



A SERIES OF FOCUS BRIEFS

## The State of Afterschool Quality



# Identifying and Improving Quality Programs

NATIONAL  
**AfterSchool**  
ASSOCIATION

# Identifying and Improving Quality Programs

*All children benefit from quality afterschool and summer programs. These programs not only ensure children are in safe and supervised places after the school day or school year ends, but also provides opportunities to play, experiment and be creative. Afterschool programs and providers become trusted members of a child's extended family, and can be the consistent bridge from year to year, teacher to teacher and school to school throughout a child's life.*

## Who is NAA and why do we care about quality?

The National AfterSchool Association (NAA) works to ensure that families who want and need expanded learning opportunities and care during out-of-school hours are able to access high quality programs. NAA is the membership organization for professionals who work with children and youth in diverse school and community-based settings to provide a wide variety of learning experiences during the school year and the summer. The organization works actively to disseminate the best-practice thinking of the afterschool and youth development profession in a variety of modalities, including its website, annual conference, professional development opportunities and online and print resources. NAA has developed the nationally regarded *Standards for Quality School-*

*Care and the Core Knowledge and Competencies for Youth Development Professionals*. The Quality Standards, adopted in 1998 and the Competencies, adopted in 2011, are used in many states and communities and have served as a starting point for the development of community specific standards in others.

Over the past decade, research has emerged that shows the benefits of consistent participation in quality afterschool programs. Children have fewer school absences, higher grades and standardized test scores, demonstrate improved task persistence and report greater satisfaction with afterschool and school programs. In addition to reporting positive outcomes, the research has pointed us to specific inputs that support the attainment of these benefits. Afterschool practitioners and leaders have leveraged this information to create **standards, assessment tools and accreditation processes** that provide transparent evaluation of program quality.

“We have consensus on what the key ingredients (of quality) are: relationships, active learning, inquiry-based approaches and choice, among others”<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, the term **standards** refers to a set of requirements and guidelines, informed by research, that when implemented ensure afterschool program quality. Assessment tools provide a list of measurable behaviors that illustrate standards in action. Accreditation serves as a “stamp of approval” to consumers of a particular service or clients of a particular organization. An accredited program demonstrates that it meets a set of standards on a regular and reliable basis through a valid and rigorous assessment.

## How do we measure afterschool quality?

### Standards and Assessment Tools

NAA introduced the *Standards for Quality School-Age Care*, the seminal set of quality program standards for the afterschool field in 1998. Since that time over 30 states have either adopted the NAA standards or developed state-specific afterschool standards. After a review of existing data and an interview of NAA state affiliates in July 2014, we learned 29 states have written afterschool standards, while an additional six states are in the process of doing so. Standards are the foundation of an afterschool quality improvement system. Use of standards is typically voluntary, however there is an increasing trend toward funders requiring participation in a quality improvement system as a prerequisite for receiving grant funds.

### New York: NYSAN—Quality Standards and Assessment Tool

The New York State Afterschool Network (NYSAN) launched its Quality Standards and Assessment (QSA) Tool in 2010. Like other states’ quality standards and assessment tools, it identifies characteristics of quality based on evidence and research. Unlike other state’s assessment tools, it has a specific focus on continuous quality improvement through program self study.

NYSAN engaged afterschool leaders and practitioners from all program sectors—school-based, community-based, licensed and unlicensed—to develop the tool. It was important to stakeholders, and consistent with the network’s vision, that this tool did not duplicate existing program monitoring or evaluation efforts already in place. The network designed the QSA as a resource and a tool to help practitioners understand quality and support its development.

*“It is not meant to be a device for judging a program as “good” or “bad” and it is not a monitoring tool! Rather, the QSA Tool should serve as a guide for making every part of the program the best that it can be.”<sup>2</sup>*

The tool is widely used across the state and has served as a model for other states’ standards and quality assessment tool development. NYSAN has developed an online User’s Guide that provides directions for use of the tool, as well as strategies for taking action to improve upon areas identified through the self-assessment process. The QSA prompts programs to identify steps that can be taken to improve quality right now, this year and next year. Additionally, the User’s Guide provides assessment best practices, discussing roles program participants, families and staff should play through the QSA process.

