

# After School Quality: Moving from Research to Practice

A BRIEF FOR YOUTH WORK LEADERS

## Practical Steps for Directors, Boards, Program Leadership, and Other Key Staff

New research on after school is coming out all the time. Youth work leaders do their best to keep up on the latest in the field, and yet much of the research can feel hard to implement: it doesn't reflect the realities of leaders' programs, it offers many descriptives but few prescriptives, or it is interesting but lacks how-to's. If you've ever been in a similar situation, then read on: **this brief is here to bridge the gap between the research and the steps you, your Board, and your program leadership can take to build quality in your own program.**

## The Foundation: Program Quality Research and Why It Matters

In this brief we review the research to provide the foundation for our discussion of all things program quality. Drawing on studies in the out-of-school time field about after school itself and about program quality within these programs, we **describe the importance of after school and explore how program quality is the critical hinge** between youths' program participation and their positive academic, socio-emotional, skill-building, mastery, and communication outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

## Connecting the Dots: Ways to Move from Research to Practice

We then suggest some ways to bring high-quality practices to life, both from the research and from our own deep experience as after school program evaluators working with District- and community-based programs throughout California and the U.S. Offering examples from West Contra Costa County Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District (Alameda County), 826michigan, Partnership for Children and Youth's Housed, the YMCA of San Francisco, and San Francisco ExCEL (SFUSD), our projects offer up **some best practices, lessons learned, and road-tested tips for similar programs** looking to bring high-quality practices to their youth-facing work.

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<sup>1</sup> National Afterschool Association. "Why Afterschool Quality Matters." Retrieved from [http://naaweb.org/images/Final\\_NAA\\_1E\\_.pdf](http://naaweb.org/images/Final_NAA_1E_.pdf)

### After School is Vitaly Important...

Youth work leaders know that after school is of vital importance to both school age and older youth. Recent studies indicate that one in five (11.3 million) K-12 youth in America are left unsupervised after school.<sup>2</sup> These numbers are troubling, especially for youth in neighborhoods with high levels of community stressors such as poverty. Youth without consistent supervision from 3p.m. - 6p.m. are at a higher risk of becoming victims of violent crimes and engaging in risky behaviors such as smoking and drug use.<sup>3</sup> Youth who are not supervised and lack access to enriching, supportive after school programs are also at a **higher risk of facing academic difficulties, dropping out of school, and stymied social-emotional skills driven by stress, loneliness, and fear.**<sup>4</sup>

Research has shown, however, that after school programs can contribute to positive outcomes for youth. After school programs can **keep youth safe**: youth report that they feel more safe in after school than in their neighborhoods, and youth who participate in after school can be less involved in criminal activities compared to their peers.<sup>5</sup> After school can also **improve student behavior and social skills.**<sup>6</sup> Participation in after school can improve self-confidence and self-esteem and other positive social behaviors. After school participation can also reduce problem behaviors such as acting out or aggression.

Moreover, studies show that after school can **improve academic outcomes** for youth. After school participation can increase school day attendance and engagement in learning.<sup>7</sup> **Regular participation** can also improve academic outcomes by supporting academic skills like task

<sup>2</sup> Afterschool Alliance. (2014) America After 3 PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand.

<sup>3</sup> Riggs, N. R., & Greenberg, M. T. (2004) "The role of neurocognitive models in prevention research." In D. Fishbein (Ed.): The science, treatment, and prevention of antisocial behaviors: Application to the criminal justice system: Vol. 2. Evidence-based practice. Kingston, NJ: Civic Research Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Mahoney, J.L, Parente, M.E. & Zigler, E.F. (2009) "Afterschool programs in America: Origins, Growth, Popularity, and Politics." *Journal of Youth and Development* Vol. 4(3).

