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Elements of Quality in After-School Programs

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<u>Introduction</u>

Communities across the country are becoming more aware of the importance of how our children and youth are spending their out of school time. Out of school time poses opportunities for both positive and negative outcomes in the lives of children, families and communities. Federal, state, and local systems interested in the health and well-being of children and families, overall community safety, and overall economic growth are beginning to understand the value of <u>intentional, coordinated service delivery</u> for children and families, including that which occurs within and outside of school including after-school programs (ASP).

There is an increasing demand for accountability in educational programming, and achievement of a full range of desired outcomes. To meet these accountability standards, we are experiencing a steady movement in efforts to identify high quality programs, including after-school programs that demonstrate success in measurable outcomes. However, there is currently no commonly agreed upon definition of "quality" in after-school programming (including school-based, school-linked, and community-based). Likewise, there is no standard published or unpublished set of research-based guidelines regarding elements or indicators of quality in after-school programs, or how they are accomplished. There exists a dire need to synthesize the research on extended learning opportunities and after-school programs, and identify indicators of quality. In this report, we (a) briefly describe three primary types of after-school programs (school-based, school-linked, and community-based), highlighting key similarities and differences; and (b) synthesize the literature on quality program indicators and outcomes in after-school programming.

In the summer of 2008, the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools in the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on elements of quality in after-school programs. Funding and support for this project was provided by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, and the Nebraska Community Learning Center Network. This summary report is a synthesis of the information gleaned from the comprehensive literature review. We review the current status of knowledge and evidence regarding successful after-school programming, and identify and summarize common elements of quality in after-school programming. We have organized this document into ten elements of quality program indicators in two arenas: programmatic and administrative. We also discuss five common outcomes of quality programs.

This document is intended to shed light on the research findings related to after-school programs and related factors (e.g., extended learning opportunities, family involvement, continuities in educational programming, positive youth development, risk reduction, professional support, staff competencies), and specifies quality indicators in after-school services. Below, we describe the approach used to conduct the review, provide an overview of program types, and describe key findings.

The project was initiated by reviewing six prominent articles featuring various after-school programs across the country. Working from the initial six articles, we gathered and reviewed additional literature (i.e., primary sources) cited in the original review articles, including peer-reviewed and non-peer reviewed journal articles, program newsletters, annual reports, program evaluations, and written updates provided to funding agencies. From this search, we gathered 150 sources. A careful review of all sources revealed a great deal of overlap existing among the 150 sources. Some were full studies, some were shortened versions of a full report published elsewhere, and some were literature reviews that had conducted meta-analyses utilizing several articles. This overlap allowed us to narrow our sources to 81 unique articles. A complete list of the 150 references is provided in Appendix A.

From the comprehensive literature base, we identified ten key elements of quality program indicators (organized into two areas) and five key quality program outcomes. Quality program *indicators* refer to elements or components of quality program design, curriculum, implementation, and administration. Quality program *outcomes* refer to the positive impacts of quality after-school programs on students, families, and schools.

