



Model Schools Network Program

POLICY Recommendations

Student Affairs and Extracurricular Activities: Final Report

This report is the first of four final reports each highlighting important thematic outcomes of the USAID funded, AMIDEAST administered MSN Program. This report presents findings from extensive evaluation of capacity-building interventions in student affairs and extracurricular activities among 40 MSN public schools. This evidence has framed key policy recommendations which are presented below.

Based upon extensive evaluation of AMIDEAST's three-year engagement with 40 public schools in student extracurricular activities and community engagement, the following draft policy recommendations are presented. These recommendations are premised upon the statement that community engagement and extracurricular activities within Palestinian schools are most effective when the following conditions exist:

- 1 Schools have a part-time designated teacher who serves as an extracurricular activity coordinator. Furthermore, district offices support these coordinators in a peer network focused on increasing the variety and quality of student activities.
- 2 A variety of student interests, skills, grade levels and socioeconomic backgrounds are taken into consideration so that activities attempt to engage all students in collaboratively-planned activities, with clear, agreed upon goals by all stakeholders.
- 3 Principals and teachers are given wide autonomy to initiate and manage new extracurricular activities.
- 4 Recruitment and participation among students and parents in school life are voluntary. All students should have the right to participate in activities of their choice, and recruitment should be open to all.
- 5 Teachers as facilitators of extracurricular activities are viewed in a professional capacity and receive sufficient training. Teachers' participation is voluntary, and teachers should receive incentives (financial or in-kind).
- 6 Communication and outreach occurs between schools and parents in order to keep stakeholders better informed about connections between social and academic development and co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- 7 Principals and teachers need to be assigned to a given school for a sufficient period of years to provide continuity of leadership and instructional practice. Reassignment of staff should be limited and take into consideration ongoing school initiatives.
- 8 Institutional mechanisms to increase families' involvement in school decision-making is developed or improved and training is offered for parent and community members in committee participation and leadership.
- 9 Community outreach and parent involvement training is strengthened in the Leadership Diploma Program for school principals.
- 10 The MoEHE reviews its own policies and procedures at the school, district and central level to ensure they reflect the recommendations in this report in order to encourage development of community engagement and extracurricular activities.

Background and Research Approach

A growing body of empirical evidence demonstrates that when community engagement involves collaboration and partnerships among schools, families, as well as civil society, student achievement, attendance, retention and behavior can improve.



The USAID-funded and AMIDEAST-administered Model Schools Network (MSN) Program sought to engage students and school communities in creative, collaborative and competitive activities through a wide range of interactive learning experiences. One of four major goals of MSN was to create structures of overlapping school, home and community relations to help promote a strong and sustainable community of learning for Palestinian students.

Between January 2009 and April 2012, MSN sponsored over 1,500 activities involving over 18,000 students among 57 public and private schools in the West Bank. These activities aimed to do the following: promote student motivation and achievement; encourage critical thinking; strengthen the link between schools and communities; and create more child-friendly schools by enhancing the variety and quality of extracurricular activities available to students. MSN also engaged Parent Teacher Associations and created national guidelines for parent engagement in schools.

Table 1

	MSN Schools		Control Schools	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Teachers	521	655	146	104
Principals	57	40	13	10
Parents	918	1603	180	364
Students, grades 4-5	147	726	111	96
Students, grades 6-9	739	1799	275	314



The MSN Assessment Team, which included technical input and data gathering from the MoEHE's Assessment and Evaluation Department, designed a mixed-methods approach for its research. Quantitative data collection comprised the use of surveys and systematic classroom observations, while qualitative methods included focus groups and in-depth interviews. A specific pre- and post- study took place at the start of the MSN program to establish baseline data and was followed at the program's conclusion using the same instruments. Furthermore, ten schools outside the MSN network were selected by the MoEHE and included in the pre- and post- study to provide a more robust basis for comparing changes in the 40 MSN schools and determining if changes were the result of MSN's interventions or other factors. Table 1 shows the sample sizes for the different groups comprising the survey research. In addition, AMIDEAST/MSN's internal Monitoring and Evaluation Department conducted 9 quantitative surveys, 12 written evaluations, 43 observation visits, and 210 oral interviews. This data was triangulated and integrated with the pre- and post- study.

