Strengthening and Safeguarding Continuous Quality Improvement Systems: Lessons from Afterschool System Builders

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National Institute on Out-of-School Time

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Introduction

Children and youth can benefit — academically, socially, and emotionally — from afterschool programs. Unfortunately, often those most in need have less access to high-quality programs, in large part because of a history of decentralization and disorganization in the afterschool field. City leaders have come to understand that the problem of access to afterschool programs is not solved by simply paying for more programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). In recent years, many cities have begun to build afterschool systems to address the problem.

In 2003, the Wallace Foundation began an initiative with five cities — Boston, Chicago, New York City, Providence, and Washington — to help them develop afterschool systems. In 2012, the foundation launched a Next Generation Afterschool System-Building Initiative (ASB), selecting nine additional cities (see box) with a solid foundation for system building and strong mayoral leadership. The ASB partner organizations in these nine cities are working on system building in several areas, including:

- Expanding youth participation in afterschool programs
- Improving the quality of programs
- Improving policies, governance, and coordination within the system
- Developing systems to collect and use data to inform their system-building activities

To support these efforts, technical assistance in organizational development, quality assessment and

Partners in the Wallace Foundation Next Generation Afterschool System-Building Initiative

Baltimore, Maryland: Family League of Baltimore

Denver, Colorado: Denver Afterschool Alliance

Fort Worth, Texas: Fort Worth SPARC (Strengthening Afterschool Programs Through Advocacy, Resources, and Collaboration)

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Network, facilitated by Our Community's Children

Jacksonville, Florida: Jacksonville Children's Commission

Louisville, Kentucky: Building Louisville's Out-of-School Time Coordinated System (BLOCS), facilitated by Metro United Way

Nashville, Tennessee: Nashville After Zone Alliance (NAZA)

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania:

improvement, data systems, and governance was provided through support from the Wallace Foundation. The ASB partners also engaged in cross-city meetings, conferences, and other learning opportunities to share successes and challenges and to support the development of collective knowledge about afterschool system building.

As a part of these learning opportunities, representatives in "like" roles as quality leads with the nine ASB grantees came together monthly with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) to discuss support for and sustainability of continuous quality improvement systems (CQISs). They were joined at times by experts in the field who could speak to specific areas of interest. This Quality Role-Alike Group went beyond spelling out needed components of a successful CQIS: They spent three years looking at the inner workings of their evolving systems — sharing concrete, tested strategies and practices while surfacing complexities, debates, and questions related to quality.

What were the group's conclusions? A strong CQIS depends on clearly defining, carefully assessing, and intentionally supporting quality. Citywide systems like the ASB partners serve a critical leadership role in making a CQIS strong and sustainable. Most significantly, the group concluded that safeguards must be put in place to protect CQISs from inevitable changes in funding and leadership, thus bettering their chances for sustainability. These safeguards include providing operational support, forming partnerships, establishing communication plans, implementing advocacy strategies, and embedding all aspects of quality into the culture of programs and organizations.

This report documents the work of the ASB Quality Role-Alike Group and shares the collective lessons learned. Specific examples and best practices from the nine ASB partners are spotlighted throughout. The report is organized by the key components of a system of continuous quality improvement:

- ***Defining quality practice.*** Quality standards and core competencies define and drive quality. This section explores how ASB grantees are putting standards and competencies into action.
- ***Assessing quality practice.*** Many ASB partners are already using various tools to assess quality. This section explores how organizations can get the most out of quality assessment data.

- ***Supporting quality practice.*** Professional development and other supports, such as family engagement initiatives, are key to promoting positive experiences for youth. This section explores specific strategies ASB partners have used to support quality, as well as the most effective ways to implement those strategies.
- ***Safeguarding quality.*** A key concern for citywide systems is how to sustain, safeguard, and strengthen their CQIS. Beyond the question of how to continue the work after one funding stream dries, this report also addresses beneficial partnerships, communications plans, advocacy strategies, and creative ways to embed quality. The group's consensus is that these safeguards are what make quality systems sustainable.

Quality Matters: Making the Case

Over 25 years of research has helped make the case — to funders, legislators, communities, providers, and other key stakeholders — that afterschool quality matters. Research has demonstrated that youth who participate in high-quality out-of-school time (OST) programs show increased self-confidence and self-esteem; improved social skills with peers; increased prosocial behaviors; intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, and positive states of mind; improved attitudes and feelings towards school; reduced problem behaviors; and reduced engagement in risky behaviors (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Larson, 2000; Shernoff & Vandell, 2007; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). Research also shows that participation in high-quality OST programs helps to close the achievement gap, has positive long-term effects on school attendance and task persistence, has positive effects on school grades and academic work habits, and improves achievement test scores (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Vandell, 2013).

