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Quality Afterschool: Helping Programs Achieve It and Strengthening Policies to Support It

Well-implemented, quality afterschool programs have the potential to support and promote healthy learning and development. Moreover, there is a research warrant for continued public and private support for afterschool investments. – Harvard Family Research Project

For years, policy makers, program directors and parents have attested to the widespread benefits of afterschool programs. Fortunately, a wide variety of research ranging from quantitative studies and polls to qualitative reports and field observations has corroborated the need for afterschool enrichment. As the field grows and resources thin out – especially given the economic recession and subsequent budget cuts – it is increasingly important to secure afterschool’s place as a necessity for youth. Promoting quality in the field of afterschool, which includes before school and summer learning programs, is one way to ensure researchers continue to find positive outcomes that can convince policy makers to increase investments in this valuable resource to children and parents.

While goals and outcomes differ from program to program, quality afterschool programs show positive results in the realms of academics, behavior, family and social life. Results from quality programs demonstrate the benefits of afterschool:

The Academic Impact:

- **Improved Test Scores and Grades:** The Promising Afterschool Programs Study, a study of about 3,000 low-income, ethnically-diverse elementary and middle school students, found that those who regularly attended high-quality programs over two years demonstrated gains of up to 20 percentiles and 12 percentiles in standardized math test scores respectively, compared to their peers who were routinely unsupervised during the afterschool hours.ⁱ
- **Improved School Attendance and Engagement in Learning:** A five-site evaluation of the Boys & Girls Clubs’ national Project Learn program found a reduction in absences among participants, from 6.4 days per school year at baseline to 2.19 days per school year at follow-up. This was especially notable when compared to non-participants whose absences increased over that same 30-month period.ⁱⁱ
- **Higher Graduation Rates:** Chapin Hall’s study of Chicago’s After School Matters program found that, over their high school careers, students enrolled in the program for three or more semesters and those who participated at the highest levels had higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates than similar students not in the program.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Social, Safety and Familial Impacts:

- **Promotion of Self-Concept and Healthy Choices:** The Promising Programs evaluation found that regular participation in quality afterschool programs is linked to “reductions in behavior problems among disadvantaged students,” including “significant reductions in aggressive behaviors with peers,” “reductions in misconduct,” and “reduced use of drugs and alcohol.”^{iv}

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- **Keeping Children Safe and Healthy:** A 2007 evaluation of the LA’s BEST program found that children attending LA’s BEST are 30 percent less likely to participate in criminal activities than their peers who do not attend the program. Researchers estimate that for every dollar invested, the program saves the city \$2.50 in crime-related costs.^v
- **Helping Families and Encouraging Parental Participation:** Parents in the TASC study said that the program helped them balance work and family life: 94 percent said the program was convenient; 60 percent said they missed less work than before because of the program; 59 percent said it supported them in keeping their job; and 54 percent said it allowed them to work more hours. In addition, 31 percent of principals reported that TASC greatly increased parents’ attendance at school events and 15 percent reported that it increased parents’ attendance at parent-teacher conferences.^{vi}

Common Characteristics of Quality Afterschool Programs

In order to promote program quality, program characteristics associated with proven outcomes must be identified so that the field has tangible standards for which to strive. With a better sense of what makes a quality program, afterschool advocates are able to craft specific policy recommendations that support the movement toward quality afterschool for all. Fortunately, there are numerous studies that have looked at an array of afterschool programs in order to discern the key factors that contribute to program quality.

Researchers at the University of Connecticut examined eight frameworks on quality programs and synthesized the findings to a list of six characteristics that significantly overlapped across the eight studies. Broadly, University of Connecticut researchers define quality programs as those that provide youth with safe, supportive relationships and a positive emotional climate.^{vii} Programs with the six characteristics of quality fit this overarching definition and also yield more precise outcomes. For this brief, we consolidated the characteristics from the University of Connecticut research with those identified by two other well-respected organizations that were not included in the synthesis. Both the Harvard Family Research Project^{viii} and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)^{ix} have also taken a research-based approach to identifying quality characteristics. The consolidation resulted in the following list of eight characteristics exemplified by quality programs:

“The best after-school programs capitalize on the advantages that after-school hours offer compared to the school day . . . these advantages include a greater opportunity to actively involve youth, project-based activities that can extend many weeks and are not constrained by school-day class schedules and the use of the surrounding community as a resource and a place to carry out activities.”