Overview of Program Types

Initially, we were informed by leaders in the area of after-school programs of three types of program structures – school-linked, school-based, and community-based. Although some degree of overlap is present among these, distinctions among them are commonly made based on executive decision making power, location of program/activities, control and sources of funding, and links to school day curriculum. Figure 1 illustrates the distinctions among program types.
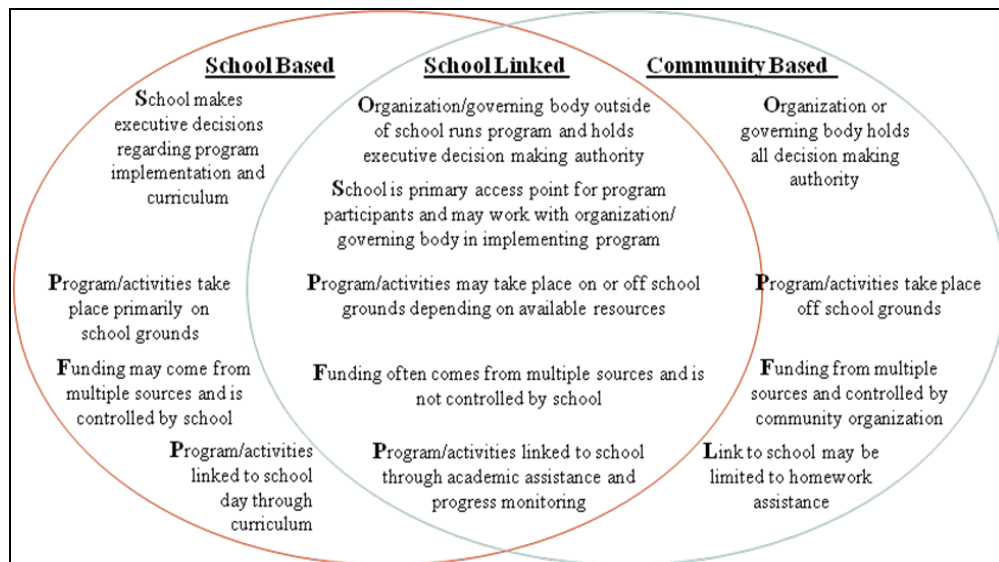

Figure 1. Types of programs providing after school services.

The characteristics that constitute quality programs are consistent across school-based, school-linked, and community-based program types. A summary of the literature identifying these program indicators of quality is presented next.

Key Findings

Quality Program Indicators

Key elements of quality program indicators are organized into two arenas: **administrative** and **programmatic**. Administrative indicators are *necessary* for the quality of any program that includes children as participants. Although not sufficient as indicators of quality programs, in order for programs to be implemented with high quality, they must include elements of safety, self-reflection, and organization/management. The programmatic indicators go beyond administrative indicators and are required for program sustainability. Programmatic indicators include program development, instructional activities, recreational activities, family involvement and accessibility, community partnerships and mentoring, health awareness and opportunity, and active participation. Several of these indicators have a tendency to overlap in program implementation yet are distinct enough to warrant individual discussion. It is important to note that experimental studies were lacking in the literature; therefore, results presented herein are descriptive only.

Administrative: Safe, Self-Reflective, & Well-Administered

Programs' physical environments, personnel, and procedures must ensure the physical and emotional safety of participants. Safety includes staff training in first aid, clear emergency exit procedures and clean/well-maintained physical space. Self-reflective administration involves an approach to program development, monitoring, and ongoing improvement (Lauer et al., 2006). Well-organized and well-administered programs assure ongoing improvement through proactive program funding, establishing valuable connections with community agencies, program monitoring, and documentation/careful reporting on operations and outcomes (Pechman & Fiester, 2007). Administrative indicators were not emphasized in the literature on quality after-school programs because they are often assumed as necessary for any environment where children are provided care. Additionally, administrative indicators are necessary for a quality program but are not sufficient in establishing or maintaining a successful after- school program.

Programmatic: Program Development

Three elements of program development were prevalent across studies as indicators of quality programs: program design, program environment, and professional development/staff characteristics. Key aspects of program design include program intentionality, goals, and evaluations. Programs should initially establish intentional, thorough, and detailed designs that specify measurable outcomes and periodic evaluations for continuous program improvement and evaluation (Friedman & Bleiberg, 2002; Harvard Family Research Project, 2002; Kansas State Department of Education, 2007; Quinn, 1999).

Strict adherence to established intentions and goals is essential in achieving program success and implementing informative evaluations. The presence of consistent and accurate data collection on participant attendance, engagement, and academic progress is important in paving the way for longitudinal program evaluations. (Sengupta, 2008).

Program environment refers to establishing a supportive, warm, and welcoming after-school environment (Fashola, 1998; Harvard Family Research Project, 2002; High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2008; Hollister, 2003;). Youth-staff interactions characterized by mutual respect, attentiveness, encouragement, and reciprocity are foundational in establishing an effective program environment (Grossman et al., 2007; Pechman et al., 2008; Russell et al., 2003; Vandell & Pierce, 2006). Successful programs employ staff that are responsive and adaptive to participants' individual needs, utilize positive behavior management techniques, consistently hold high expectations of participants, and are capable of establishing positive and trusting youth-staff relationships (Vandell & Pierce, 2006; Walker & Arbreton, 2004; Yohalem et al., 2007).

