



“This Is Their House, Too”: An Afterschool Space Designed for and by Teenagers

Deepa Vasudevan and Jessica Fei
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You can tell that you have arrived at the Everett Boys & Girls Club (BGC) when you catch glimpses of color popping out against a beige brick building and concrete sidewalk. New planters, two painted in the trademark “Boys & Girls Club blue,” flank either side of the entrance. Teens sit at the front desk; couches are arranged in a semicircle; a foosball table stands in front of a graffiti-inspired Everett BGC mural. Once you enter, the latest Everett BGC mural project stands on your left. It’s a depiction of the main street in Everett, recognizable by the iconic Everett clock. In this portrait of the city, rays of sun burst from the horizon; proud birds fly outward, as if they’re about to soar above your head.

During weekdays between 2:30 and 7 p.m., youth pour in through the doors of the Everett BGC. Walking through the rooms, we see students engaged in a variety of activities: recording their own songs with their music instructor, completing homework in the lobby, whispering to each other on a hallway bench, laughing with friends in the game room, preparing decorations for an upcoming event in the art room, making snacks in the kitchen, or playing basketball in the gym. Each room represents a distinct universe of activity. Teens spend their hours at the Everett BGC immersed in one of these spaces or bouncing between them.

AT A GLANCE: The Everett Boys & Girls Club

City: Everett, Massachusetts

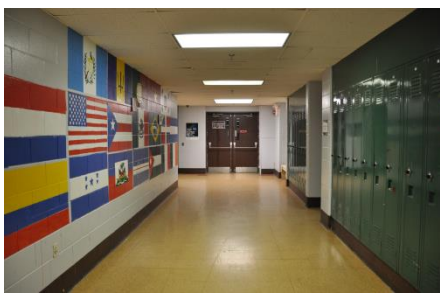
Founded: 2009

Enrollment: 222 young people, ages 13 to 18

Weekday Hours: 2:30 – 7 p.m.

Home Languages of Families:
Haitian Creole, Spanish, Portuguese, English

Program Demographics:
41% African American, 23% Hispanic; 12% White, 14% biracial, 8% multiracial, 1% Asian, 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.



A walk through the Everett Boys & Girls Club.

While there are many well-documented benefits to youth engagement in afterschool programming, including positive outcomes in academics, social and emotional development, health and wellness, and career readiness, afterschool opportunities for youth in low-income neighborhoods are many times limited.¹ Additionally, existing programs may struggle to recruit youth and sustain their participation over time. Teenagers have expressed a need for increased access, awareness, and interest in out-of-school

time (OST) opportunities, and have described obstacles to long-term participation, such as safety concerns in getting to and from the program, difficulty gaining parental buy-in for participation, or trouble balancing activities with family responsibilities (e.g., part-time work, sibling care).² Research shows that highly successful, well-attended teen programs tend to have a high number of leadership opportunities for youth, enroll 100 or more young people each year, are based within home communities, and are composed of dedicated practitioners engaged in program improvement and recruitment.³

THE CASE OF THE EVERETT BOYS & GIRLS CLUB: USING INTENTIONAL INFORMALITY TO ENGAGE YOUTH

The Everett BGC exemplifies the practices of a vibrant, well-attended out-of-school time program for teenagers. For this case study, we visited and observed the Everett BGC and interviewed Geobany (Geo) Rodriguez, the program director, to better understand how practitioners create engaging community afterschool spaces for teenagers.⁴ We explore what makes the Everett BGC a place of learning and development for young people, and share takeaway practices for other practitioners to consider when designing programming for adolescents.

The Everett BGC represents what can be termed “intentional informality,” which we define as spaces and interactions that are orchestrated so that teenagers feel that they have room to be themselves while also knowing there are caring adults around them when they need guidance or mentorship. By adopting “intentional informality,” the Everett BGC provides structure and routine for youth within an atmosphere of exploration. Below, we highlight two important dimensions of intentional informality — the co-creation of space and informal interactions.

On the day we visited the Everett BGC, two boys run up to Geobany (Geo) Rodriguez, the program director. One of them announces earnestly, “Geo! I just turned 13 today. Can I have an application?” When Geo pulls out the application file by the front desk, they eagerly grab the form and walk to a nearby table to start filling out the information.

A Co-Created Space: Where Youth and Afterschool Staff Learn Together

The Everett BGC operates in a new wing of the former Everett High School, a sprawling, almost century-old building located just off the city’s main street. Since his first day as director of the Everett BGC, Geo has sought ways to repurpose the existing resources of the school to create new experiences and opportunities for local youth. Ultimately, his goal was (and is) to create a space that’s comfortable for kids, one that makes them want to come here, be here, hang out, have a quiet place to sit and a corner where they can hang out with their friends, explore, and be young; and one that makes them feel that “this is their house, too.”

Geo focuses a great deal of attention on transforming the entrance area into a welcoming and dynamic environment, one with a similar aesthetic and feel to a “student union” that might be found on a college campus. Recognizing that many teens are attracted to the club because of the gigantic school gym, Geo has moved the check-in desk close to the front door—and farther from the gym—so that club members socialize with others before they head in to play basketball. In this front area, the walls are covered in announcements about Everett BGC events, staff bios, and “shout-outs” to teens for their accomplishments within and beyond the club. Geo has also moved items from other rooms in the club to the entrance area so that teens can do homework, play games, and be on the computer all in the same place.



Youth take an active role in creating their space at the Everett Boys & Girls Club.