Outcomes of MSN's Extracurricular Activities

KEY FINDINGS

Adult stakeholders - teachers, principals, and parents - and students at MSN schools give a generally positive assessment of both the variety and provision of opportunities for extracurricular activities¹. Survey results indicate that the views of MSN teachers and principals, when compared with the control schools, show a modest improvement from the pre- to post-periods.

Interviewees and survey comments highlighted how the MSN activities exposed them to new opportunities and improved their confidence and self-efficacy. The diversity of experience the activities provided, enabled students who had not previously been the “academic all-stars” at their schools the chance to show abilities that had not previously been recognized by their teachers or within the school community. MSN’s extracurricular activities were also associated with improved classroom outcomes and learning. Approximately a third of those interviewed remarked on how improved academic achievement was linked to student participation in activities, especially among low-achieving students. Eight percent of those interviewed remarked on the tangible experience extracurricular activities gave students in cementing their understanding of academic concepts and connecting theory to real world situations.

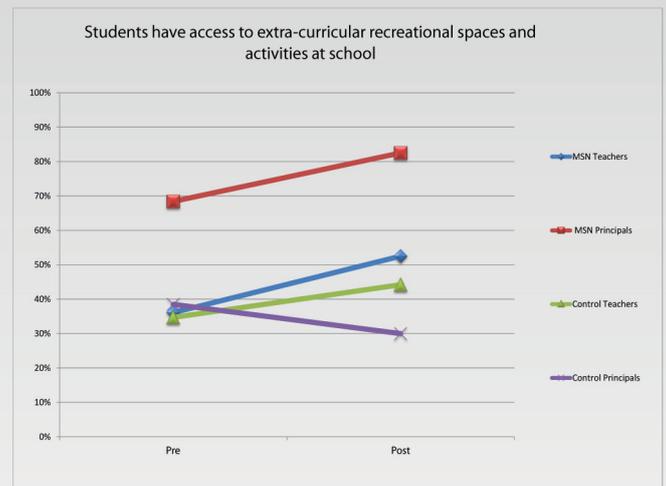
In response to the question of whether students have access to extracurricular recreational spaces and activities at school (Figure 1), MSN teachers and principals are dramatically more likely to respond “somewhat agree/agree” compared to their counterparts from the control schools. Moreover, scores for the principals from the control schools decreased in the post-survey. This may be as a result of MSN schools having greater opportunities and varieties of extracurricular programming.

Another interesting trend is that MSN schools seemed to succeed at building capacity of a larger number of teachers to facilitate extracurricular activities. The number of hours MSN teachers reported supervising extracurricular activities decreased from 5 to 3.7 hours per week whereas

teachers’ commitment from the control schools increased from 3.1 hours to 4.4 hours. In essence, as activities increased at MSN schools, the overall workload was distributed over a greater number of volunteers. Furthermore, teacher interviews revealed that some teachers developed an intrinsic interest in extracurricular activities as they evolved and showed promise.



Figure 1



“The projects we do here are very connected to what we study now and what will we study next year.” Ahmad - student at 2011 First Lego League competition.

¹The survey did not distinguish between co-curricular activities, such as a field trip to complement a math or science unit, and an extracurricular activity.

Outcomes of MSN's Extracurricular Activities

This resulted in increased teacher motivation to support extracurricular activities. This is significant because public school teachers were not paid to participate or facilitate after-school activities. Nine percent of comments from interviewees noted an increase in teacher awareness of the importance of extracurricular activities. Furthermore, twenty percent of those interviewed said that MSN's efforts had increased teacher professionalism and interest toward supporting extracurricular activities in their schools.

MSN students from all grade levels - 4th to 9th- appear to regard after-school programming as exhibiting variety, as well as educational and recreational value.

MSN students appear more likely than students from control schools to “agree strongly” that their schools’ extracurricular programs are educational. This trend suggests that MSN interventions may be improving the integration of classroom learning tasks and extracurricular programming.

Anecdotal evidence from in-depth interviews and focus groups further support this statement. A number of students and teachers reported that teachers now integrate field trip with learning concepts and skills in their curriculum. Students are asked to produce projects and reports demonstrating what they learned. Principals also observed that the integration of curriculum and extracurricular activities provides opportunities for students to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as improves students’ communication and leadership skills.

