough volunteer adults to serve all the youngsters who sign up. Consequently, the number of children in the control group was no greater than the number of children who would have been unserved under other circumstances. For organizations like After School Matters that still have room for more children, and have plans to increase their enrollment, the creation of a randomly assigned control group would be much more unsettling. It would mean actively barring the gates to young people who want to sign up and would otherwise have been welcome.

5 The names in this exchange have been altered. All other names in this report are real.

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About the After School Project

THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION created the After School Project in 1998 as a five-year, three-city demonstration aimed at connecting significant numbers of young people in low-income neighborhoods with responsible adults during out-of-school time. To that end, the Project focuses on developing: (1) consistent, dedicated revenues to support after school programs in low-income communities; (2) an array of developmental opportunities for youth, including physical activity and sports, educational, social, and recreational programs; and (3) strong local organizations with the necessary resources, credibility, and political clout to bring focus and visibility to the youth development field.

For more information, please write to The After School Project, 180 West 80th Street, Second Floor, New York, NY 10024; or e-mail: info@theafterschoolproject.org.

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