Everett BGC staff also regularly create opportunities for youth to “own the space.” While the staff make some changes to the physical environment at the beginning of each year, to keep things feeling fresh and new, they like to maintain the club as a fundamentally flexible and adaptable space. One of Geo’s favorite memories comes from this kind of creation of new space. Last year, the whole club community worked together to repurpose an abandoned room as a performance space for a fashion show. Pillars and floors got new paint, side closets were redesigned as changing rooms, and broken ceiling boards were reinforced with pieces of white cardboard. The culminating event was a huge success, with more than 70 family and community members in attendance.

Many youth participating in the Everett BGC consider it to be a “second home,” one in which they can be themselves without constant monitoring from parents and adults. One Everett BGC teen member notes:

“I was happy when I was coming here. Because I didn’t get disrespect from nobody and I didn’t disrespect nobody. That’s why I say BGC is like my house. Why BGC is like my last name. Because every time I come here, I do homework, use the computer ... I talk to Nicole [the assistant director], talk to Geo, make fun. I teach them to speak Creole; they teach me to speak English.”

Informal Interactions: Connecting With Youth, Families, and the Community

Everett BGC staff develop warm and trusting relationships with youth in the program. They also try to have a presence in community events to get to know parents and families in the town. The club seeks to be responsive to the communities on both sides of its walls, extending the kind of care and attention to the neighborhood as is shown to the space of the club. At the same time, while Geo expressed the importance of family engagement, he also voiced the need to keep it informal and for maintaining boundaries with parental presence in a teen-centered club. Despite an intentional separation from everyday involvement of families in the club, Geo often gives tours of the club to families interested in sending their children to the program, and he appreciates when parents call to check in on their children, whether it’s about what is happening at the club, pickup time, or a discussion about their child’s school experience.



The Everett Boys & Girls Club engages youth with an approach of “intentional informality.” The club is everyone’s home.

Moreover, parents frequently seek guidance from staff in finding opportunities for their children to volunteer. They sometimes ask program staff to write letters for the court about the supportive environment and activities that students are involved in through the Everett BGC. This relationship has generated trust between families and the club space, while creating safe opportunities for teenagers to grow alongside their peers.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Engaging teenagers in out-of-school time programming can pose a unique set of opportunities and challenges for educators and families. The Everett BGC is one of many programs seeking to develop an intentionally informal atmosphere that feels safe and enriching for the teenagers in their community. Below are some tips for practitioners who might be in similar positions designing out-of-school time spaces for teens:

- **Invite input!** Ask your staff and the teens what they want to do with a program space, and equip them with the tools, ideas, and enthusiasm to make it happen. Community volunteers can support your vision by donating time and resources to rehabilitate or re-envision a space.
- **Personalize your program space.** Consider what you want your program space to communicate to teenagers and the community: The core structures of the space give a program its identity. At the same time, it’s good to keep certain areas open and flexible, to accommodate the shifting needs and interests of program participants. At the Everett BGC, the staff have incorporated bright colors and plants into their space so that young people see the program as fun and inviting.
- **Consider diverse needs and priorities for teens.** Create spaces where doing work, having fun, and hanging out can coexist. Not all youth have to be working on the same project or activity; particularly for adolescents, afterschool programs are an important space for exploring identity and expressing individuality.
- **Maintain and create neighborhood and family connections.** Try to situate the program in a space where school and community events can happen. Also, be a presence in the neighborhood surrounding the program space by attending school and community meetings and celebrations. Although families may not be available during afterschool hours, actively invite parents to visit the program for tours and special events.



Sunny greetings and blue farewells are offered at the Everett Boys & Girls Club entrance.



Signs of inspiration surround the Everett Boys & Girls Club space.

All photos in this article were taken by Jessica Fei.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Harvard Family Research Project

Harvard Graduate School of Education
50 Church Street, 4th Floor
Cambridge, MA 02138
www.hfrp.org
hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu
(617) 495-9108
Twitter.com/HFRP

AUTHORS

Deepa Vasudevan is an Ed.D. student in Culture, Communities, and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research explores relationships between public schools and community-based organizations and the role of youth workers in supporting adolescents' experiences with school and home.

Jessica Fei is an Ed.D. student in Culture, Communities, and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research explores themes of place, identity, and storytelling in the lives and learning of adolescents.

Access this article online at:

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¹ Bowles, A., & Brand, B. (2009). *Learning around the clock: Benefits of expanded learning opportunities for older youth*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum; Deschenes, S. N., Arbreton, A., Little, P. M., Herrera, C., Grossman, J. B., & Weiss, H. B. (2010). *Engaging older youth: Program and city-level strategies to support sustained participation in out-of-school time*. Harvard Family Research Project, Public/Private Ventures, Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/coordinating-after-schoolresources/Pages/engaging-older-youth-city-level-strategies-support-sustained-participation-out-of-schooltime.aspx>; Harvard Family Research Project (2004). *Understanding and measuring attendance in out-of-school time programs*. Issues and opportunities in out-of-school time evaluation. Number 7.

² Terzian, M., Giesen, L., & Mbwana, K. (2009) *Why teens are not involved in out-of-school time programs: The youth perspective*. Child Trends. Retrieved from: <http://www.childtrends.org/?publications=why-teens-are-not-involved-in-out-of-school-time-programs-the-youth-perspective-2#sthash.MXO92XZ4.dpuf>

³ Deschenes et al., 2010.

⁴ Authors' methodological note: We were drawn to the Everett Boys & Girls Club because of the dynamics of the space, and the palpable sense of community created by students and staff within and beyond the club walls. Given the practical issue of how to sustain participation in youth programming, we wanted to know, what makes young people eager to attend an afterschool program when participation is truly optional.