<sup>1</sup> Grantmakers and Thought Leaders on Out-of-School Time: Survey and Interview Report. Grantmakers for Education, Summer 2014.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nysan.org/userfiles/file/nysan/overview\\_QSA\\_tool.html](http://www.nysan.org/userfiles/file/nysan/overview_QSA_tool.html)

Standards are a useful tool for afterschool program leadership and practitioners. They address best practices in a number of domains including: curriculum and activity, child-staff interactions, program management, physical program environment, family-staff interactions and health and safety. Standards provide clear expectations regarding what an afterschool program should look like, feel like and be like.

Many states and communities that have developed standards used the process as an opportunity to engage stakeholders including afterschool staff, program leaders, community-based organizations, parents, community members, state and local government agency staff, legislators and school staff. Leaders who engaged diverse stakeholders in standards development report increased community understanding of the important role afterschool programs play in helping young people develop into good students, employees and citizens.

However, standards are only the first element of a quality improvement system. Many states have adopted or created an aligned **quality assessment tool** to measure program and practitioner progress towards quality standards. Our research identified 28 states that have either created a state-specific quality assessment tool or that have adopted a commercially available tool for use in their state.

Quality assessment tools give feedback to afterschool program leadership, staff and parents regarding what the program is doing well. The tools also provide concrete information regarding areas that need improvement. These tools most frequently take the form of a developmental rubric that identifies progress towards desired behavior or structure. Afterschool standards are commonly developed at a state or community level and reflect local values and desired outcomes. Conversely, many states have adopted the use of commercially available assessment tools such as the SACERS, SAYO/APT and YPQA. The tools assess quality along comparable, research-based

TOOL NAME	TOOL USE <sup>3</sup>
<b>SACERS</b>	<u>The School-Age Care Environmental Rating Scale (or SACERS)</u> focuses on “process quality” or social interactions within the setting, as well as features related to space, schedule and materials that support those interactions. The SACERS can be used by program staff as well as trained external observers or researchers. Target age group includes Grades K-8.
<b>SAYO/APT</b>	<u>The Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool (or APT)</u> is a set of observation and questionnaire tools designed to help practitioners examine and improve what they do in their afterschool program to support young people’s learning and development. The APT was designed to address program practices that research suggests lead to youth outcomes measured by the Survey of Afterschool Youth Outcomes (or SAYO)—an evaluation system developed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST).
<b>YPQA</b>	<u>The Youth Program Quality Assessment (or YPQA)</u> encourages individuals, programs and systems to focus on the quality of experiences young people have in programs and the corresponding training needs of staff. The YPQA is primarily focused on what is referred to as the “point of service” —the delivery of key developmental experiences and young people’s access to those experiences. Target age group includes Grades 4-12.

3 Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools. The Forum for Youth Investment, January 2009. [http://forumfyi.org/files/MeasuringYouthProgramQuality\\_2ndEd.pdf](http://forumfyi.org/files/MeasuringYouthProgramQuality_2ndEd.pdf)

domains, but have distinct approaches informed by the developer's theory of change related to afterschool programming, curriculum and evidence of quality. Typically, trained assessors complete these assessment tools through a combination of observations and a document review.

Some states have formalized the assessment of afterschool and early care and education programs into a **Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)**. A QRIS provides a public, transparent and easily understandable rating for licensed child care programs in a community or state. Parents benefit from clear information, generally in the form of hotel or restaurant-style star ratings that can guide their choice of afterschool options. Programs that participate in the QRIS receive access to incentives and support to improve their quality. With many QRIS, meeting basic licensing and regulations equates to the lowest or most basic level on the scale, while accreditation by an external body or organization equates to highest level. Our research identified 30 states with a QRIS that includes school-age programs or allows them to participate in the existing system.

Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) state-level program quality set-aside dollars fund QRIS system development and implementation. Due to this funding model, participation is usually limited to child care and afterschool programs that are licensed by the state and eligible to receive CCDF child care subsidy payments.

## Accreditation

Accreditation is seen as the highest achievement in quality by many child care and afterschool programs. **Accreditation** is a process that starts with initial self-study or an organizational assessment of its readiness to pursue an accreditation process. A team of assessors then embarks on a collaborative process over the course of several months of observation and documentation. At the end of the process, programs either gain accreditation, or must address areas of weakness and apply again in the future. Accrediting bodies charge a fee for this service, the cost of which is normally borne by the program.