A key indicator of quality in after-school programs is staffing by diverse, well paid, and highly educated individuals, with multiple opportunities for continuous professional development (Arbreton at al., 2005; Dryfoos, 1999; Hall & Gruber, 2007; Little et al., 2007). An emphasis in quality programs is placed on hiring staff members that reflect the demographic characteristics of after-school participants and are committed to continual program and professional development (High Scope, 2008; Russell et al., 2003; Walker & Arbreton, 2004; Vandell & Pierce, 2006). Staff should have multiple opportunities to engage in relevant workshops, continuing education, local/national conferences, and mentoring relationships with other successful programs (Hall & Gruber, 2006; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004) to maintain high quality.

Programmatic: Instructional Activities

Instructional activities include coverage of (1) academic content such as reading, math, and writing; and (2) pro-social behaviors and development. Both categories are characterized as high quality when instructional activities are sequential, active, explicit, and focused on specific goals (Birmingham et al., 2005; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Gardner, 1992; Little et al., 2007). Offering students opportunities for choice and leadership and the integration of principles of positive youth development, such as in service learning programs, are also successful instructional activities that characterize elements of quality programs. Academic instructional activities potentially include: homework assistance/tutoring time, specialized academic support and monitoring, college preparation, and enrichment activities in a variety of academic subjects (Davis & Farban, 2002; Fashola, 1998; Ferrin & Amick, 2002; Friedman & Bleiberg, 2003; Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). High quality after-school programs also offer activities and opportunities to learn cognitive and non-cognitive skills essential for pro-social behaviors and development (Hollister, 2003; Reisner et al., 2007). Examples of these include activities and environments that emphasize and model teamwork, responsibility, acceptance, and respectful peer interactions (Hall & Gruber, 2007; Hollister, 2003).

Programmatic: Recreational Activities

High quality after-school programs provide recreational activities that allow participants' exposure to a variety of physical, mental, and creative (e.g., arts and crafts, music, drama/theatrical) experiences. Activities include cultural and community /service learning opportunities that incorporate school curriculum, field trips, sports/exercise opportunities, career skills exploration, and opportunities to take initiative and explore personal interests (Friedman & Bleiberg, 2002; Granger, 2008; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; New York State Afterschool Network, Program Quality Assessment Tool; Quinn, 1999; Redd, 2006; Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). A common element of successful recreational activities in after-school programs is project-based activities that culminate in authentic work (Birmingham et al., 2005; Ferrin & Amick, 2002). As with instructional activities, it appears important that participants have a wide array of challenging recreational activities from which to choose and are granted a sense of autonomy and independence in choosing recreational activities in which to participate (Vandell & Pierce, 2006; Walker & Arbreton, 2004).

Programmatic: Family Involvement and Accessibility

Family involvement and accessibility refers to the extent to which participants' families are welcomed and encouraged to take an active role in both the planning and execution of the day-to-day activities and overall goals of the program. High quality programs emphasize convenience for families in scheduling planning meetings and family activities; such programs are considerate of working families' needs and offer accessible, convenient programs (Walker & Arbreton, 2004). Family involvement is established in a variety of ways, including adult development activities (GED classes, ESL classes, job skills training), support groups/parent counseling, and referral to health and social services (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002; Levy & Shepardson, 1992). Other forms of involvement may include parent-child shared events, parent volunteers, or parent leadership councils (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002).

Programmatic: Community Partnerships and Mentorship

Community partnerships and mentorship refers to programs effective use of community resources (education, health, social, etc.) in offering enhanced programs and services to participants and their families (Foley & Eddins, 2001; Jehl & Kirst, 1992; Walsh, n.d.). High quality programs provide participants the opportunity (through service-learning, mentorship, or community based experiences) to interact with community agencies, businesses, and universities (Hall & Gruber, 2007; Reisner et al., 2007). For families this may be in the form of referrals and on-site services, building families' awareness of available community resources (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002). For participants, community partnerships serve to enhance the role of young people as community resources (Quinn, 1999).