<sup>5</sup> Goldschmidt, P. and Huang, D. (2007) "The Long-Term Effects of After-School Programming on Education Adjustment and Juvenile Crime: A Study of the LA's BEST After-School Program." US Department of Justice. Retrieved from [http://www.lasbest.org/imo/media/doc/LASBEST\\_DOJ\\_Final%20Report.pdf](http://www.lasbest.org/imo/media/doc/LASBEST_DOJ_Final%20Report.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., & Pachan, M. (2010) "A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Naftzger, N, et al. (2013) "Texas 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers: Year 2 Evaluation Report." American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <http://tea.texas.gov/index4.aspx?id=3546>

persistence and other study habits, which in turn helps promote academic achievement.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the more often youth participate in after school, the more they can benefit from these programs. Increased participation is linked to improved school attendance, improved tests scores and grades, and fewer suspensions from school.<sup>9,10</sup>

## ...And Quality is the Hinge Between Youth Participation and Positive Youth Outcomes

The quality of the after school program is critical in promoting positive outcomes for youth. After school programs of high quality can have **strong positive impacts** on youths' lives, including for their **academic and socio-emotional development**; this may be especially true for underserved youth.<sup>11</sup> There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that regular participation in high-quality programs is **correlated with improved grades, study habits, task completion, and communication skills**.<sup>12,13</sup>

Programs that are high-quality **include key youth development practices** such as strong relationships among youth and staff, opportunities for youth choice and leadership, opportunities for youth to build skills and gain mastery, and chances for youth to participate in activities that are well-organized and challenging in a positive way.<sup>14</sup> Because **quality is the critical link between participation and positive outcomes**, and because program leadership and staff have direct control over this aspect of the programs, understanding program quality is the key to understanding youths' success through after school.

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<sup>8</sup> Vandell, D. L., et al. (2007) Outcomes Linked to High-Quality Afterschool Programs: Longitudinal Findings from the Study of Promising Afterschool Programs. Report to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

<sup>9</sup> Vinson, M., Marchand, J., Sparr, M., and Moroney, D. (2013) "Rhode Island 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program Evaluation: Evaluation Report 2011-12." American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <http://www.ride.ri.gov>.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, C.J., Chan, W., and Polonsky, M. (2009) Chicago Public Schools Students Succeeding Academically Through Non-academic After-School Activities: The 2008 After-School All-Stars Program. Office of Extended Learning Opportunities, Chicago Public Schools. Retrieved from <http://eevala.org/documents>.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, G. and Gruber, D. (2007) Making the Case: Quality Afterschool Programs Matter. The Massachusetts Special Commission on After School and Out of School Time. Retrieved from [http://www.niost.org/pdf/MSO\\_brief\\_Hall\\_Gruber.pdf](http://www.niost.org/pdf/MSO_brief_Hall_Gruber.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Vandell, D. et al. (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.

<sup>14</sup> Birmingham, Jennifer, et al. (November 2005) Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs: A Follow-Up to the TASC Evaluation. Policy Studies Associates. Retrieved from <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/fam107/fam107.pdf>.

## FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE:

# HIGH-QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH

Deciding to incorporate high-quality staff practices into after school programming represents a **long-term investment**. Undertaken with intention, this quality journey will help your organization use data to benchmark its starting point, point to topics for staff professional development and coaching, reveal staff and programmatic change through year-over-year data, and become a natural part of your organization's program planning process. Here are some steps that break this long-term journey down into **manageable, action-oriented pieces**:

### **Lay the foundation by building a culture of feedback and iteration.**

Simply put, improving program quality is about refining staff and organizational practices to better support youth; as such, this process relies on staff members' ability to give, receive, and act on feedback. Building and nurturing an **organizational culture of feedback and iteration is therefore a critical precursor** to being able to successfully engage in the quality improvement process.

Programs should provide opportunities for line staff, program managers, and others to receive meaningful feedback. In particular, supporting youth-facing workers to learn new skills, have opportunities for practice, receive input on their skill development, and fine-tune their delivery **helps staff buy into and benefit from a culture that prizes continual gains in staff quality**.

Regular performance reviews, coaching, activity observations, or Learning Communities or other professional development engagements are great opportunities for line staff and coordinators to benefit. For example, when **826michigan**, a writing and tutoring organization, began to conduct program observations, the staff chose to observe each other (rather than their corps of program volunteers) first in order to practice giving and receiving feedback. Having built staff buy-in, the organization is poised to further align the tool to the program goals in starting to observe volunteers.

In addition, the **Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) After School Programs Office** coordinates a number of content-focused Learning Communities for youth workers; youth-facing staff can

participate in multi-session professional development workshops in subject areas including Math, Science, Gardening, Physical Fitness, and Cooking. Many of these Learning Communities involve a coaching component, so that line staff receive content area instruction, have opportunities to practice new skills and lesson plans, are observed on-site by the instructor, and then refine their new skills based on tailored feedback. This cycle can help grow these key elements in participants' programs.