## Pennsylvania: PA Keys to Quality

Child care stakeholders in the state of Pennsylvania included afterschool providers in the very first discussions about planning and developing a statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System. As a result, Keystone STARS, the state's QRIS, meets the unique needs of afterschool programs and providers. Afterschool providers were able to articulate how afterschool programs differ from early care and education programs and advocate for system elements, such as environmental rating scales and professional development opportunities that reflect those differences.

PA Keys sponsors a robust and comprehensive system of professional and career development opportunities for school-age professionals. Professional development coursework is aligned to Keystone STARS creating a dual incentive for participation. Practitioners benefit personally by gaining competency and building skills and programs benefit by meeting staff development standards in STARS. For more information regarding the full complement of professional development and program quality improvement support offered to school-age programs visit the [PA Keys website](#).

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## Who funds the creation and implementation of quality improvement systems?

With such a varied program terrain, it is no surprise that funding for the development and implementation of quality system elements is varied and diverse as well. The federal or state funding a program receives determines its approach to quality improvement. If a program blends or braids a number of funding streams from multiple federal or state agencies to support its overall program, it may have to meet multiple, sometimes conflicting, rules and regulations regarding program quality.

The US Department of Education (ED) and the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) fund afterschool programs targeted at meeting the needs of low-income families. These funding streams are allocated based on the population of at-risk / low-income children in the state. In both cases, a legislatively mandated minimum percentage of these funds must be spent on quality improvement initiatives. As a result, states with a larger population of qualifying children have more funding available to support a quality improvement system.

ED funds afterschool and summer programs through the state-administered 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grant program. These funds are awarded through state-level competitions open to schools, school districts and community-based providers of afterschool services. As per federal program statutes, there is funding set-aside at the federal and state levels to fund quality improvement systems and initiatives. At the federal level, the quality set-aside dollars fund national online technical assistance, federal meetings and a web-based data collection portal. States use 21st CLCC quality dollars to support a wide variety of quality elements—from annual professional development conferences to funding quality assessments.

The US Department of Health and Human Services administers the Child Care and Development Fund through the Office of Child Care in the Administration for Children and Families. While

the total 21st CCLC investment across the country is just over \$1 billion, the total CCDF federal investment nationwide is over \$5 billion. As with 21st CCLC, there is a minimum amount of funding that must be set aside to implementation quality improvement initiatives. The quality dollars, as they are known in the field, support a significant federal training and technical assistance infrastructure. At the state level, there has been a strong push toward state creation of QRIS and the infrastructure to support implementation. In most states, the CCDF quality dollars are spent supporting a systemic approach to quality. States must set aside at least 4% of the total quality dollars to support resource and referral networks and school-age quality improvement efforts.

Unfortunately, while CCDF quality dollars are intended to improve the quality child care programs across the continuum from infancy to school-age, policy incentivizes spending at the infant and toddler and preschool levels. CCDF implementation policy requires funding set asides to support quality improvement programs generally and for infant and toddler programs specifically. However, the quality set aside for school-age (afterschool) programs are shared with funding for child care resource and referral activities. As a result of this policy, and state-level flexibility, many states support quality improvement activities for afterschool programs and providers at a disproportionately low amount when compared to the amount of school-age children served through CCDF subsidy.

These two federal programs touch many, but not all afterschool programs operating in a community or state. Some states use funds from these two resources to benefit all afterschool providers, while others restrict access only to programs and practitioners directed funded by 21st CCLC or CCDF subsidy dollars. Developing quality improvement systems requires a significant up front investment of time and resources. What's more, additional, sustained funding is needed to implement and sustain a quality improvement system, a challenge when federal and state investment in social service and education programs continues to decline. Community-based organizations and philanthropy have stepped in to provide additional support for quality improvement programs and systems.

## A Call to Action

A parent, when looking for an afterschool program for his child, looks for the highest quality program with the widest range of engaging and interesting curriculum that he can afford. It is imperative that all programs, in all neighborhoods, serving all children, have access to tools, resources, training and technical assistance to help them exceed the expectations of their community.

Public and private funding are critical to making sustainable improvement to afterschool quality. It is true that on paper, public and private investment in quality systems for afterschool is sizeable, but the expectations regarding the support and services these programs provide are significant. Investments pay for the development of quality metrics, tools and resources as well as for the human resources that support the implementation, use and understanding of the tools. With the mounting evidence regarding the important role afterschool plays in child and youth development, we can't afford not to invest in improving program quality.

“Public and private funding are critical to making sustainable improvement to afterschool quality.”

