This book examines after-school programs in light of their explosive growth in recent years. In the rush to mount programs, there is a danger of promoting weak ones of little value and failing to implement strong ones adequately. But what is quality and how can it be achieved?

This book presents findings from an intensive study of three after-school centers that differed dramatically in quality. Drawing from 233 site visits, the authors examine how – and why – young people thrive in good programs and suffer in weak ones.

The book features engaging in-depth case studies of each of the three centers and of six youths, two from each center. Written in a highly accessible style for academics, youth workers, after-school program leaders, and policy makers, the study breaks new ground in highlighting the importance of factors such as collective mentoring, synergies among different programs and activities, and organizational culture and practices. Guidelines are included for program improvement.

Barton J. Hirsch is Professor of Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern University. An internationally recognized authority on after-school programs and positive youth development, his earlier book, A Place to Call Home: After-School Programs for Urban Youth, won the Social Policy Award for Best Authored Book from the Society for Research on Adolescence.

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After-School Centers and Youth Development

Case Studies of Success and Failure

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This research project has gone through some interesting transformations. Our original grant application to the William T. Grant Foundation proposed a year of qualitative research followed by a year of quantitative research. We were very grateful when the foundation’s then senior vice president, Robert Granger, encouraged us to focus on the qualitative portion only.

We hadn’t expected to be taken by surprise by the nature of the three after-school centers that we were going to study, but we were. A few years earlier, we had studied six Boys and Girls Clubs and had written two books based on that experience: Hirsch’s *A Place to Call Home: After-School Programs for Urban Youth*, and Deutsch’s *Pride in the Projects: Teens Building Identities in Urban Contexts*. We had thought that the clubs in the current research would be reasonably similar to the six we had studied earlier, but that was not the case. With one of the clubs (referred to as North River), it was clear from the very beginning that it was a lot worse than any of the clubs we had come to know previously. Nothing during the rest of our year of data collection served to change our mind about this. Indeed, as time went on, we became more sharply aware of differences across all three of the clubs. We became convinced that to do justice to this situation, we needed to expand our research focus. Our initial objective was to conduct an intensive study of youth-staff relationships, as such relationships had emerged as an important factor in our prior studies. We have done that. But we also added an organizational level of analysis to capture the different cultures and operations at the three sites. The varying perspectives are reported via case studies of each club and of two youth at each club. The book
that grew out of this more comprehensive effort is richer, and it is both more theoretical and more applied as a result.

As with our earlier publications, we made an agreement with the clubs to keep their identities confidential. Accordingly, the locations of the clubs are not specified and their names have been changed, as have the names and potentially identifying characteristics of both the clubs and individuals. Each youth chose his or her own pseudonym, and we assigned pseudonyms to the various staff members and administrators.

We owe a debt of great appreciation to the youth, staff, and administrators at the clubs for their cooperation and support. We are pleased to acknowledge the contributions of Leah Doane, Carrie Luo, and Kim Star who served as research assistants. Thanks also go to James G. Kelly, Dan Lewis, Megan Mekinda, and James Spillane, who generously commented on earlier drafts of some of our chapters. We are very grateful to the William T. Grant Foundation, and especially Robert Granger (now president of the Foundation), for its support over the years. Thanks go as well to our editor at Cambridge, Simina Calin.

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