After School Issues

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Setting Standards

Citywide After-School Initiatives Share Their Experiences Developing and Implementing Standards

Most longstanding professions eventually develop some set of institutional or professional standards through which practice and procedure are scrutinized. Experts suggest that there are two hallmarks of a new field: a professional association and an agreed-upon set of standards for practice. The Standards for Quality School-Age Care of the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA) were first published in 1995. The Standards were designed to describe effective practices in out-of-school time care and to institute guidelines for policy and programs.

Some school-age care professionals suggest that the NSACA Standards are limited in scope because they were designed with only youth between the ages of five and 14 in mind, although programs serve children and youth of all ages. As a result, the Standards may serve more as a baseline for revision and adaptation. Examples and indicators of quality reflect the characteristics of the program and the population served. Citywide After-School initiatives have moved in different directions along the issue of standards. Their experiences are helpful in considering the choices and challenges associated with standards development and implementation.

Having a national set of standards available may or may not be useful to policy makers and program providers. Any promulgated national set of standards runs the risk of being too broad and difficult to actualize at the program level in addition to being developed without the input of front line staff or participants. Yet, established standards national or local can guide the allocation of funds, promote consistency, create goals for staffing and program development, and stimulate strategic planning. Standards may provide a lens through which program providers can look critically at program components.

One of the uses of the NSACA Standards has been as an avenue towards accreditation. However, accreditation is difficult to achieve and may not be appropriate for some programs. Recognizing the unique situations faced by each out-of-school program, NSACA promotes the Standards as a tool to guide continuous improvement, with or without accreditation as an end goal.

Motivation for Standards Development

Utilizing standards, national or local, can create a common language or dialogue across program types allowing all stakeholders to have a common understanding of quality. As a strategic tool, standards can help target needs, which then allows for an improvement agenda based on those needs. Assessment based on standards can also fill-in for missing quantitative data to show program effectiveness. A demonstration of program effectiveness is imperative to engagement of community collaborators, retention or expansion of funding, staff recruitment, increased public recognition, and enlarged program participation (Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 2001).

Key Motivators for Standards Development

- Creating common language
- Developing a common understanding of quality
- Streamlining efforts for fundraising, training, and evaluation
- Increasing public recognition
- Demonstrating program effectiveness

In Denver over the last six months, a citywide committee has embarked upon the task of creating citywide standards and outcome goals. Motivating their work was a realization that there were many co-existing prototypes of after-school program providers in the city – with many similar needs, varied program standards, and all needing to raise dollars, etc. It became apparent that it would be in the best interests of the organizations and the children, if providers could focus effort on working more collaboratively, recalls Shirley Farnsworth of the Denver Public School-Community

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Education Office. "We asked ourselves two questions: What is our joint vision for Denver? and What would be the components of a quality program?" The answers to those questions led to a strong partnership between the Denver Mayor's Office and the Denver Public Schools Superintendent's Office and the formation of a citywide committee. The Denver citywide committee will be focusing its work on standards and outcomes over the next six months, and expect the full implementation of the project to take about two years.

Concept, Consensus, Commitment

In Columbus the Mayor's Office of Education crafted a collaborative relationship with the Board of Education, community leaders, the United Way, and local private corporations. A community forum brought together over 180 individuals with strong interest in youth and child development. Out of that forum and using the NSACA and National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) Standards as a foundation, came the "Standards for Creating Successful Out-of-School Opportunities for Columbus Youth."

City of Columbus Standards For Creating Successful Out-of-School Opportunities For Columbus Youth

- Program Management
- Program Components
- Academic Assistance
- Enrichment Activities
- Prevention Units
- Recreation and Socialization
- Strong Family Involvement
- Nutritious Snack
- Program Performance Criteria

Hannah Dillard from the Mayor's Office of Education explains that "as an after-school community we would be all over the board if we didn't have the Columbus Standards as a focused strategy. We know in order to achieve the outcomes we desire we must stay focused on our six components of quality out-of-school time."

The process of moving from concept to commitment required several key steps according to Dillard. "One of the first tasks in developing the Columbus Standards was taking a scan of the environment and uncovering community needs, issues, etc. It was important that we suspended deliberation over possible areas of conflict between different sectors of the city in order to first get to consensus of what after-school should look like and what our needs were." After reaching consensus and agreeing on major issues, then the stakeholders could move through any murky waters of conflict. Dillard points out the importance of then identifying someone who would champion the cause. In Columbus, the Mayor emerged with a "willingness to talk the big picture and give vision to the mission."

