



A SERIES OF FOCUS BRIEFS

The State of Afterschool Quality



Funding Quality Initiatives

NATIONAL
AfterSchool
ASSOCIATION

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The landscape of afterschool programs and providers is complex. Within a community, and certainly within a state, there exists a mix of free and tuition-based afterschool and summer programs. While some programs offer a comprehensive mix of academic enrichment, recreation and social-emotional learning activities, others focus on a single area or discipline, offering coaching in a particular sport or instruction in the visual or performing arts. Regardless of the type and cost of the programs, parents are united by the desire of knowing their children are in safe and quality environments for during out-of-school hours.

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 undertook an initial study of the status of quality improvement efforts nationwide in the summer of 2014. This survey informed a series of white papers that discuss the elements of an afterschool quality improvement system, how these systems work across the country and make recommendations regarding next steps.

Who funds afterschool programs?

Many afterschool programs are tuition-based. Parents pay tuition and/or registration fees, transportation or special activity fees to enroll their children in afterschool care and enrichment activities. In some cases these fees cover the entire cost of the program while in others it augments public funding or support received by the program. Yet while many families pay these fees out of pocket, others receive subsidies from the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) that cover a portion of the costs of afterschool care.

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Perhaps the best-known public funding sources supporting afterschool are the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) program administered by the US Department of Education and the CCDF program administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services. Both of these programs are designed to provide subsidized afterschool programs for low-income children. In 2013, the federal government allocated \$1.09 billion to states to fund 21st CCLC grants and services and over \$5 billion through CCDF.

Other local, state and federal agencies also support afterschool programs. Many public libraries, for instance, offer homework help during the school year and reading programs over the summer. An increasing number of cities support a comprehensive system of afterschool and summer supports for children, particularly those from low-income families. Numerous community-based and faith-based philanthropic organizations—such as YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs and 4-H—also support afterschool and summer programs.

Why quality?

It comes as no surprise that public and private investors in afterschool programs want a positive return on that investment. Over the past twenty years afterschool has evolved from drop-in settings and midnight basketball to more comprehensive programs with expectations to meet specific measurable outcomes. As the demand for more formalized programs has grown, expectations regarding program quality have evolved as well—and programs have exceeded that challenge. New research demonstrates what practitioners have known for many years—more consistent time spent in afterschool activities during the elementary school years is linked to narrowing the gap in math achievement among students from low, middle and high-income families.¹ This outcome and other academic, social and behavioral outcomes are attributable to high quality afterschool programs. Researchers have worked in partnership with program leadership and practitioners to identify specific practices that constitute quality.

Enhancing quality, however, requires investment—investment on the part of afterschool funders, programs, stakeholders and practitioners. Further, this investment must be multi-leveled, comprehensive and sustained.

1. Pierce, K. M., Auger, A. and Vandell D. L. *Narrowing the Achievement Gap: Consistency and Intensity of Structured Activities During Elementary School*. Unpublished paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Seattle, WA. (April, 2013)

Who funds quality improvement activities?

The two largest public programs supporting afterschool, 21st CCLC and CCDF require investment in efforts to improve program quality and in fact, require this investment at both the federal and state levels. The US Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services invest in a suite of efforts to both better understand what constitutes quality in afterschool programs as well as in training and technical assistance support to states and agencies administering these funds. The amount of quality dollars available at the state level is indexed to the number of children living in poverty, so the dollars available vary widely from state to state.

These quality dollars must stretch to fund a number of system elements. To improve, and sustain afterschool quality, it's necessary to take a systemic approach to funding several individual elements of quality including:

- **Regulations** to provide baseline expectations for safety and quality.
- **Program and practitioner standards** that spell out the components of a high quality afterschool program including staff qualifications and core competencies, appropriate curricula, outreach to parents, core knowledge and competencies and benchmarks of high quality practice.
- **Program and practitioner supports** including strategies to reach out to practitioners and programs to ensure equitable access to supports and a cohesive set of professional development and training opportunities to help practitioners increase their professional skills.
- **Accountability systems** to collect and use data to track trends over time and to conduct evaluations of initiatives and/or the system.²

2. Afterschool Investments Project, Using the Child Care and Development Fund to Support a System of Quality Improvement for School-Age Programs. (Office of Child Care, 2009).