## Collect data about program quality using a common observational framework.

Understanding – and measuring – program quality can take many forms, from staff reports, to participant or parent surveys, to direct observation. Because core elements of program quality can be seen in the interactions between staff and participants, **direct observation can be the best measure of point-of-service quality**. An observation tool will serve as the common framework you will follow to move your organization's quality focus from research to practice. There are many research-validated after school program quality tools available to get you started; **look for one that will multi-task** by helping your organization think about quality. Choose a tool that:

- ...measures the many facets that contribute to program quality. These may include quality components that support social-emotional learning, skill building, or physical health. The tool you use can reflect the quality components on which your program focuses.
- ...can be used for continual quality action planning. Many tools focus on the interactions between staff and youth during program activities; a tool focused on those areas of the program over which site staff have control provides natural starting points for staff to improve their youth-facing practices.
- ...is both age-appropriate and age-specific. Youth at different developmental and educational stages will need different things from their after school program; the tool your organization uses should reflect these differences.
- ...is widely in use across your city, district, region, or state; adopting a widely-used tool can offer a set of common standards and goals to programs to help them situate their own practices within the larger after school landscape.

### Evaluators' Tip:

The ingredients for high-quality programs are not a mystery – they are well documented within research and practice. Any tool you select is likely to align with California Department of Education (or other statewide) quality standards. Pick a tool and stick with it – measuring quality is a long-term investment that benefits from consistent measurement year over year.

For example, **Partnership for Children and Youth's HousED** program brings together several regional organizations providing after school services within affordable housing communities. These organizations adopted a common, research-validated observational rubric and received extended training on how to conduct observations using this tool. The common tool focused on four main elements of youth program quality that were important to the group: emotional and physical safety; supportive group dynamics; interactive programming; and youth engagement. The program quality tool was dynamic, well adapted to the group's capacity and goals, and offered several entry points for staff development and program planning. As well, it offered program staff within a given agency a common language to discuss the process, scoring results, and next steps across the different sites of their agency.

### Use the data you collect.

Whichever observation tool your program adopts, the important thing is to **use those data about program quality**. Much like staff feedback, quality data should be used in an iterative way; this means that your organization should collect data, use those data to plan, and use the plan to continuously improve youth programming. This cycle will help ensure that the data you collect are used constructively.

The **YMCA of San Francisco** is piloting a consistent data review session that allows programs to bring in association-wide and program-specific data sources to make meaning out of data for program improvement planning. The session walks youth-facing staff and program quality coaches through a set of interactive data review exercises. These include hands-on manipulation of their numbers, a deep dive into the root causes behind these numbers, and steps to prioritize potential actions based on their findings. These exercises set staff up to write program improvement plans based both on numbers and on staff members' knowledge of the programmatic context. The coaches then follow up with individual programs at their branch in order to assess progress and provide support.

### Support change by developing a program quality infrastructure.

In order for programs to reach their full potential to provide strong youth development, **it is not enough to simply measure quality** using a common framework. Programs need to invest in strong staff training and coaching and develop strong content to actually *improve* quality; **this can be done by cultivating program infrastructure** that will

support these new quality practices.

For example, in **West Contra Costa County Unified School District, the Expanded Learning Office** provides aligned trainings for site coordinators each month. Starting in the third year of their quality systems journey, the Expanded Learning Office organizes site coordinators to *conduct* these same training sessions for line staff across sites. Each site coordinator is assigned to a team of four. After attending the training themselves, they meet with the Expanded Learning Office to review the material and plan the session for front line staff, which they conduct the following month.

In addition, the Expanded Learning Office creates lesson plans for the start of the school year. Building on their experience with a tightly managed, successful summer learning program, the Expanded Learning Office created a set of lesson plans that line staff can use in order to set the initial tone for the year and establish facilitation habits aligned with the District's quality standards.

### **Act at both the site and system levels.**

Effecting improvements at the organizational or system levels can be difficult; **working simultaneously at the site- and system-levels helps facilitate change.** Organizations can work at system level by selecting a common quality framework and introducing it across its youth programs, as described above. Organizations can **work at site level by including site coordinators and youth-facing staff** in all phases of the quality improvement cycle, including in training, data collection.

For example, **San Francisco Unified School District's ExCEL Office** connects the system and the site in a variety of ways. In addition to common survey collection and site observation tools, each site must select program improvement goals in each of three areas specified by the District: aligned academic support, healthy active youth, and safe and supportive culture and climate. Sites then develop their own plans on how to achieve the goals selected from the District-wide priority list.