– Bob Granger, William T. Grant Foundation

1. **Prepared staff^x:** Forming healthy relationships with program staff can lead to a positive emotional climate for students, allowing them to feel comfortable learning and exploring. Factors that serve as a catalyst for establishing these bonds are a small staff-child ratio and a well-prepared and compensated staff. Professional development in both content areas and youth development contribute to staff becoming role models and informal mentors for participating young people.
2. **Intentional programming^{xi}:** The best programs are structured with explicit goals and activities designed with these goals in mind. For instance, program goals might address improving a specific set of social skills, building on previous knowledge, meeting age-specific developmental needs or maximizing engagement in school.^{xii}
3. **Alignment with the school day^{xiii}:** Intentional alignment with school instruction allows struggling students to catch up to their classmates, while helping all students hone the skills necessary for

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success in school. Learning the same content through different and innovative approaches that only afterschool can offer is extraordinarily helpful in content understanding and retention for students.

- In Lincoln, Nebraska, a 21st CCLC grant supports the **Arnold Community Learning Center's afterschool program** as it works to align its curriculum with regular school day instruction. Site Supervisor Dayna Krannawitter works with school staff to extend the school day plans for students into the afterschool hours. The homework club teachers are school para-educators who work closely with teachers and students during the school day and then carry that expertise into the afterschool homework club. The Lincoln CLC initiative also has a curriculum coach as a school district employee who works with district curriculum specialists to train afterschool staff in aligning afterschool curriculum with district standards. Says Krannawitter, *"It is because of the intentional and meaningful involvement of CLC and school staff that we have seen an increase in academic performance for 94 percent of CLC students who participated in our afterschool programs at Arnold 30 days or more during the school year."*
 - In Cincinnati, Ohio, **CincyAfterSchool** operates more than two dozen 21st CCLC sites, providing instruction and activities tailored to support each school's curriculum. Programs embed a full-time coordinator in the school building specifically to build relationships that support the recruitment and retention of students who most need the program. Meanwhile, CincyAfterSchool leaders and school district personnel collaborate on common quality standards and data-sharing tools, while personnel ensure alignment and integration by creating communication packets that connect the student's core day work to their afterschool instruction. The packets also help parents stay informed about how their children are doing. The approach is working, and student test scores are up. A recent evaluation found that 51.6 percent of CincyAfterSchool students had increased their reading scores from 2007 to 2008, while 50.8 percent had increased their math scores during that same period.
4. **Promotion of varied youth engagement^{xiv}**: The afterschool space represents an unparalleled opportunity for students to grow not just academically, but holistically as well. Quality programs that feature enriching, creative endeavors such as art, music or physical activity present kids with options they *want* to explore. This 'whole child' approach also allows for autonomy in program choice since kids are more likely to participate in activities in which they are interested.
- The **Woodcraft Rangers NVision afterschool program**, offered at more than 60 public schools, parks and community centers in Los Angeles, offers cutting-edge enrichment activities with science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) as the root. Activities are crafted based on student choice and are run through strong community partnerships. In one activity, participants explore physics and aerodynamics by building their own wind turbines, solar panels and semiconductors. Students in the Sustainable Agriculture Club make their own gardens from recycled material, learning about pollination and conservation. Other forms of engagement include robot building and sound recording and production.
5. **Strong community partners^{xv}**: Partnerships with community organizations allow programs to leverage otherwise unattainable resources. Effective partnerships also provide youth with multiple constructive environments, thus reinforcing healthy attitudes and behavior more consistently. Similarly, family involvement also promotes continued participation and engagement.^{xvi}
- In Milledgeville, Georgia, the **YES afterschool program** partners with two professors and 26 Georgia College and State University students to run Public Achievement, a civic engagement initiative. The college students coach groups of eight to ten students, instilling in them values of citizenship, community service and democracy. The YES program serves 650 students in five schools and aims to help students improve academically, promote to the next grade and persist to graduation. Public Achievement represents one of the personal enrichment opportunities that