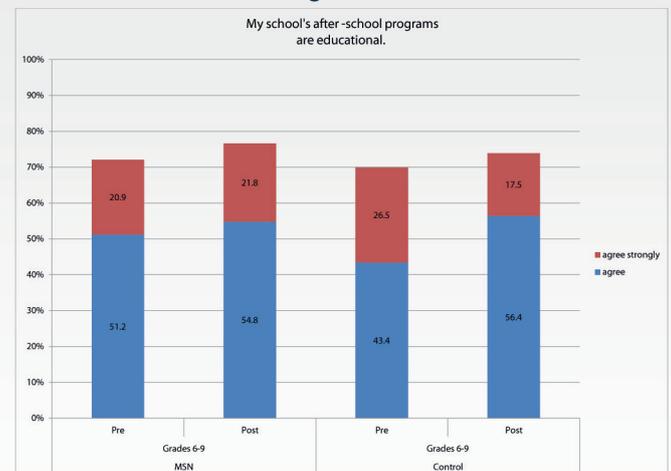
Solid majorities of students in both MSN and control schools report participating at least once a month in some form of extracurricular activity for “fun and recreation.” However, rates of participation from MSN students in grades 4-5 were significantly higher for activities related to math and science.

MSN's interventions seem to have had some impact on strengthening students' engagement with specific subject areas of the curriculum. Rates of participation in extracurricular activities associated with science and math increased for MSN students in grades 4 to 5 while they decreased correspondingly for students in the control schools. Qualitative data from focus groups and in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and parents help contextualize the trends about participation in after-school programming.



Most students interviewed welcomed the variety of extracurricular and co-curricular programming as opportunities to enhance not only their learning experiences, but also to build on personal hobbies and interests such as art, music and computers. In addition to fostering a child-friendly environment and building stronger school-community relationships as a part of recreational activities, the survey results also demonstrate that MSN's interventions may have strengthened students' engagement with specific subject areas.

Figure 2



CHALLENGES to Implementing Extracurricular Activities

Specific challenges to implementing extracurricular activities emerged from the research and evaluation. For example, teachers often requested more training for their facilitation role. Eight percent noted that the sustainability of the program could have been increased by training teachers to implement all of the activities. In contrast, AMIDEAST subcontracted certain activities to outside local organizations without engaging teachers directly. Similarly, a small number of interviewees also noted the need to include school teachers, not just principals, in more of the planning of activities.



Another challenge involved creating the right balance of activities for each age group and the need to engage a broader cross-section of students. Some students said they chose not to participate in extracurricular activities because they didn't see the academic benefit. As one student explained: "We have drama club at my school, but I like to concentrate on my classes. I don't like to participate in extracurricular activities. I don't feel like they are beneficial." Another reason heard from students and parents is that some activities privilege students who excel academically or athletically, making less involved students feel unfairly left out. Based on attendance, registration documents and photos it is clear some students participate in many activities, while others do not participate at all.



"We have noticed that the students' personalities are showing some development but still there is a problem we have faced: that is, most of the students who participate in the activities are always the same." Hamza, district student activities staff member.

There were also indications that some students may be selected to participate in activities as a reward for good grades. This selection process could explain why some students participate in many activities while others do not. There are many other reasons students may not volunteer to participate, ranging from shyness to cost to personal time constraints. Encouraging all students to participate includes recognizing the barriers to voluntary participation when planning activities.

The availability of resources presented a constant challenge, although many resources were provided as a part of the program. Importantly, the availability of space at the right time was a major challenge. Schools offered their space for extracurricular activities by either scheduling the activity during the school day so the school facility would be open, or extending school opening hours into the afternoon and weekends to accommodate extracurricular activities.

Some parents in focus groups commented that low participation of students in extracurricular activities could be linked to poor teacher motivation, a consequence they said of teachers being underpaid and overworked and thus unable or unwilling to devote extra time and effort without the school making reasonable accommodation for time and compensation. For their part, teachers commented that pressure from their supervisors to cover the official curriculum is a major disincentive to volunteering for extracurricular activities. Such concerns are supported by the fact that over half of MSN schools made use of breaks between classes for some extracurricular activities and that nearly three quarters of schools scheduled at least some of their extracurricular activities during class time and in related classes.