However, studies showing that OST programs *can* produce results do not guarantee that they *will*. To be effective, programs must be of high quality. In examining programs that had short- and long-term effects on youths' academic and social outcomes, researchers (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) identified a number of common characteristics. High-quality OST programs foster positive relationships between program participants and staff, build positive relationships among program participants, offer a blend of academic and developmental skill-building activities, promote high levels of student engagement, maintain an orientation toward mastery of knowledge and skills, and provide appropriate levels of structure as well as opportunities for autonomy and choice (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

The National Afterschool Association's series of focus briefs on the State of Afterschool Quality highlights important research findings and may be a helpful tool when making the case for quality. The documents can be found at http://naaweb.org/resources/item/258-naa-executive-members-new-resource-material-is-available-for-download.

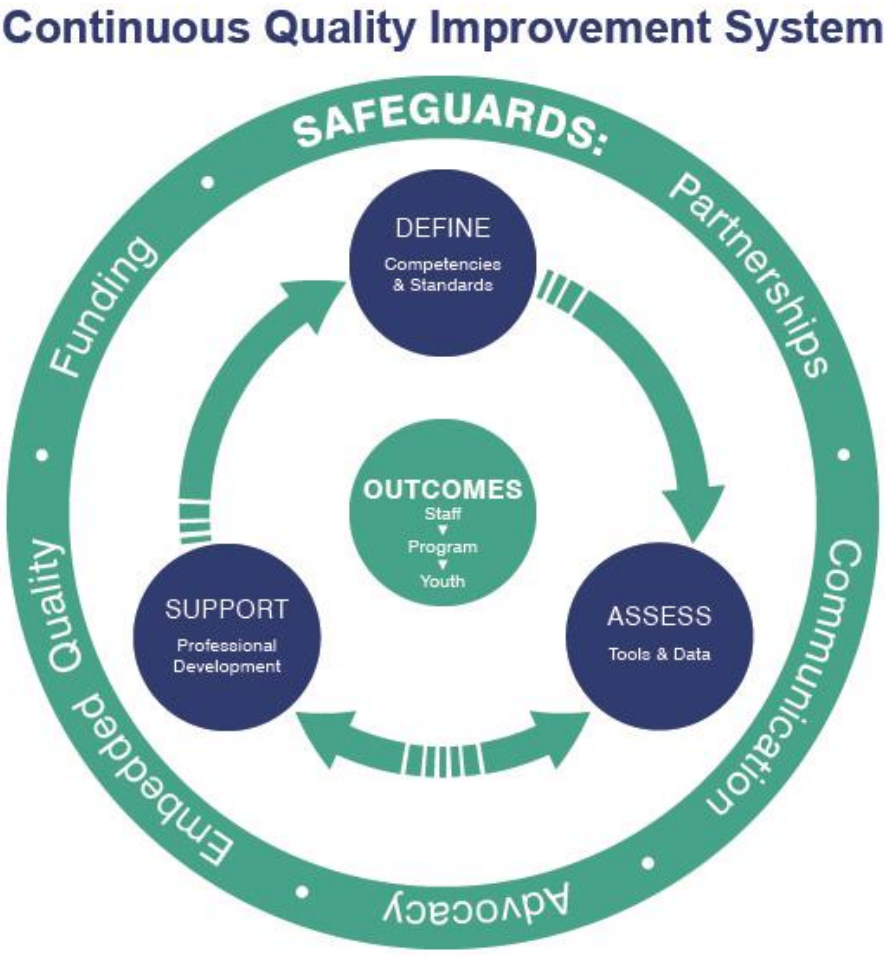
A Continuous Quality Improvement System

Continuous improvement efforts that systematically address quality are an important part of an afterschool system strategy. The Forum for Youth Investment report *Building Citywide Systems for Quality* (Yohalem, Devaney, Smith, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2012) identifies the essential components of a quality improvement system: a shared definition of quality, a lead organization, engaged stakeholders, a continuous improvement model, information systems or data collection, guidelines and incentives for participants, and adequate resources. This report builds on these findings by taking a closer look at the next steps: What does the system look like in action? What are the challenges and complexities in the quest for quality? What makes a strong and sustainable CQIS? City- or statewide systems and afterschool leaders can apply the lessons shared in this report to strengthen and sustain their CQISs.

The Wallace Foundation's Next Generation ASB Quality Role-Alike Group began with a continuous quality improvement system model developed by Elizabeth Devaney, which includes three of the four main parts shown in Figure 1: define quality, assess quality, and support quality.[1] To these three, the group added a fourth element: safeguard quality.

[1] The model is similar to the David P. Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Intervention "Assess – Plan – Improve" sequence (http://cypq.org/about/approach), but it focuses on systems and supports rather than on individual OST programs.

Figure 1



1. **Define quality.** Definitions of quality drive the system. They include both core competencies, which define individual staff quality, and standards, which define program quality.
2. **Assess quality.** Assessment is essential to determine whether programs are of high quality. Collecting, analyzing, and making meaning of data — as well as engaging providers in this process — are critical components of assessment.
3. **Support quality.** Supporting quality is perhaps the most demanding work of the system. Staff quality, which in turn leads to program quality, is supported through a professional development system. Such a system includes training and technical assistance, coaching, and mentoring, but it may also include more

formal credential and certification programs or advanced degrees. It also includes academic and career pathways, compensation for staff that is commensurate with education and training, and a sustainable source of funding.

