

Lesson 3: Developing Standards

Find quality-control measurements for building successful after-school programs.

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In the development of the community-campus AfterZone model, PASA led the community in a rigorous effort to define the standards it would use to build a successful after-school learning network. The PASA group of partners (including key network members like parents, youth, funders, educators, and program providers) reviewed and created a set of standards culled from such existing sources as the National Afterschool Association (naaweb.yourmembership.com) and from cities including Washington, DC, Baltimore, Kansas City, and Chicago, but that are reflective of the particular needs and priorities of Rhode Island and the city of Providence.

These standards helped PASA and its partners create a quality-improvement strategy to support the growing AfterZones. Those standards serve as benchmarks for assessment and have evolved into a quality assessment tool called the Rhode Island Program Quality Assessment Tool (RIPQA). In this lesson, we discuss how to develop your own standards; the next lesson highlights the evaluation and assessment process based on those standards.

PASA's standards cover five broad areas of program quality:

- » Health, safety, and the environment
- » Relationships
- » Programming and activities
- » Staffing and professional development
- » Administration

VOCABULARY

- » **After-school:** The hours after school, primarily the time between 2 P.M. and 6 P.M.
- » **Providence After School Alliance (PASA):** An intermediary agency responsible for creating a system of high-quality after-school opportunities for middle school youth in Providence, Rhode Island. Initially funded by The Wallace Foundation and Bank of America, PASA is driven by the collective efforts of over 150 public and nonprofit after-school providers and is spearheaded by Mayor David N. Cicilline.
- » **Quality standards:** A set of agreed-upon benchmarks that after-school programs identify as important to their success. They also serve as guides to continuous improvement and accountability.

Developing Standards (continued)

Health, Safety, and the Environment

The after-school environment involves how a program looks and feels: the physical space, its safety and security, the atmosphere it conveys, and aspects of health and nutrition. The environment helps an after-school “shopper” develop a first impression of the program and influences whether a youth and/or family member decides to participate. It also contributes to keeping young people “coming back for more.” The following environmental characteristics are critical to developing a successful after-school program:

- » The program’s indoor and outdoor facilities are welcoming and accessible to children, youth, and the community.
- » The indoor and outdoor space provides an atmosphere of comfort, ownership, and respect for children, youth, and their families.
- » Children and youth are physically safe in both the indoor and outdoor spaces of the program.
- » Program space, materials, and equipment fit the needs of the participants, the staff, and the curriculum.
- » The program facilities are clean, safe, and well maintained.
- » The program protects and supports the physical, mental, and social/emotional Participants are carefully supervised during all program activities.
- » When provided, snacks are well balanced and nutritious.

Relationships

Relationships are the “glue” of an after-school program. For children and youth to feel engaged and excited about the program and activities, staff and volunteers must work together to foster strong, respectful relationships at every level—among staff, youth, families, and the community. For an after-school program to function optimally, it is important that the following take place:

- » Staff and volunteers work well together to meet the needs of all children and youth.
- » Staff and volunteers interact with families in positive ways.
- » Staff and volunteers provide opportunities for meaningful engagement of participants’ family members.
- » Staff and volunteers respond in positive ways to the individual needs of children and youth.
- » Staff and volunteers provide appropriate mentoring and/or role modeling to guide the behavior of children and youth in positive ways.
- » Staff relationships with participants are positive, supportive, nurturing, and consistent.
- » Staff and volunteers encourage participants to make choices and become more responsible.
- » Staff and volunteers interact with participants and their families to support positive growth and development.
- » Participants and their family members interact with one another in positive ways.

Developing Standards (continued)

Programming and Activities

When surveyed, children and youth nationwide indicate that their number one criterion when selecting an after-school program is that it's fun. Beyond being fun, after-school programs can contribute to positive learning and personal growth. Ongoing involvement in an after-school program is connected to the quality and variety of activities offered. The following programming and activities characteristics are important:

- » Activities reflect and promote the mission of the program.
- » There are a variety of engaging program activities to choose from.
- » The daily schedule offers activities that are engaging, varied, and flexible.
- » Participants have choice in the program activities offered.
- » Activities are well supplied with materials, where needed.
- » The program provides a mix of well-structured and loosely structured activities that support and promote creativity.
- » Participants are involved in program planning and development.
- » Program activities enhance the positive development of children and youth.
- » Program staff are thoughtful about influencing learning and increasing knowledge for participants.
- » Participants experience and learn about diversity.
- » The program builds upon community resources.
- » The program offers opportunities for age-appropriate learning, physical activity, skill building, and development.

Staffing and Professional Development

As in any profession, after-school staff and volunteers require ongoing resources, support, and training so they can provide high-quality programming that has a meaningful impact on participants' lives. Methods of recruiting, hiring, training, and technical assistance are important to consider. Staff who are involved in delivering high-quality programming tend to be more satisfied with their jobs and stay at them longer; professional development can make a program more consistent and sustainable. The following are important for staffing and professional development:

- » All program staff receive relevant training and attend ongoing professional development activities that support their own growth and build more effective program practice.
- » Staff have opportunities to assess their individual training needs.
- » Program managers assess job performance and satisfaction among staff and volunteers and make improvements where necessary.
- » Staff and volunteers of all levels are eligible and well prepared to work with participants and their families.
- » Staff and volunteers are culturally aware in working with participants and their families.
- » Staff and volunteers are familiar with their job roles and responsibilities prior to working with participants and their families.
- » Staff and volunteers receive the necessary support to work effectively.

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Developing Standards (continued)

Administration

An after-school program must have appropriate organizational supports in place to run smoothly and effectively and serve youth in the best way possible. Administrative areas that deserve attention include management supports, policies and procedures, links to others, and program assessment. The following administrative policies help ensure an after-school program's success:

- » Staff-to-participant ratios and group size enable the staff to meet the needs of participants.
- » Program policies and procedures are responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families in the community.
- » The administration provides sound leadership and management.
- » The program sets clear expectations for participant behavior and active, consistent participation.
- » Program policies and procedures exist to enhance the health and safety of all children and youth.
- » The program solicits feedback from children, youth, and their families about program activities.
- » The program engages families as partners in its success.
- » The program builds links to the community.
- » Emergency information for each participant is on file and accessible.
- » The program has a clear vision and mission and a plan to support continuous growth.
- » The program has a system for using information for learning and program improvement as well as for measuring outcomes relevant to program activities.

KEY POINTS

- » Standards give after-school programs direction and are used as measures of quality.
- » Work with youth, community providers, and students to develop a list of standards, using PASA's standards across five areas as well as those created by other cities as a point of reference.
- » Research has shown that safety and academic opportunities are key issues for parents; quality and fun are key issues for kids.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Go online to read more about creating and maintaining quality standards in these articles:

- » "Out-of-School Time and Youth Development: A School-Community Analysis," a research report co-sponsored by the United Way and Providence Public Schools at edutopia.org/pasa-curriculum-lesson-quality-standards.
- » "Guide to After-School Quality Standards," a detailed report on PASA standards at edutopia.org/pasa-curriculum-lesson-quality-standards.
- » To see the research behind creating these standards, visit the PASA Resources page at mypasa.org/pasa-strategies/