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complement the YES academic enrichment goals. The program, instituted during the YES program in January 2009, reflects Georgia social studies and citizenship development standards with particular attention to the goal of providing students with "opportunities to engage in inquiry-oriented projects related to social studies." Without the volunteers and space that this community partnership yields, the program could not succeed.

6. **Safety, health and wellness^{xvii}:** For a program to work, it is necessary to have enough space, supervision and psychological and physical security. With the comfort and freedom these factors provide, kids can focus solely on the task at hand. In addition to physical safety, the best programs provide opportunities for exercise and access to nutritious meals and snacks that otherwise might be unavailable. Studies have shown that improving a student's physical well-being can build higher self-esteem, leading kids to participate with greater frequency and confidence.

- **The Riverview-Brunswick 21st CCLC AIM (Access to Inspiration and Motivation) program** in Brunswick, Maine centers on a peaceful martial arts curriculum. This activity not only improves physical health, but also fosters positive social and emotional development. By participating in structured martial arts training, students can better handle personal challenges, overcome fears, reach goals and develop a healthy lifestyle. The program offers a daily blend of physical fitness, academic support, pro-social bonding and healthy snacks with the goal of providing a safe, structured and enriching learning experience that extends beyond the school day.

7. **Sustained student participation and access^{xviii}:** In order for youth to take advantage of all that afterschool offers, there must be steady attendance and access to programs over a significant period of time. Programs that contain components of quality—specifically safety, youth engagement and supportive relationships—are more likely to yield increased participation and keep kids coming back. Additionally, studies have shown that the more a child participates in afterschool, the more likely they are to show academic and social gains.^{xix} Access to summer learning programs is similarly linked to preventing summer learning loss in youth.^{xx}

"Cities across the country want better ways to provide high-quality out-of-school learning opportunities to children who need it most—through understanding need, aligning programs with those needs, and tracking participation."

– Nancy Devine, The Wallace Foundation

8. **Ongoing assessment and improvement^{xxi}:** Programs that employ management practices focused on continuous improvement have the most success in establishing and maintaining quality programs. Frequent assessment, both informal and formal, and regular evaluation, both internal and external, are ingredients needed to refine and sustain exemplary programs.^{xxii}

- **The After-School Corporation (TASC)** recognized that, from the very beginning, they had to be thinking about evaluation in order to ultimately achieve strong outcomes. According to Lucy Friedman, President of TASC, *"Building evaluation into TASC from the outset served to strengthen the TASC model. We understood that if we wanted to learn something across all the sites, we needed a program model that had characteristics common across sites, but also was sufficiently flexible to respond to the needs of individual schools and communities. So we developed the set of core elements that have become the basis for the entire TASC model. If we hadn't been thinking about evaluation at the very beginning, we might not have developed such a strong program model. We made it clear to grantees from day one that evaluation was an integral part of receiving TASC funds, so grantees were never taken by surprise when PSA (the TASC evaluation contractor) asked them for cooperation with the evaluation."*^{xxiii}

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Tools to Support Quality

Establishing some guidelines on common aspects of quality certainly helps pave the path to success for afterschool programs; however, programs already struggling to stay afloat need more than just an understanding of what quality entails: they need to be equipped with resources and tools that can aid them on their quest to sustained program quality. There are a plethora of tools available to facilitate those looking to turn an average program into a high quality one.

