



Quality Standards, Assessments and Supports

The State of Cities

As cities make substantial investments in providing out-of-school opportunities at scale, an increasing number are ready for a serious discussion about how to ensure that these programs are of high quality — that is, that they live up to high standards of practice and deliver on the outcomes that they claim they will achieve.

Cities are pushed toward the quality question from a number of fronts. In Little Rock, city officials and advocates want to ensure that a significant public investment is not compromised by programs that fail to provide meaningful opportunities. In Chicago, stakeholders see the often conflicting standards to which funders hold their grantees, and are eager to bring differing definitions of good programming into alignment. In Kansas City, agencies themselves want to hold themselves to a higher bar, and realize that it is in their best interest to set standards for themselves, rather than have them dictated by an outside force. In many locations, it is parents and young people themselves who demand that programs improve. Whatever the constellation of forces, an increasing number of communities are newly ready to talk about quality standards and the capacity-building supports that must accompany them.

Cities and organizations have responded to the call for quality standards in a variety of ways — reflecting the diversity of stakeholders and fields that come together in the out-of-school hours. Child care providers come to the table with

the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA) standards, which aim to ensure “an environment in which children can grow to the best of their abilities, one that taps their creativity and strengths and allows them to excel.” Workforce development programs can look to standards developed by the National Youth Employment Coalition. Schools bring with them clearly articulated standards for academic performance, but also less defined — but no less important — standards about good instruction and learning environments. Building on and responding to these national models, a number of cities are developing their own standards documents — ranging from the massive detail of Baltimore’s *Standards for After-School/Out of School Opportunities in Youth Places* to much less clearly articulated documents thrown together by school districts or providers in other communities.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

What does it take to ensure that the opportunities available to young people are of consistently high quality?

How can standards support the development of quality programs?

What is the role of program evaluation and assessment?

What supports need to be in place to ensure that standards are met?

The GRASP project is a time-limited, focused effort to help four cities — Chicago, Little Rock, Kansas City and Sacramento — document the opportunities and infrastructures that support young people in the out-of-school hours, and to develop “big picture” plans for better supporting children and youth. GRASP was initiated by the Forum for Youth Investment with the support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.



7014 Westmoreland Avenue
Takoma Park, Maryland 20912
T: 301.270.6250; F: 301.270.7144
www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Tolman, J., Pittman, K., Yohalem, N., Thomases, J., & Trammel, M. (2002). *Moving an Out-of-School Agenda: Lessons and Challenges Across Cities*. Takoma Park, MD: Forum for Youth Investment.

INVOLVING YOUTH IN PLANNING PROGRAM STANDARDS

A growing number of cities are beginning to develop standards documents relevant to adolescents and older youth — requiring a different process and different content than when standards have been developed for school-age programs. One critical difference: young people must be at the table for the standards to be relevant to their needs and experiences.

YouthNet of Greater Kansas City, a network of youth-serving organizations with a history as a capacity-building intermediary, was among the first to take on the challenge of developing teen program standards. The process involved the development of teen surveys distributed in schools, brainstorming sessions on “what makes a good program” and the review of national program resources on teens.

Based on information collected, a draft of teen standards was created. This draft was disseminated to agency representatives and teenagers for their input and review. The final document was thus rooted in the experiences of both teens and youth-serving agencies. YouthNet believes that by involving both youth and agency members, it has created not only a quality-assessment tool of the standards of teen programs, but also a “philosophical shift — because of the participation of youth in the process.”

A scan of this cacophony of local and national standards documents reveals both a common core and important variations. Nearly all of the documents address a set of central issues:

- organization/administration (e.g., agency has sustainable funding sources);
- program activity (e.g., the daily schedule is flexible and it offers enough security, independence and stimulation to meet the needs of all children and youth);
- staff/staffing (e.g., staff work well together to meet the needs of youth);
- health and safety (e.g., there are no known health or safety hazards in the program space); and
- family involvement (e.g., foster student success by encouraging family participation).

Other types of standards are included inconsistently. *Youth engagement and leadership* are often neglected as aspects of program quality — due in part to the fact that many after-school program documents are focused on elementary-aged young people, for whom leadership and voice are less often considered vital. However, a handful of organizations and communities have adopted standards that encourage youth involvement as stakeholders in the standards process and in programming. Supporting youth engagement in the development and content of the standards is an essential part of

USING STANDARDS TO BUILD CAPACITY

A unique collaboration between researchers (Michelle Gambone and Jim Connell), a local intermediary (Community Network for Youth Development), San Francisco Bay Area community-based organizations, and local funders is proving that some things do work to improve program quality.