Commitment to the standards needs to come from all stakeholders. One of the key components of standards development is to ensure that enough people and the right people are at the table. The overseeing entity, in this case the Mayor's Office, needed to demonstrate commitment to implementation along with program providers. "We provide support for implementing and evaluating the standards. There is an interim self-assessment from which programs can use to check progress and identify needs. We also send out an evaluator to the site. Between the self-assessment and the evaluator we can come to consensus as to where the program needs to go forward."

Gaining Compliance

Once standards are in place there are new challenges in meeting those standards. Accountability requires significant investment in capacity building, assessment, and evaluation capacity. Without these support structures in place, standards lose their role as achievement benchmarks (Pitman, et.al, 2002). Thomas Hatch (2001), writing for the Carnegie Foundation, suggests that it takes capacity to build capacity. Writing about schools, he affirms that the implementation of improvement may be difficult because programs lack the capacity to change. His notion suggests that promoting the standards absent of providing capacity building assistance give little guarantee of success. Program providers may easily see the benefit of standards, but lack the resources to hire appropriate personnel, acquire needed materials, or dedicate requisite time to carry out change.

Standards for Baltimore After-School Opportunities in Youth Places

Organizational Standards
- Human Relationships
- Indoor Environment
- Outdoor Environment
- Safety, Health & Nutrition
- Administration

Program Standards
- Activities
- Program Areas

Core Standards for Philadelphia's Youth Programs

- Human Relations
- Program Planning
- Program Implementation
- Activities
- Program Administration
- Indoor Environment
- Outdoor Environment
- Safety, Health & Nutrition

In Baltimore, complying with the "Standards for Baltimore After-School Opportunities in Youth Places" also means receiving funds and technical assistance. Baltimore's approach to standards compliance has been to hold out the Baltimore Standards as a more fluid document. Rebkah Atnafou of the After-School Institute explains that "there is a three year commitment to implementation so programs can prioritize which standards to implement first…. which are most doable for an agency at a specified time. The only exception to the three-year implementation is safety standards."

This strategy may prove helpful to many after-school initiatives. Having a gradual and supportive implementation strategy keeps the focus on long-term change and quality development instead of quick improvements to satisfy crisis funding needs.

A similar strategy is employed in Philadelphia. The Core Standards of Philadelphia, based on a number of national youth advocacy organization standards, including NSACA, are divided into eight categories. Under the categories there are three levels of Standards: Minimum or Level 1 Standards which should be in place at the start of the program; First Year or Level 2 Standards which should be fully implemented by the end of the first year; and Continuous Improvement or Level 3 Standards which are tailored to the particular characteristics of the program and serve as longer-term quality goals. Paul DiLorenzo, Director of the Office of Children's Policy explains

Gaining Compliance *(cont. from p. 4)*

that in choosing this accountability structure the city could be supportive to providers. "We didn't want to be just about quantity. We provide as much help as possible to reach quality. Progress on Level 2 and 3 Standards is done through developing a workplan that comes with training and technical assistance contracted through the United Way."

In Baltimore, according to Atnafou, after-school providers are thankful that they have the standards because it provides a framework to develop quality programs. "Resources such as a funding stream, technical assistance, and training are real carrots. The After-School Strategy Team continuously advocates for increased funding, so there is a clear benefit to programs complying with the After-School Strategy and embracing the standards." The Baltimore Standards are "research-based." Atnafou explains that this means "we are

always in the process of reassessing the standards as more information and research becomes available. As we get more feedback from programs, new issues and concerns emerge."

In order to promote increased utilization of programs it is essential, in program design, to always keep the end-users in mind. One area that Baltimore is currently evaluating is the inclusion of children's voices. "We are beginning to take steps to get youth more actively involved and grant them a say in the kinds of activities implemented in the programs. We have hired a youth engagement specialist to help us."

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>
> - Rebkah Atnafou, After-School Institute

Key Elements for Gaining Compliance

- Funding Stream
- Technical Assistance
- Capacity Building Assistance
- Supportive Implementation
- Strategy
- Fluid Standards
- Input from End Users

Alternative Strategies

The City of San Diego administers San Diego's "6 to 6" Extended School Day program that includes sub-contracting with community-based providers, disseminating funds, conducting the RFP process, and monitoring compliance with the sub-contracts. San Diego City Schools has always allowed community organizations to operate licensed after-school programs on campus. When the movement towards supporting a citywide strategy for after-school emerged, it was logical to pursue these experienced organizations.