In addition, the District supports several system-wide initiatives, particularly restorative practices, at both the system and site levels. The District provides organization-specific coaching (by both District staff and outside consultants), hosts monthly professional development sessions for all sites together, and facilitates access to District data on school climate, social-emotional learning, and academic outcomes that are reported back to individual sites in annual data profiles.

The data collection effort should be worth the learning payoff. Right-sizing your collection input and your knowledge output will help generate staff buy-in and make it more likely that data collection and use are carried forward to future program cycles.



## Build your story from multiple perspectives.

Using observation data in support of building program quality is an essential data strategy – **but it is not the only strategy**. Data collection tools such as surveys, interviews, or focus groups can complement observational data. Pick a data collection schema that is well **adapted both to your program’s capacity and to the questions you want to ask**. Some things to consider:

- Surveys are good at answering ‘yes/no/how frequently/to what degree’ types of questions and can nicely bring youth voice (or staff voice, parent voice) into focus;
- Interviews, either with individuals or groups, are good for addressing nuance, such as change over time, and answering questions that do not have ‘yes/no’ responses;
- Focus groups also address nuance, but require experienced facilitators who will be comfortable designing and leading highly structured activities with the participants; and
- All data collection instruments require staff time and skill to develop the tool, collect the data, analyze the findings, and present the results.

**For example, OUSD’s After School Programs Office** conducts structured observations to each of its grantee programs, and each program receives an external observation from an outside evaluation team<sup>15</sup>; these observation reports to individual programs get aggregated and are used to help describe the overall data trends about after school programs in Oakland. As well, the individual sites’ data is shared with them to help staff at those programs understand program quality and make a site-specific improvement plan to execute during the school year. In addition to site visits, OUSD uses data on operational metrics like program attendance or staffing ratios. Further, OUSD fields surveys to all after school participants; these surveys ask youth questions about program quality (aligned to the observation rubric), youths’ opinions of their program, and their perceived program outcomes. OUSD’s data strategy is multi-faceted and blends staff observation, youth voice, and academic and demographic data to get a more complete picture of quality within and across its programs.

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<sup>15</sup> In the case of OUSD (and the other examples detailed here), Public Profit – author of this brief – serves as the external evaluator. For more information, visit: [www.publicprofit.net](http://www.publicprofit.net)

### Evaluators’ Tip:

Share site-level data with the sites themselves early and often. Empowering site-level staff to understand and use the data collected about them can increase the pace of change.

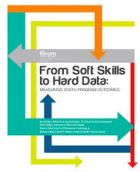
## Follow the steps, be the hinge.

Research and practice demonstrate that **after school programs contribute to positive outcomes if they provide youth with high-quality experiences**. Undertaking some or all of these practical steps will allow your organization to **be that crucial hinge** between attending after school and reaping its vitally important benefits.

For additional resources about selecting an observational tool, see:

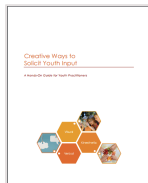


**Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools.** Comprehensive guide comparing the purpose, history, structure, methodology, content, and technical properties of different program observation tools. This guide is accessible free online by visiting: [http://www.cypq.org/sites/cypq.org/files/publications/MeasuringYouthProgramQuality\\_2ndEd.pdf](http://www.cypq.org/sites/cypq.org/files/publications/MeasuringYouthProgramQuality_2ndEd.pdf)



**From Soft Skills to Hard Data: Measuring Youth Program Outcomes.** A guide to help providers select measures for programs that serve upper-elementary-through high school-aged youth. Available free by visiting: [http://forumfyi.org/files/soft\\_skills\\_hard\\_data\\_o.pdf](http://forumfyi.org/files/soft_skills_hard_data_o.pdf)

And for even more information, check out Public Profit's data and evaluation resources at [www.publicprofit.net/toolbox](http://www.publicprofit.net/toolbox):



**Creative Ways to Solicit Youth Input: A Hands-On Guide for Practitioners.** Non-traditional methods for getting youth input on programs, including through verbal, visual, and kinesthetic methods.



**Get More from Your Data! – Three Steps to Success.** A three-step method to help you make meaning from your data.






**Dabbling in the Data: A Hands-On Guide to Participatory Data Analysis.** Fifteen team-based activities to promote meaningful conversations about data.

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