Building and Managing Quality Afterschool Programs:^{xxiv} Funded by the C.S. Mott Foundation, SEDL’s National Center for Quality Afterschool offers this practitioner’s guide, which includes practices for building and managing quality afterschool programs based on a 5-year study of 53 afterschool programs and 104 sites that successfully promote gains in students’ academic achievement. The practices included in the guide focus not only on improving student performance and motivation, but also on how to oversee daily operations, support staff and sustain stakeholder relationships. From a managerial perspective, this tool highlights four focus areas for high quality afterschool programming: program organization, academic programming practices, supportive relationships in afterschool and achieving program outcomes. After each subsection, there are “Quality-O-Meter” and “Planning for Action” tools that help programs conduct self analysis and map out plans for improvement.

Given the heterogeneous nature of afterschool, it is hard to assess all programs based on one set of standards. There are assessments developed by individual organizations, however, that other programs can use to measure at least some quality outcomes. Realizing that a multitude of assessments exist and that some fit programs better than others, the Forum for Youth Investigation, with funding from the William T. Grant Foundation, created **Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools, Second Edition** as a way to compare approaches. This guide distills ten assessment tools, breaking them down into digestible components. For providers looking for a self-assessment tool, this is a good starting point.^{xxv}

Structuring Out-of-School Time to Improve Academic Achievement:^{xxvi} This guide from the IES “What Works Clearinghouse” provides recommendations designed to help afterschool programs improve the academic achievement of participants. The guide outlines four principle recommendations consistent with the characteristics of quality and includes sections on how to carry out the recommendations while also identifying roadblocks and potential solutions.

Recognizing that high-quality afterschool programs can help put preteens on the path to success, the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health commissioned Public/Private Ventures to identify the characteristics of quality afterschool programs that are linked to positive outcomes for preteens. Based on the latest research and experience in the field, P/PV developed the publication **Putting It All Together: Guiding Principles for Quality After-School Programs Serving Preteens**, along with a companion Resource Guide that includes links to research and tools to strengthen programs.^{xxvii}

“All program operators should think through, step-by-step, how they expect participants to be changed by their programs. Then they can figure out a few things to measure that will help them assess if these changes occur. I like to collect data to capture three phases of a program: early, middle, and late. Early data tell something about participant characteristics. Middle phase data capture something about dosage and about whether the program is reaching its intended participants. Late phase data offer information about in-program changes or outcomes.”

– Jean Grossman, Public/Private Ventures

After-School Toolkit: Tips, Techniques and Templates for Improving Program Quality: Public/Private Ventures developed this toolkit to help afterschool managers create and sustain quality academic programs. It is based on lessons learned during a three-year study of the Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL) initiative funded by The James Irvine Foundation

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in five California cities. While the toolkit draws on many CORAL lessons and examples, the structures, processes and tools it offers are broadly applicable to the work of practitioners who seek to enhance program quality.^{xxviii}

The California After School Resource Center:^{xxix} While somewhat California-specific, this site is filled with resources that are categorized by topic. The “Program Administration” tab, with sections ranging from funding to program evaluation and staff development, is a valuable resource for providers seeking to implement more quality approaches.

For afterschool leaders working at the systems-level (e.g. county or citywide programs). The Wallace Foundation’s **Hours of Opportunity** report examines five cities’ efforts to build systems that improve the quality and accessibility of afterschool, summer and other out-of-school time programs. Researchers describe the successes, barriers, data management systems and lessons learned in the five systems and offer recommendations for other afterschool system building efforts.

Current Quality Supports

Thus far, cities and states have been the leaders in developing and implementing policies that support quality afterschool programs. Numerous groups, including several statewide afterschool networks, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality have developed assessment tools that are being used as the anchor for quality improvement systems in cities and states across the nation.

