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New Study Shows That Intensive Year-Round Out-of-School-Time Program Improves Test Scores

Philadelphia, PA, October 4, 2011 - Higher Achievement—a highly structured academically oriented after-school and summer program—significantly improved youth’s standardized test scores two years after enrollment, according to new research released today by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV).

Based in Washington, DC, Higher Achievement enrolls rising fifth and sixth grade students living in low-income neighborhoods, with the ultimate goal of increasing their attendance at top high schools to launch them toward college and careers. The study found that students who had access to Higher Achievement did measurably better in both reading comprehension and math, compared with youth in the control group.

“These findings suggest that the investment Higher Achievement makes in its participants—offering 650 hours a year of instruction and activities over four years, creating a curriculum that mirrors and builds on what youth learn during the school day, and providing extensive training and support for its staff—can make a striking difference for middle school youth,” said P/PV’s Dr. Carla Herrera, the lead author of two new reports on the research.

The study, a randomized controlled trial conducted by P/PV and Dr. Leigh Linden from the University of Texas at Austin, found that improvements in test scores take significant time to produce. Better scores only appeared two years after youth’s enrollment in the program. Also, surprisingly, improvements in test scores were not preceded by improvements in self-reported attitudes or behaviors. In fact, at both the one- and two-year follow-ups, Higher Achievement youth were more likely to report engaging in certain negative behaviors—a pattern the researchers are continuing to examine.

The study also looked at youth’s learning and experiences over the course of one summer, a time when young people—particularly disadvantaged youth—often experience setbacks in the progress made during the previous school year. Youth with access to Higher Achievement were more likely to engage in a range of academically focused summer activities, but their test-score advantage over the control group did not increase over the summer months. By the end of the summer, however, Higher Achievement youth expressed more enjoyment of learning and more interest in attending a competitive high school, relative to the control group.

“P/PV’s study helps unpack the answers to some important and complicated policy questions,” said Brenda McLaughlin, Senior Advisor at the National Summer Learning Association. “It shows how long a young person needs to be involved in a program before an impact can be detected, and suggests features that may be important to the program’s success. Higher

Achievement should be applauded for engaging in this study and for helping its participants make such impressive academic gains.”

The study’s findings are compiled in two new reports that can be downloaded at www.ppv.org: One, funded by the William T. Grant Foundation and The Atlantic Philanthropies, examines Higher Achievement’s overall impact on youth one and two years after enrolling in the program. The other, funded by The Wallace Foundation, provides a “snapshot” of the program’s effect on learning over the summer of 2010. The Higher Achievement evaluation is ongoing, with additional support provided by the Spencer Foundation. Researchers are following students into high school to document the program’s longer-term impact on their lives.

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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit research organization that works to improve the lives of children, youth and families in high-poverty communities by making social programs more effective. We identify and examine gaps in programs designed to create opportunities for people in poverty. We use this knowledge to stimulate new program ideas, manage demonstration projects, conduct evaluations, and expand or replicate effective approaches. For more information, visit www.ppv.org.