

Making the Case: Quality Afterschool Programs Matter

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Program Quality – The Key to Positive Outcomes

There is broad agreement that afterschool programs can play a significant role in supporting the development of young people. But to do so it is critical that the program be of high quality. A high quality afterschool program can have strong positive effects on children's academic, social, and emotional lives and this can be especially true for at-risk youth. Some research suggests that what students do during the out-of-school time hours has as much bearing on their success as what they do during the school day.¹

Child and adolescent development unfolds in dramatic and predictable ways. Development is influenced by family, community, and the support and guidance available. In order for children and youth to succeed and sustain a positive and healthy trajectory through adolescence and young adulthood, they need support across a range of developmental outcomes. These five domains can be summarized as cognitive/academic; vocational; physical; social/emotional; and civic/cultural development.² Afterschool programs can be one of the important contributing settings to providing the critical experiences and relationships in these domains that keep children and youth on a positive and healthy path to adulthood.

There is growing recognition that participation in high-quality afterschool programs is associated with better grades, work habits, task persistence, and social skills; and that benefits appear to intensify as children and adolescents continue their involvement over a succession of years.³ Recent reviews of afterschool program evaluations done on well-run and effective afterschool programs showed that participation in quality afterschool programs improved youths' feelings of self-confidence, self-esteem, attitude towards school, school grades, achievement test scores, and reduced problem behaviors.⁴ Some of the most desirable features of learning environments—such as intrinsic motivation, flexibility, and multiple learning arrangements—are characteristics of quality afterschool programs.⁵ These findings point to the vital importance of investment in afterschool programs and the benefits of participation in high quality programs.

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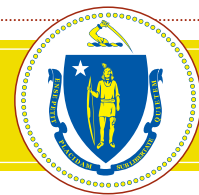
¹ National School Board Association. (2005). Building and sustaining afterschool programs. Successful practices in school board leadership. Alexandria, VA: Author.

² Forum for Youth Investment. (2007). Ready by 21: Key ideas. Available at www.forumfyi.org.

³ Vandell, D., Reisner, E., Pierce, K., Brown, B., Lee, D., Bolt, D., & Pechman, E. (2006). The study of promising after-school programs: Examination of longer term outcomes after two years of program experiences. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin – Madison.

⁴ Durlak, J., & Weissberg, R. (2007). The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. In the Durlak and Weissberg study quality programs were identified as those that used evidence-based training approaches to promote personal and social skills. These approaches to skill development are: sequential, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE).

⁵ Hall, G., Yohalem, N., Tolman, J., & Wilson, A. (2002). How afterschool programs can most effectively promote positive youth development as a support to academic achievement. White Paper commissioned by the Boston After-School for All Partnership. Boston, MA: After-School for All Partnership. Also available from www.wcwonline.org.



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What Makes a Quality Program?

In recent years, close study of the afterschool field has begun to define what is needed for a young person to have a quality experience during the out-of-school time program hours. Quality afterschool programs incorporate what is commonly referred to as a youth development approach. This approach focuses on what children and youth need as they mature into responsible and caring adults. The National Collaboration for Youth Members defines the youth development approach as an engagement strategy which prepares children and youth “to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically and cognitively competent”. High quality programs strive to incorporate a positive youth development approach into their programs by incorporating program features that maximize positive and healthy development. These program features align with the key features of positive developmental settings established by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine: (1) Physical and Psychological Safety; (2) Appropriate Structure; (3) Supportive Relationships; (4) Opportunities to Belong; (5) Positive Social Norms; and (6) Support for Efficacy and Matterings.

Features of afterschool programs such as staffing, leadership, communication, planning, physical and financial resources, family and school relations, and programming can vary in quality and collectively contribute to the delivery of experiences to children and youth. Findings from the Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (MARS) showed that program quality across the state of Massachusetts is uneven unrelated to geographic location, auspices, or program mission. Several recent studies including MARS, have shed light on the association between program features and high quality program experiences. From these studies we can summarize that the following program characteristics and features cut across all high quality programs and are the non-negotiables of program quality:

- More highly educated and highly paid staff.
- More highly educated program directors.
- Lower staff turnover.
- Smaller group sizes for activities and lower staff/child ratios.
- Good connections with schools such as understanding of school objectives, and good relationships with principals and teachers.
- Continuous program evaluation of progress and effectiveness.

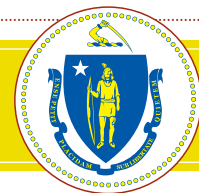
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⁶National Collaboration for Youth Members at www.collab4youth.org.