About 60% of school principals or coordinators mentioned the importance of intrinsic teacher motivation in support of extracurricular activities. In this context, the value of acknowledgement and praise of a teacher's contribution was important. AMIDEAST requested each MSN school designate a coordinator of extracurricular activities. In this regard, principals mentioned the importance of clear delineation of roles. By assigning a central contact person, as well as different teachers for each activity, personal 'ownership' of each activity was promoted. If given the resources, 88% of MSN school principals would like to have a teacher dedicated part-time to coordinating extracurricular activities. Furthermore, principals and coordinators both acknowledged in retrospect that they should have been more strategic in choosing and planning the appropriate activities for their schools.



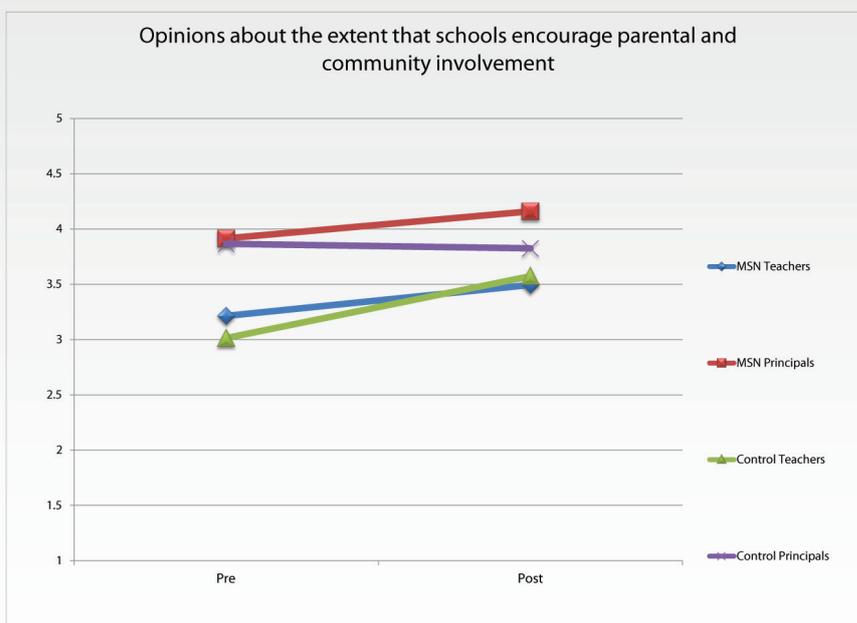
Sustainability of extracurricular activities is contingent upon many factors. The majority of MSN schools intended to continue to implement eight of the ten extracurricular activities initiated by MSN. The activities most directly linked to academic subjects received the strongest support for continuation. In sum, teacher motivation and training, parent awareness and support, strategic scheduling and management of limited resources and open student participation are key issues in the successful delivery of extracurricular activities.

Community Outreach and Parental Involvement

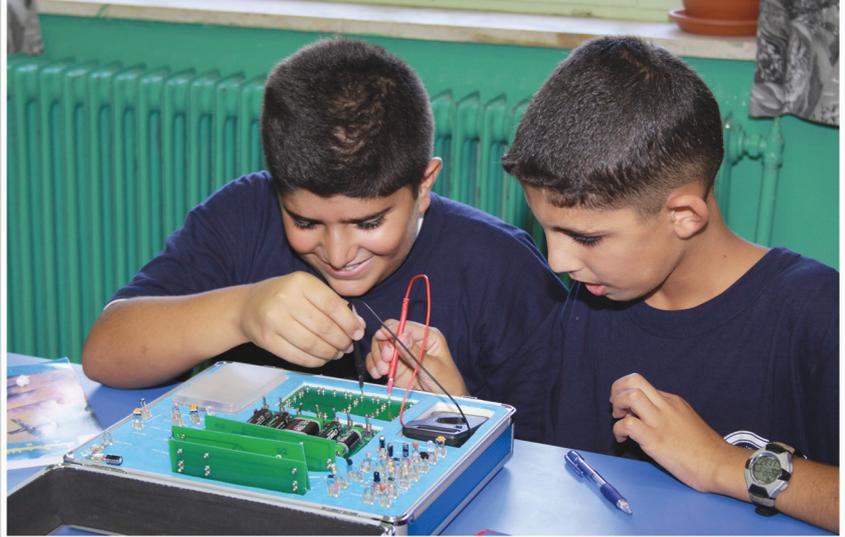
Research findings indicating that teachers, principals, and parents believe MSN schools are making improved efforts toward community outreach are tempered by other indicators suggesting these efforts are not fully translating into actual parent and community involvement.