The sub-contract specifies scope of services, period of performance, budget and expenditures, staffing requirements, program content, funding procedures, etc., to which all programs funded by the city must ascribe. While the operating agreement does not include specific quality statements as found in other standards documents, the city sub-contracts with community organizations that have demonstrated the capacity to provide high quality after-school care including YMCA San Diego County, Social Advocates for Youth, and Harmonium. Steven Amick, Program Administrator for San Diego "6 to 6" comments that, "if we were to impose a set of city-wide standards that supercede our sub-contractors' protocols, it would probably be met with some resistance." Each of the providers has their own set of documented standards that often extend beyond the expectations embedded in the contractual agreement. The providers have shown a historical ability to provide quality after-school care. "We have collected policy and procedure manuals from each of the program providers."

One of the reasons why San Diego's Standards strategy works is because the city has good cooperation among providers, which ensures a consistent level of quality. Amick explains that the city offers a forum through its staff development activities for providers to share effective practices. Program monitors visit sites at least twice a year to check whether the elements of the contract are being met and also to make some qualitative observations. However, providers also see themselves as having responsibility for program evaluation and improvement in addition to the City of San Diego.

Amick emphatically points out "the fact that San Diego does not impose an overarching set of standards separate from the requirements outlined in the Operating Agreement, does not water down the quality of programming. At the insistence of the providers themselves, the bar has actually been raised as the elements of the Operating Agreement are scrutinized against those standards historically held and implemented by the community providers."

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> - Steven Amick, Program Administrator, San Diego "6 to 6"

Expanding Standards

Kansas City Youth Program Standards of Quality Performance, adapted from the NSACA Standards, were developed by 24 local youth-serving agencies working in collaboration with YouthNet of Greater Kansas City. These standards apply to youth programs serving children and youth ages five through ten years of age during non-school hours. After surveying 1,600 teens, the standards were reconfigured to address characteristics and needs of older youth and the organizations that serve them.

"We think of the organizational structure as three concentric circles with youth in the center, staff in the circle surrounding youth, and agency in the outermost circle."

\- Laura Lyon, YouthNet

The Standards of Quality Performance for Teen Programs are formatted in a unique action-oriented framework. Standards are expressed under the themes of: (1) what youth do; (2) what staff do; and (3) what the agency does, instead of the more typical quality categories of school-age care standards.

Laura Lyon of YouthNet expounds that "we think of the organizational structure as three concentric circles with youth in the center, staff in the circle surrounding youth, and agency in the outermost circle. The focus is on youth and how we support them in youth programs. The concept is that with agency support, staff are better able to do their job and provide opportunities and support to youth. Youth, with this support from staff, are able to take leadership roles, have frequent interactions with caring adults and are free to take advantage of the developmental opportunities offered to them by staff." Teens in Kansas City are currently engaged in a process of further delineating specific examples of these standards in action.

Resources

After-School Leaders Interviewed for this publication:

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References:

Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement. (2001). Use of Continuous Improvement and Evaluation in After-School Programs. Minneapolis, MN: Author.

Hatch, T. (2001). It takes capacity to build capacity. Education Week, 20 (22), 44,47.

Pittman, K., Tolman, J., 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.

U.S. Department of Education. (2000). Working for Children and Families: Safe and Smart After-School Programs. Washington, DC: Author.

Other Resources:

The NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care, 1998
The National School Age Care Alliance
1137 Washington Street
Boston, MA 02124
(617) 298-5012
www.nsaca.org

After-School Programs & The K-8 Principal Standards for Quality School-Age Child Care, 1999
National Association of Elementary School Principals
1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
(800) 386-2377,
(703) 684-3345
www.naesp.org

Accreditation Criteria & Procedures of the National Association For the Education of Young Children, 1998
National Association for the Education of Young Children
1509 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
(800) 424-2460,
(202) 232-8777
www.naeyc.org

"Community Programs to Promote Youth Development"
National Academy Press
www.nap.edu
This report compiles research about the effectiveness of specific youth development programs or approaches. Researchers report that they found consistent, compelling evidence that specific factors in community programs have a positive impact on adolescent development. The report cites and explores the following elements in programs:

- Physical and psychological safety
- Appropriate structure
- Supportive relationships
- Opportunities to belong
- Positive social norms
- Opportunities to "matter" or make a difference
- Opportunities for skill building
- Integration of family, school and community efforts

The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) is developing a tool for continuous improvement for education programs and schools serving vulnerable youth. The tool is based on the Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) system of continuous improvement, launched by NYEC in 1995.

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