Programmatic: Health Awareness and Opportunity

After-school programs that are considered high quality adhere to principles of healthy life choices. Health awareness and opportunity may be as simple as the fostering of an environment in which healthy food choices are available and encouraged, or various opportunities for physical exercise (Policy Study Associates Inc., 2006; Russell et al., 2003). This may also include increased awareness of substance abuse, sexuality, reproductive health, and prevention of STDs (Friedman & Bleiberg, 2002; Warren et al., 2002).

Programmatic: Active Participation

Youth-centered policies and practices are integral to maintaining participant motivation and engagement in high quality programs (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2008). Involving participants in running the program, offering a variety of choices, and refraining from forced participation is highly predictive of youth motivation. Thus, high quality programs prioritize active participation in program events in two primary ways: children participating in planning, and children participating actively in activities and events. Children of all age groups receiving the services should have a voice in program curriculum and activities; participation should be developmentally appropriate. Older adolescents can have more freedom to make suggestions and create unique and meaningful experiences for themselves, but children can also be considered part of the planning team to the extent that it is practical and appropriate (Hall & Gruber, 2007; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; Pechman et al., 2008).

Outcomes

Five general outcomes of after-school programs were identified in the literature review. Generally speaking, these categories apply to all programs regardless of program type (e.g., school-based, community-based, school-linked). Depending on the needs of the program, these categories may also be easily dissected for a more finely-tuned evaluation of outcomes. Below, we summarized the five quality program outcomes and included examples of programs that represent each outcome. As a reminder, experimental studies were lacking in the literature; therefore, results presented herein are descriptive only.

Academic Performance

Academic performance is often reported as an outcome of high quality programs. This includes increases in school grades and grade point average (GPA), proficiency or performance in core content areas such as reading and math, or academic achievement as indicated by standardized test scores or state-/district- wide assessments (Afterschool Alliance, 2003; Davis & Farbman, 2002; Durlak & Weissberg). Other measures include teacher or parent ratings of academic performance (Gomby & Larson, 1992). In addition, some reports indicate decreases in dropout rates, and increases in grade retention and graduation rates (Gomby & Larson, 1992; Huang et al., 2000; Walsh, n.d.).

Positive School Behaviors

The category of positive school behaviors is a second set of outcomes reported as a benefit of quality after-school programs. This includes decreases in tardiness and absence rates, increases in completion of in-class assignments and homework, and improvements in general work habits and study skills (Afterschool Alliance; Davis & Farbman, 2002; Little et al., 2007). Other positive school behavior outcomes include the following: increased school engagement, higher educational and career aspirations, improved attitudes toward school and teachers, and increased motivation and task persistence (Afterschool Allicance; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Grossman et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2000; Pathways to Success; Vendell et al., 2007).

Social Behaviors

Key social behaviors are identified as important outcomes of well-developed, quality after-school programs. These include social skills such as positive peer and adult interactions and relationships, and positive conflict resolution and emotion regulation skills (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; Pathways to Success; Pechman et al., 2008; Reisner et al., 2007; Russell et al., 2003; Vandell et al., 2007).

Emotional Well-Being

Emotional well-being is an important outcome of high quality after-school programs. This includes attitudes toward and beliefs about the following: (a) the self (e.g., self-worth, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, the self as a learner, the self as a student), (b) connection with the community, (c) sense of safety, (d) the self in relationship to peers and adults, and (e) mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Afterschool Alliance, 2003; Arbreton et al., 2005; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; Gomby & Larson; Hollister, 2003; LeCroy, 2003; Little et al., 2007; Phillips, 1999; Vandell et al., 2007; Zief et al., 2006). This outcome may be measured through interviews, self-reports, suicide rates, scores on depression scales, and scores on self-esteem scales (Gomby & Larson, 1992).