Trends over the pre-post period provide some evidence of positive momentum in the direction of mobilizing better community involvement. Figure 3 shows that scores for teachers from both MSN and control schools trend in the same modest upward direction. Scores for principals of MSN schools increased while those for control schools remained static. This latter trend may be attributed to MSN's leadership training and its emphasis on community outreach.

Figure 3



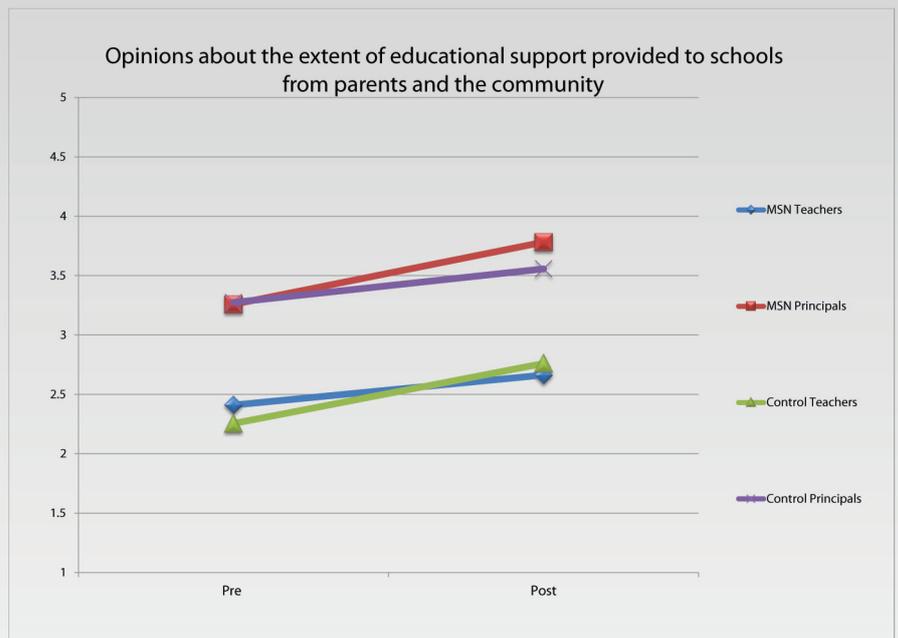
Survey results show that teachers and principals from MSN schools responded positively on questions pertaining to two-way communication between home and school and the school's efforts to provide parents with useful information about their child's learning. The introduction of education technology within MSN participating schools has been a key factor in encouraging principals to increase their outreach efforts to families. MSN schools now have Internet connectivity, making it easier for principals and



teachers alike to communicate with students' families, including parents who might not visit their child's school regularly. Comments by adults and students in focus groups and in-depth interviews noted that some parents are now better informed about school events and calendars thanks to the use of text messaging and web-based social media with secure login features like Facebook and Twitter.

Comments from parents in focus groups describe their MSN schools as having become more proactive in soliciting and integrating their participation and input in some learning-related activities. Importantly, while some parents credited efforts by their principals and teachers in promoting better home-school involvement, others observed that the high rate of transfers of principals and teachers at the beginning of the school year seriously undermines the capacity of a school to develop and strengthen the trust and respect necessary for effective home-school-community relations and partnerships.

Figure 4



Despite the overall positive impressions of principals, teachers, and parents concerning their schools' efforts toward community outreach, research findings paint a less certain picture of actual parent and community involvement. Nearly one-third of MSN principals remarked that by the end of the MSN Program they were still unsatisfied with the level of parental engagement at their schools.

However, principals opinions about the extent of educational support provided to schools from parents and the community increased 10%, which was double that of principals from the control schools. This upward trend illustrated in Figure 4 suggests, once again, that MSN leadership development may have had some impact .