The eight participating organizations agreed to take part in an intentional effort to provide the basic supports and opportunities that young people need: caring relationships, challenging experiences, high expectations and the like. Young people involved in the organizations were surveyed against this list of basic supports, and the results indicated that many organizations were not offering as much of these basic supports as they wanted to. In response, CNYD, Gambone and Connell worked with the organizations for one year to increase their ability to deliver basic supports and opportunities. A year later, young people rated their organizations at higher levels — sometimes markedly so — across many of the categories.

encouraging program quality; it is also a way of ensuring that young people also value standards. *Community engagement* — again, both as a principle of good programming and as a part of the standards development process — is also left out of many out-of-school standards documents. Without such an expectation, there is no guarantee that programs will meet the needs of the communities of which they are part.

The conversations about standards get people nervous. But they already exist. Whenever you submit a proposal, it's being looked at through a lens. We're talking about engaging partners in the development, oversight and monitoring of those standards.

— A major funder of youth programs

Just as standards vary in their content, cities and programs are at different points in addressing the quality issue. Some, like Kansas City, Baltimore and Philadelphia, are ahead of the curve, and offer very different models for the process and product of standards development. Others, like Chicago, are being deliberate and careful as they proceed — bringing in the expertise of other cities and national intermediaries, involving the range of local stakeholders, and building buy-in. Others are trying to find the right source of leverage in pushing a much-needed quality agenda. Leaders in one city were frank about quality issues in their city. A public funding stream has turned into entitlement for many youth-serving organizations, making any conversations about quality politically loaded. Still, leaders and nonprofit partners are committed to taking the issue on.

Critical Issues, Lessons Learned

Holding programs accountable requires capacity building support. Very few organizations or program leaders would deny the importance of having shared standards. However, many are asking, “what good are standards if we aren’t building the capacity of organizations to meet those standards?” Standards provide a natural frame for capacity-building efforts; they allow programs to identify their strengths and weaknesses, then seek out supports that match their situations from capacity-building organizations that share the same way of talking about quality. Yet, far too often, standards are applied in the absence of new resources, and organizations end up being measured against expectations they cannot meet.

Holding programs accountable also requires assessment and evaluation capacity — currently limited at the program level. Assuming that evaluation capacity exists within local programs is a mistake. Quality evaluations in the out-of-school field have come not from individual programs but large-scale initiatives that bring national resources and expertise to the table. While a handful of national organizations are beginning to support small-scale evaluation work, there is much more capacity building to be done in this area.

One of the tricky consequences of establishing standards in out-of-school time programs is determining who should enforce them. Should community boards or local governments enforce such standards? Further, what are the consequences of programs that do not meet standards? These are some questions that should be addressed as stakeholders are engaged in the process and as the out-of-school time field expands.

Standards take on new significance when they become shared criteria for funding. The commitment of public and private funders to the standards development process can be critical, and participation can provide a remarkable opportunity for funders to discuss their expectations of grantees across traditional lines. Having funders at the table can result in one of the most tangible impact of standards — that they become a shared language for discussing who should receive money. In some cities, the standards have been integrated into grant guidelines. Safe and Sound: Baltimore’s Campaign for Children and Youth, for instance, has established “a policy match that requires all newly funded as well as currently funded after-school/out-of-school time programs to comply with standards for Baltimore After-School/Out-of-School Opportunities in Youth Places.” Whether such policy matches increase programs’ compliance with standards, or deprive them of the resources they

CITY SNAP-SHOT: SACRAMENTO

As is the case in many cities, Sacramento sits at the hub of a number of efforts to ensure that out-of-school programs are of high quality. The array of efforts underway is promising. But stakeholders are calling for some sort of resource and referral structure that would match organizations with the capacity-building resources they need. They are also recognizing that quality-building opportunities are in shorter supply for those working with older youth. Some examples of the range of opportunities currently in place:

- Youth Services Provider Network. Begun in 2001 in response to service providers’ desire to come together to share resources and study strengths-based best practices in the youth services field, this network focuses particularly on programs for elementary school children.
- Asset Development Network. This three-year effort aims to increase awareness in the education community of Search Institute’s 40 developmental assets framework and support sites implementing asset-building efforts. The group holds networking meetings and workshops.
- Region 3 Healthy Start/After School Training Support. This is an effort to support Healthy Start programs and state-funded after-school programs through trainings, monthly support, networking meetings and on-site technical assistance.
- After School Intermediary. This joint initiative of the Foundation Consortium and the California Department of Education created a statewide after school training network that hosts conferences and provides on-site technical support for state-funded after-school programs.
- California School Age Consortium (CalSAC). CalSAC supports the advancement of professionals and organizations in providing quality, affordable and accessible after-school programs through training, advocacy and networking.
- Mentoring Coalition. This alliance of local mentoring programs and agencies dedicated to helping young people succeed provides information and support to mentoring programs.
- Out-of-School Time work group, UC Davis. This is a network of 4-H programs and staff around the state that are working together to provide and support out-of-school time programs in California.
- Prevention Technical Assistance Coalition. This effort includes a group of about 15 providers from various disciplines (drug and alcohol, recreation, and mental health, etc.) who have come together to work jointly on training and research.
- Non Profit Resource Center. Located in the public library, this resource assists nonprofits with researching funding opportunities and also offers professional development.
- The EMT Group, Inc. This firm offers technical assistance and training to program providers. Training is paid for by state drug and alcohol funds. Available training ranges from one-day workshops to on-site technical assistance for specific organizational needs.

need to eventually meet standards, is not yet clear. In any case, standards need not — and will not — erase the differences in priorities among funders.

Contact Information for Local Efforts

Safe and Sound: Baltimore's Campaign for Children and Youth

Hathaway Ferebee, Executive Director
2 East Read Street, 3rd Floor
Baltimore, MD 21202
Tel: 410.625.7976; Fax 410.332.4752
Email: info@safeandsound.org
Web: www.safeandsound.org

Community Network for Youth Development

Sue Eldridge, Executive Director
657 Mission Street, Suite 410
San Francisco, CA 94105
Tel: 415.495.0622

YouthNet of Greater Kansas City

Deborah Craig, Executive Director
104 West 9th St., Suite 104
Kansas City, MO 64105
Tel: 816.221.6900
Web: www.kcyouthnet.org

Contact Information for National Resources

The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is a leader in issues related to evaluation and program quality in out-of-school programming. HFRP produces *Evaluation Exchange*, a newsletter that addresses a variety of issues related to program evaluation, produces many relevant publications, and hosts an online database of after-school evaluations. For more information, contact:

Harvard Family Research Project
Longfellow Hall
Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138
Tel: 617.495.9108; Fax: 617.495.8594
Email: hfrp@gse.harvard.edu
Web: <http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~hfrp/>

The National School-Age Care Alliance

(NSACA) is a national membership organization representing the range of public, private and nonprofit after-school program providers. NSACA supports and accredits organizations working to meet the organization's Standards of Quality School-Age Care. For more information, contact:

National School-Age Care Alliance
1137 Washington Street
Boston, MA 02124
Tel: 617.298.5012; Fax: 617.298.5022
Web: www.nsaca.org

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time

(NIOST) provides technical assistance to organizations and communities working to develop quality standards and improve program quality. For more information, contact:

National Institute on Out-of-School Time
Wellesley College
106 Central Street
Wellesley, MA 02481
Tel: 781.283.2547
Web: www.niost.org
Email: niost@wellesley.edu

The National Youth Employment Coalition

(NYEC) has brought new focus and resources to quality in workforce development programs through its Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) — a system that assesses, recognizes, documents and shares effective practices. NYEC facilitated the development of the PEPNet Criteria for Effective Practice, and offers a self-assessment workbook, a program improvement process and certification for programs working to meet the criteria. For more information, contact:

National Youth Employment Coalition
1836 Jefferson Place, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.659.1064; Fax: 202.659.0399
Email: nyec@nyec.org
Web: www.nyec.org

Youth Development Strategies, Inc., (YDSI) is a policy research and technical assistance organization, formed to help community organizations and institutions that serve youth understand the youth development approach, assess their effectiveness, and develop new policies and practices to strengthen their work. YDSI 1) conducts and disseminates research supporting the use of a developmental approach to serving youth; 2) evaluates the effectiveness of organizations and institutions in helping youth attain the desired outcomes; and 3) develops and provides technical assistance and tools to funders, managers, planners, evaluators and technical assistance providers working with community-based youth initiatives and programs to measure and improve the quality of services to youth. YDSI began as Community Action for Youth Projects, the research collaborative led by Michelle Gambone and Jim Connell described under "Using Standards to Build Quality." For more information, contact:

Youth Development Strategies, Inc.
Michelle Gambone
Email: magambone@aol.com