Health and Wellness

Health and wellness is a final outcome of quality programs. This consists of the ability to identify and make healthful choices (e.g., eating habits and physical activity) as well as reduced problem and risk taking behaviors such as substance use, sexual activity, or criminal behavior (Arbreton et al., 2005; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Goldschmidt & Huang, 2007; Gomby & Larson, 1992; Policy Study Associates, 2006). This may be measured by physical fitness, self-reports/interviews, rates of juvenile delinquency, and ability to withstand peer pressure (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Policy Study Associates, 2006).

<u>Limitations & Cautions</u>

The quality indicators presented here are representative of common themes throughout the literature on quality after school programs. While most successful programs are able to weave elements of all the indicators into their program design, emphasis is often given to carefully selected indicators based on program goals and intended outcomes. It is important to note that the aforementioned programmatic indicators do not constitute a checklist for assessing quality after school programming. *Quality* is not defined by the presence or absence of all possible program indicators or outcomes. *Quality* is more appropriately defined by a clear and appropriate approach to programming. A quality approach to programming includes identifying community and participant needs, clearly articulating program goals and intended outcomes, and ensuring that quality program indicators associated with those intended outcomes are present.

The current status of research regarding afterschool programs is limited to descriptive information – who the participants are, what the intended outcomes are, and the programmatic indicators present. Additionally, it is important to note that the literature base fails to empirically link quality indicators with outcomes. There is a lack of experimental studies that systematically manipulate indicators in investigating their relationship to outcomes. Because of this, it is difficult to align evidence-based indicators with intended outcomes.

<u>Examples of Successful Implementation of Quality Indicators</u>

Evaluations of successful and sustainable after-school programs provide valuable examples of how quality indicators are implemented to achieve specific goals and outcomes. Based on a review of program evaluations, we provide a brief glimpse at some of the approaches programs have taken in implementing quality indicators. Please note that the following examples were selected based on their complete descriptions of their programs and are not an exhaustive list of programs or a comprehensive review of all after-school programs.

<u>Program Development: Program Design</u>

The nationally recognized *LA's BEST* program in Los Angeles, California, initially outlined five specific goals of their program, planned multi-phase evaluations to assess outcomes, and carefully implemented activities to achieve goals (Huang et al., 2000). *LA's BEST* and other programs (After School Matters, Citizen Schools) track participants from program entry throughout their academic career; collecting detailed attendance data, monitoring participants' grades and graduation rates, and assessing participants' attitudes towards school (Goerge, 2007, Pearson et al., 2008). Long-term tracking enables longitudinal studies of program impacts utilizing existing databases (Goerge, 2007; Kansas State Department of Education, 2007). These evaluations help programs in decision making (staffing, program implementation, etc.) and contribute to continual program improvement and sustainability.

Program Design: Program Environment

Program environment is an indicator that most successful programs addressed and integrated into their program or activities in some fashion. For example, *Extended Services Schools* functions as a support to communities in creating after-school programs based on one of four nationally recognized models. All four models (the *Beacon*, *Bridges to Success*, Community *Schools*, and *West Philadelphia Improvement Corporation*) stress the importance of staff members' ability to develop warm and engaging environments that foster positive adult-youth and peer relationships (Grossman, 2002). Activities are designed to promote key features of positive youth development, including adult-youth relationships and peer support.

Program Design: Professional Development/Staff Characteristics

Foundations After School Enrichment program has a particularly strong commitment to staff development. They engage in systematic overviews of programs, using a quality assurance program to track efforts and plan for staff improvement. Their staff is committed to continual program improvement and participates in national conferences, continuing education, and pre-service/in-service professional development (Klein & Bolus, 2002). In terms of staff characteristics, the *Virtual-Y* after school program found a relationship between positive outcomes and a focus on low student to staff ratios, hiring staff with four year degrees, ensuring all staff is trained in youth development practices, and maintaining low staff turnover rates (Foley & Eddins, 2001).