Though teachers' views of educational support from parents were lower than that of principals, several teachers observed some improvement after their schools offered educational workshops for parents. For example, science and computer workshops designed to enhance parent knowledge about what their children were studying seemed to make a difference. One teacher noted that these workshops were organized by her school using computers procured by MSN even though the workshops were not sponsored by MSN.



It is worth noting that one reason why some parents may rarely come to school to visit teachers or are reluctant to become more involved in school could be the result of their children's belief in the stigma of a school visit being associated with student discipline or academic failure. In focus groups, some students admitted they hide or throw away school invitations to their parents because of this stigma. This perception is not universal, however, as one student explained: "The principal sends invitations to our parents regularly to visit the school for meetings but some of them don't show up. It is because some of them can't or don't care, which will decrease their children's academic achievements. Parents must visit the school and inquire about their children's performance no matter what the circumstances."

Statistical and anecdotal evidence suggest that teachers and principals underestimate and possibly undervalue the extent of learning support that children receive at home from parents and older siblings. Survey results for students from both MSN and control schools report much higher assessments of their parents' involvement with their learning at home than teachers and principals give them credit for. Overwhelming majorities of students surveyed from 4th to 9th grades "agreed/strongly agreed" that their parents either check or help them with homework.



"When I have a problem that I couldn't solve I let my older brother help me,"

"My mother helps me study English and science. And my dad is an engineer, he helps me in math."

Furthermore, comments by students in focus groups and in-depth interviews regularly framed the home as a space where older siblings or parents could be relied on to act as mentors, tutors and even surrogate guidance counselors. This underscores the need for schools to explore innovative strategies for stronger, more collaborative home-school partnerships.

Parents perceive they are increasingly expected to contribute financially or in-kind to support their child's schooling. This burden comes without a reciprocal increase in their influence on school decision-making. However, MSN schools are moving in a more positive direction than control schools in advancing parental involvement in decision-making.

Only a third of the teachers and just over a half of the principals think that parents influence school decision-making as highlighted in Figure 5. Although, the views of MSN principals increased over the pre-post period while those of principals from control schools decreased. One reasonable explanation is the impact of MSN leadership development for principals. It is possible that MSN leadership training increased the principals' capacity to involve parents in the development of the School Improvement Plan.



Statistical and anecdotal results suggest some modest improvements in the performance of PTAs, particularly for MSN schools and possibly associated with MSN's Leadership Diploma Program involving principals. There was a 26% increase regarding the quality of the PTA performance among MSN parents as illustrated in Figure 6.

The MSN Program sought to "activate" existing PTAs. Examples of new activities undertaken by these PTAs included the formation of a PTA extracurricular committee; school staff turning over the supervision of some extracurricular activities to the PTA; parent participation in community involvement activities; and parent participation in the School Improvement Planning (SIP) processes. Anecdotal evidence from parent focus groups suggest that improved relations between principals and parents in MSN schools are indeed making a difference.

Figure 5

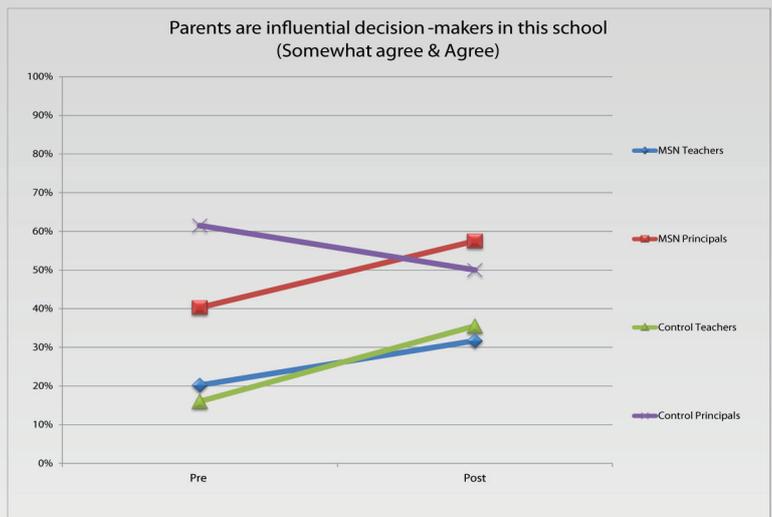


Figure 6