- Since 2005, the Michigan Department of Education has required 21st CCLC funded afterschool programs to use the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool, which is correlated with the *Model Standards for Out-of-School Time/After-School Programs in Michigan*. More recently, the Technical Assistance and Coaching Supports Services (TACSS) project began. It deepens and builds on the partnership between Michigan and The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality with the goal of creating a culture of continuous improvement across all 21st Century programs in the state.
- The National Institute on Out-of-School Time developed the Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS), a set of research-based evaluation tools that combine program quality, youth outcomes and data management. Thus far, four communities (Atlanta, Georgia; Middlesex County, New Jersey; Boston, Massachusetts and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District of North Carolina) have piloted the system.
- The New York State Afterschool Network developed the Quality Self-Assessment (QSA) Tool. The QSA Tool is intended to help program leaders and staff, in collaboration with other stakeholders, better understand the indicators of a high-quality program and reflect on all aspects of their program's operation. It is based on the recognition that self-assessment provides an important opportunity for programs to identify strengths and weaknesses free from the pressures of external monitoring and evaluation. In fact, ongoing self-assessment is a key program development practice that can assist in preparing for program licensing, accreditation, monitoring or evaluation.

“We started with a voluntary pilot to help our 21st Century programs achieve high quality. We noticed the programs that were engaged most intensively with the YPQA intervention were setting themselves apart quality-wise from the others. We decided we needed to grow a culture of performance accountability through the state’s 21st Century system.”

– Lorraine Thoreson, Michigan Department of Education

In addition to quality assessment tools, states have invested in program standards, revisions to licensing requirements, staff credentialing and incentive strategies that reward programs that demonstrate higher

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levels of quality. For example, Arkansas is promoting quality in afterschool and summer programs by adapting minimum licensing requirements (which were originally designed for traditional school-age care programs) to meet the diversity of afterschool and summer programs in the state, with particular emphasis being placed on the needs of programs that serve children and youth ages 5-18 in “non-traditional” licensed care environments. Being a licensed program serves as an entry requirement for Arkansas programs participating in the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), also known as Better Beginnings. Various components of the QRIS system, such as the emphasis on 40 Developmental Assets training, the use of the Youth Program Quality Assessment tool and making intentional linkages to the Arkansas Department of Education’s K-12 Frameworks are applicable to a wide array of afterschool programs. By creating licensing requirements and a QRIS system that encompass the diversity associated with afterschool, more programs will have the opportunity to participate in and be rewarded with incentives that are associated with these quality initiatives.

Finally, many states and local communities recognize that partnerships are essential building blocks of quality programs and are requiring and strengthening partnerships to coordinate resources, enhance quality and better meet demand. Recognizing that schools and community partners can and should play key roles in supporting student learning, these partnerships utilize the assets of each organization to diversify funding, offer varied services and activities and provide quality afterschool and summer learning programs.

Next Steps: How Can Policy Better Support Quality?

Building on the work that is happening in states and localities across the nation, there are a number of policy recommendations that should be considered in designing any new afterschool/summer initiative or in revising existing policy:

- Recognize the rich learning that happens in afterschool and summer programs by expanding the definition of educational success to include outcomes for youth that go beyond the classroom.
- Foster a culture of continuous improvement that includes ongoing assessment, targeted plans for improvement and training and coaching that helps programs improve.
- Maximize the assets of both schools and community organizations by promoting partnerships between schools and community-based organizations.
- Encourage student-level data sharing among schools and afterschool/summer programs in order to better meet the needs of students and assess progress.
- Provide greater focus on staff training and professional development in both content areas and youth development, as well as incentives that reward programs with higher levels of quality.
- Provide sufficient funding to ensure that all youth have access to high-quality afterschool and summer learning programs. Without the resources that federal funding contributes and the potential for that funding to leverage other funding sources, it is extraordinarily difficult for the neediest communities to establish quality programs.

Conclusion

Before-school, afterschool and summer programs present young people with an unmatched arena for academic, social, emotional and physical development. It is apparent, however, that quality matters and that extra time alone is not enough. The afterschool hours are a time when kids can grow, and making the best use of that time is essential to achieving positive outcomes. For afterschool to reach its potential as a catalyst for holistic youth development, quality must be a priority. Researchers are converging on core factors of quality that lead to improved outcomes, and tools exist to help providers toward these outcomes. Numerous programs have already raised the bar for quality tremendously and it is now time to ensure that the quest for higher quality encompasses the entire afterschool community.

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