Instructional Activities

In the academic arena, *Citizen Schools of Boston* offer a variety of lessons (time management, organization, motivation/academic confidence building curriculum) for different age ranges that are intentionally designed to improve school navigation skills (www.citizenschools.org). *LA's BEST* afterschool program utilizes research based curriculum, Kidzlit & Kidzmath, as academic enrichment activities to bolster participants' academic competencies (Huang et al., 2000). To increase pro-social behaviors, *Extended Services Schools* designs their activities to promote positive social development, ensuring that most activities encourage support among peers and offer a variety of decision making/leadership opportunities (Grossman et al., 2002).

Recreational Activities

At the high school level, *After School Matters* program in Chicago offers exposure to a variety of potential interests by offering multiple after-school clubs which culminate in a service-learning internship for students (George et al., 2007). At the elementary and middle school level, *Foundations After School Enrichment Program* offers a variety of recreational activities that include significant service-learning components (e.g., field trips to local restaurants, museums, businesses) (Klein & Bolus, 2002). The nationally recognized *LA's BEST* program also offers a variety of engaging enhancement programs that culminate in a

celebration of the students' achievements (e.g., producing a play/dance production, rewarding students in science program with trips to space camp) (Huang et al., 2000).

Family Involvement & Accessibility

Beacon Centers in New York City encourage family involvement and accessibility by establishing centers that serve as a safe gathering place for *all* neighborhood citizens and offering a variety of adult courses, workshops, and counseling (Warren et al., 2002).

Community Partnerships/Mentorship

The *West Philadelphia Improvement Corporation* is a community revitalization program that partners with local universities in providing university interns that work as tutors and mentors to community schools (Grossman et al., 2002). Many programs partner with community agencies to increase families' awareness of available community resources and offer program enhancements (book programs with local library, art/music programs with museums) (Foley & Eddins, 2001; Harvard Family Research Project, 2001).

Health Awareness & Opportunity

Virtual Y- YMCA of New York implements quality activities with an emphasis on physical/health awareness (Foley & Eddins, 2001). This includes exposure to a variety of sports/physical activities and education on healthy eating habits. To decrease risk taking behaviors, *Beacon Center* staff led informal discussions on drug and alcohol use, sexuality, reproductive health, and prevention of STDs (Warren et al., 2002).

Active Participation

One of the core values of *LA's BEST* is that children should be involved in the decision making process and program design. In adhering to this value, *LA's BEST* allows participants to choose when and what activities they participate in (Huang et al., 2000). *After School Matters* gives participants opportunities to explore their personal interests by offering a variety of after-school clubs in which to participate (George et al., 2007).

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Conclusions and Recommendations

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Our extensive review of the literature yielded ten categories of quality indicators in after-school programs and five common program outcomes. It is important to note that the research base does not allow for statements of causality linking indicators to specific outcomes, and the indicators do not constitute a list of mandated requirements necessary for building and sustaining quality after school programs. That is, quality is not defined by the full and simultaneous incorporation of all indicators into programming. Rather, emphasis is often placed on particular indicators according to program design, goals, and intended outcomes. With these caveats in mind, it seems appropriate to conclude that *quality* in afterschool programs starts with a clear and appropriate approach to programming including: (a) identification of community needs and the needs of the

intended recipients, (b) clear articulation of program goals specific to the intended recipients, (c) clear articulation of the intended program outcomes, (d) quality program indicators associated with intended outcomes, (e) structures to support goals, (f) good measurement plan(s) to assess indicators and outcomes, and (g) a clear articulation of funding sources.

As the literature and interest in after-school programs expand, we have several recommendations to improve the knowledge base on what does and does not constitute quality in afterschool programming. First, there is a substantial need to increase empirical research investigating elements of quality in after-school programming. This will help standardize key elements of program success and build a more robust, informative literature base. Second, there is a need for systematic manipulation of indicators to determine the effects of certain indicators and determine their relationships to outcomes. Little is currently known about the direct and indirect relationships between indicators and outcomes; however, such knowledge is necessary for programs to determine which indicators are necessary to achieve program goals and outcomes. Third, there is a need to consistently define variations of after-school programs (school-based, school-linked, and community-based) to further understand structures and functions of different programs, and the means to maximize their efficiency and effectiveness.

Appendix A
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