⁷National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2002). Community programs to promote youth development. Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman (Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

⁸Intercultural Center for Research in Education and National Institute on Out-of-School Time. (2005). Pathways to success for youth: What counts in after-school. Boston, MA: United Way of Massachusetts Bay. The Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (MARS) was a comprehensive state-wide study of 78 afterschool programs designed to examine the links between afterschool program features and youth outcomes.

⁹Hammond, C., & Reimer, M. (2006). Essential elements of quality after-school programs. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. Vandell, D., Reisner, E., Pierce, K., Brown, B., Lee, D., Bolt, D., & Pechman, E. (2006). The study of promising after-school programs: Examination of longer term outcomes after two years of program experiences. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin – Madison.



- Use a variety of content delivery strategies such as engaging activities, opportunities for cognitive growth, and opportunities for child and youth autonomy.
- Have established clear goals.

Ensuring Program Quality Through the Use of Standards

Guidelines for establishing quality and measurement tools to assess program effectiveness do exist. Researchers assert that the “field is reaching consensus on a set of core practices, and has developed instruments that measure these practices.” Various states, municipalities and individual organizations have crafted standards to address program quality, build staff capacities, and ensure accountability. One well known example of quality standards are those developed in 1998 by the National Afterschool Association (formerly NSACA). These standards outline the best practices in out-of-school time programs for supporting and enhancing the overall development of children and youth ages 5-14 years. In almost all cases, standards address key areas such as environment, staff relationships, programming, and youth engagement.

Many programs use observational tools and other forms of program assessment to gather important information about how the program is doing and to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement. Researchers at the Forum for Youth Investment (2007) provide detailed information about seven tools that can be used to measure quality program practices and facilitate program improvement in the out-of-school time field. The assessment process can be done by the program or outside observers. In Massachusetts, 21st Century Community Learning Center programs utilize the Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool to measure program quality and practices.

Investing in Quality

In order to provide children and youth with the experiences they require to become productive citizens, a rich variety of high quality programs are needed to effectively meet the range of consumer preferences and provide expected child and youth outcomes. Today not all children and youth have access to high quality programs, and existing programs need better resources and incentives to reach and maintain quality. Polling data by Public Agenda found that parents in poorer families and those from minority backgrounds are far more dissatisfied than others with the quality of afterschool program options.

It is essential that current efforts to support children and youth during the out-of-school time hours emphasize program quality. The quality of an afterschool program is critical to reaching outcomes that are proven to be good for children and youth. The challenge facing the policy makers in Massachusetts is how to stimulate, support, and sustain program improvement towards the achievement of the agreed upon quality standards and practices. Increasing the state’s capacity to support high quality programs necessitates creating a comprehensive and sustainable

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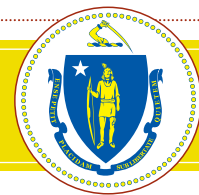
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¹⁰ Granger, R., Durlak, J., Yohalem, N., & Reisner, E. (2007, pg. 11). Improving after-school program quality. New York, NY: William T. Grant Foundation.

¹¹ Wallace Foundation. (2005). Quality that lasts. A Discussion Paper for The Wallace Foundation Symposium on Out-of-School Time Learning, Washington, DC.

¹² Duffett, A., Johnson, J., Farkas, S., Kung, S., & Ott, A. (2004). All work and no play? Listening to what kids and parents really want from out-of-school time. New York, NY: Public Agenda.



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infrastructure that could bring together systemic features such as cross-agency approaches for serving children and youth ages 0-22, and investments in professional development strategies and continuous program improvement. Now is a critical moment for the state to assess its commitment to building the quality of afterschool program opportunities in the state, and strategically examine the related challenges and opportunities.

Related Resources

A New Day for Learning. A Report from the Time, Learning, and Afterschool Task Force. January 2007. C.S. Mott Foundation.

Essential Elements of Quality After-School Programs. Cathy Hammond and Mary Reimer. January 2006. Communities in Schools.

Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students' Education. Harvard Family Research Project. No. 3. Spring 2007.

Links to Learning. A Curriculum Planning Guide for After-School Programs. National Institute on Out-of-School Time. 2005. School-Age Notes.

Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools. Nicole Yohalem and Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom. March 2007. Forum for Youth Investment.

Moving Towards Success: Framework for After-School Programs. May 2005. C.S. Mott Foundation.

The NAA Standards for Quality School-Age Care. 1998. School-Age Notes.

About the Author

Georgia Hall is Senior Research Scientist and Diane Gruber is Research Associate at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. The Centers are home to an interdisciplinary community of scholars and theorists engaged in action, research, theory building, publication, and training.

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