New Jersey: System-Level Coordination of Quality Resources

The New Jersey School-Age Childcare Coalition (NJSACC) has a track record of successfully coordinating and blending funding to support comprehensive professional development opportunities for afterschool professionals in and beyond New Jersey. One example of their efforts to blend funding to support professional development is the annual NJSAAC conference. Held each fall, the conference is supported in part by both state-level CCDF and 21st CCLC quality funds. Sessions at the conference help afterschool staff meet annual professional development requirements.

An increasing number of philanthropic and community-based organizations are also investing in efforts to enhance afterschool quality. Often these organizations co-invest in quality, by providing matching funds for grants given by other philanthropic organizations.

One of the most successful strategies for funding quality has been through system-level coordination by afterschool networks at the state and community level. These networks are comprised of stakeholders from public agencies, private philanthropy, the afterschool community, broader community leadership and business and industry, and set a neutral table where stakeholders with comparable visions—but divergent strategies to accomplish them—can come together to collaborate. The depth of collaboration has varied from shared visioning to pooling resources, but has made real impact on the quality of services available for children and families.

Equity in quality investments

CCDF investments are significant, representing the largest federal funding source to improve child care access and quality for children and families. States have discretion in how they choose to allocate these various streams of funding to meet their specific needs and priorities.³ Unfortunately, while CCDF quality dollars are intended to meet the needs of programs across the continuum of children their programs serve, policy incentivizes spending at the infant and toddler and preschool levels. Block grant implementation policy requires funding set asides to support quality improvement activities 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 practitioners at a disproportionately low amount when compared to the amount of school-age children served through CCDF subsidy.

States have begun to recognize the disproportionate emphasis of CCDF by creating line items to sustain quality improvement strategies, in some cases, including school-age. Other state –level strategies include investing above the federal minimum in program quality, setting aside a portion of those funds to support school-age quality improvement. Some states, working through a state network, have modeled CCDF quality improvement strategies off of state-level 21st CCLC program improvement initiatives.

The federal Office of Child Care has begun to take steps to equalize how funding is apportioned at the state level. The most recent biennial State Child Care planning template was revised to ask for more specificity regarding actions states are taking to support afterschool quality improvement. At the same time however, the Office of Child Care eliminated the contract for dedicated school-age technical assistance to the states. In an era when the knowledge base regarding afterschool learners and learning is advancing quickly, it is critical to have a strategy to disseminate research and promising practices to the practitioners.

CCDF State Plans

The CCDF is a block grant so states have great flexibility in how they implement the program. Every two years, however, the federal Office of Child Care requires states to submit a plan detailing plans for implementation for the coming biennium. The planning process is required to be transparent and include multiple opportunities for stakeholder feedback. States hold public hearings, public comment periods and stakeholder roundtables to gather input for the final plan.

Recent state plan templates have required states to provide specific detail regarding the implementation of school-age programs and quality improvement processes. States are asked to coordinate with leadership organization such as a statewide or citywide afterschool network or NAA affiliate. School-age programs and stakeholders are encouraged to become involved in the state planning process. Contact your state CCDF administrative agency for details. Approved state plans are typically posted on state administrative agency websites. Additionally, the Child Care State Systems Specialist Network posts details about state administration on its website.

3. Afterschool Investments Project, Using the Child Care and Development Fund to Support a System of Quality Improvement for School-Age Programs. (Office of Child Care, 2009).

A Call to Action

We are at a critical juncture in education. Our education system, as it is currently configured, is failing large numbers of students across the country. Pair a critical need for additional learning supports with the economic need for safe places for children to go while parents are at work, and afterschool emerges as a solution for communities across the country. Our expanding knowledge of what children need to be able to develop into healthy, productive adults coupled with a new understanding of what activities and behaviors contribute to a quality afterschool program creates a quality imperative that is hard to ignore. The National AfterSchool Alliance is committed to work with its affiliates and the afterschool field, to change the dynamic so all children have access to quality afterschool and summer programs.

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