

# Watch Study Report

Wisconsin Center for Education Research

September, 2002

University of Wisconsin-Madison

## What is the Watch Study?

The hours right after school—3:30 to 6:30 p.m.—are a critical time in the lives of young teenagers. It is an ideal time of day to discover and develop new interests and talents. It is also the time period when young people are most likely to get in trouble. That is why there's a lot of interest in providing high quality after-school programs for middle school youth so they can use this time creatively and productively.

Communities offer many after-school options for young teens—from programs at the school to programs at the Y or community centers, sports teams, church related activities, and youth organizations such as scouting or Boys/Girls Clubs. To see how these programs benefitted young people, a group of scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted a study. Funded by the C.S. Mott Foundation, the study compared a group of middle school students who were involved in after-school programs to students not active in any such programs.

Nearly 200 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students from eight schools in three Midwestern communities took part in the study. Each one wore a special watch for one week in the fall, and again in the spring. The watch was programmed to beep at random times in the after-school and evening hours and on weekends. Each time it beeped, students completed a short questionnaire about where they were, what they were doing, and who they were with. Across all participants, this gave us over 12,000 "snapshots" of the out-of-school lives of young teens. This report provides a first look at our findings, based on the analyses completed so far.

For more information on the Watch Study, contact:

Professor Deborah Vandell or  
Professor Brad Brown  
Wisconsin Center for Education  
Research  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

## What Do Teens Find Most Appealing in After-School Programs?

People have hoped that after-school programs give teens a chance to participate in more constructive and exciting activities than they would if left to their own resources. The Watch Study provides strong evidence that this is true. Students were much more likely to be doing homework, participating in sports, involved in academic enrichment or arts activities, and doing community service when they were at programs than when they were home or somewhere else. Watching TV and eating, which were common activities among students not attending programs, were rarely reported while students were at programs.

Of course, students found that some activities were more engaging than others. By engaging, we mean activities that students reported as especially interesting and enjoyable, but that also demanded a lot of concentration. Looking just at the times that participants reported being at after-school

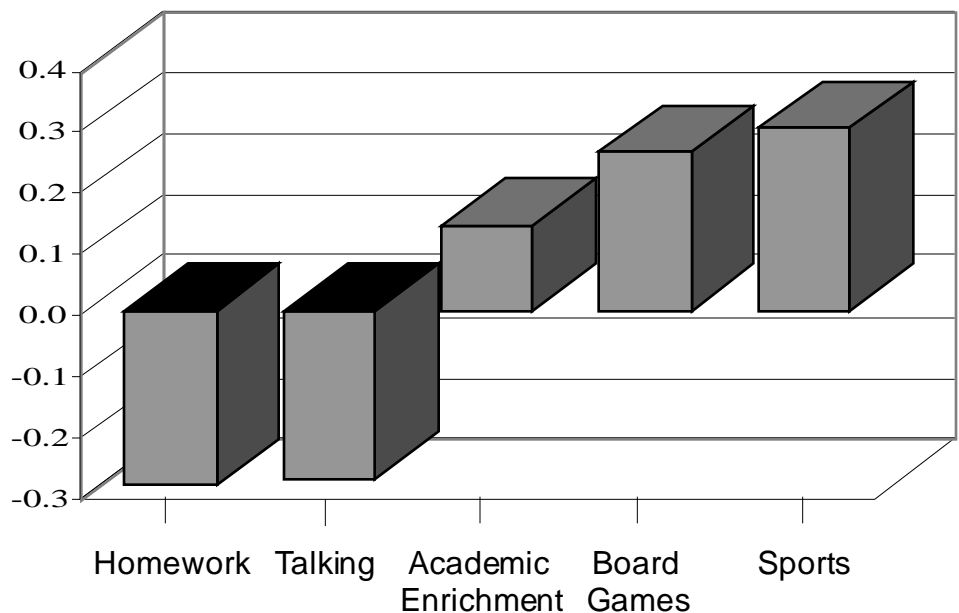
programs, they were most engaged in activities that they rated as highly challenging and offering a lot of choice.

The activities that students found most engaging included organized sports, academic or arts enrichment, and sit-down games. They were less engaged when just talking with peers or waiting for activities to begin. Homework was rated as low in engagement, even though students admitted it was an important thing to do.

The teens in the study were likely to be most engaged when doing something with both adults and peers—and least likely to be engaged when doing something just with peers.

What does this mean? To really capture students' interest, after-school programs need to be more than just a place to do homework or hang out with peers. Students become most engaged when they are involved in well organized, structured, and challenging activities with both peers and adults.

## How Engaging Are Activities?



NOTE: Activities with negative scores were below average in engagement