4. **Safeguard quality.** In order to thrive, a CQIS depends on diverse funding sources, local and state partnerships, communication and advocacy to promote the good work being done, and attention to embedding quality work throughout. These key safeguards protect a CQIS from inevitable transitions in leadership and changes in funding. They should therefore be at the forefront of all activity — both during the initial development of a system and as it continues to evolve.

Integral to the process of building a CQIS is a **continuous improvement feedback loop,** where regular assessment constantly informs the type of support needed. Definitions of quality, though they must be consistent and are therefore somewhat static, deserve revisiting, too. For example, an organization may have achieved its goal in improving a targeted area of quality and now be ready to expand into additional areas. Or perhaps a funder, responding to new research that highlights an emerging issue, has now prioritized this issue as a targeted area of quality for OST programs.

Finally, a quality system affects **outcomes** for staff, programs, and youth. Professional development increases staff engagement and capacity. Increased staff engagement and capacity improves program quality, encouraging supportive staff-youth relationships and promoting high-quality OST experiences for youth. High-quality OST experiences in which youth are challenged, engaged, and socially and emotionally nurtured promote positive long-term youth outcomes.

Defining Quality Practice

A shared, research-based understanding of what quality looks like is the necessary foundation of a quality improvement system. Standards of program quality and core competencies define and drive quality.

Program Quality Standards

Program quality standards, which should be based on research and best practices in the field, outline the path and specific steps that lead to quality programming. Some cities and states require quality standards for licensure; others use voluntary guidelines. The basic process for developing and adopting a set of program standards involves forming a committee, researching and drafting standards, piloting and soliciting feedback, and revising the draft standards based on feedback. The ASB partners are in different stages in the development of program standards; some have standards in place while others are just beginning to explore.

Spotlight on Louisville

Louisville's BLOCS had been using the Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Assessment to promote quality across programs, but it needed a more coordinated system. It formed a committee to develop program quality standards. Like other ASB grantees, it found that the process of developing program standards can take a long time — in BLOCS's case, two years. Initially, it collaborated with a state-level organization. Such collaborations are often beneficial, but in this case the partnership was limiting because of differences in priorities, funding streams, and pace. Though two members from the state organization continued to serve on the Louisville committee, BLOCS decided to develop standards on its own.

After researching other city and state standards and holding community meetings, the committee established its Comprehensive Standards document, which included eight categories along with elements, standards, and indicators. A subset, the Minimum Quality Standards, was piloted in 2012 and was well received.

BLOCS has strengthened its standards by tying them to funding. In July 2013, the city and Metro United Way required funded programs to complete the self-assessment for the minimum standards and develop an action plan. In the first year, programs need only to work toward the standards; in the future, they will be required to meet them.

Louisville's citywide system has also strengthened the standards by aligning them with other elements of the quality system, such as tools and training. The next step is to align core competencies with the program standards.

Finally, BLOCS has strengthened the standards by getting support and buy-in from programs. A common challenge is getting busy providers to complete assessments. In response, BLOCS gave providers plenty of time. In addition, the organization offered trainings on the benefits of quality standards. Its communications explained how meeting the standards would help programs get additional funding.

Spotlight on Fort Worth

In 2013, Fort Worth's SPARC set out to create a set of program quality standards. The organization convened a quality task team of local providers and evaluators, including representatives from city departments that fund afterschool programming. A subcommittee collected national, state, and local standards; analyzed and compared them; and established a framework of four categories: positive youth development, environment, relationships, and management. Then the subcommittee proposed and refined standards, elements, and indicators. The resulting document was released to providers and key stakeholders for feedback, and the quality team hosted two community feedback sessions. Applicable feedback was incorporated into the final Fort Worth SPARC Quality Standards. A smaller document, A Guide to Quality Standards, was created to communicate the standards to parents and families. Both documents were made publicly available, and providers were asked to endorse the standards.

In order to elicit buy-in from providers, the quality task team received training on quality improvement systems. The workshop explained how program standards, staff core competencies, assessment tools, and professional development are essential for

robust continuous improvement. Taking such steps to connect providers to the standards and to help them understand the larger context of quality has helped Fort Worth build a culture of quality and thus strengthened their standards.

Core Knowledge and Competencies

Core knowledge and competencies (referred to simply as "core competencies") for staff are another part of a strong CQIS. Just as standards define quality at the program level, core competencies define quality at the individual staff level. Core competencies specify what professionals in the field need to know and do in order to deliver high-quality programming. They serve as the basis for career development systems and policies that enhance quality and lead to increased recognition of OST workers.

Some Wallace ASB partners, including those in Philadelphia and Grand Rapids, have chosen to adopt the National Afterschool Association (NAA) Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals. (Fort Worth is considering adopting them in the future). Adopting standards from a trusted national organization not only saves the time and effort of developing a framework but also promotes consistency and alignment across and within states.

Core competencies can and should be put into action at the individual, program, and system levels. The NAA Core Knowledge and Competencies document offers a comprehensive list of possible uses at the program and system levels, such as writing job descriptions, planning professional development, developing career lattices, and even unifying related fields — such as early childhood education, youth development, and summer learning –— under a common umbrella (NAA, 2011). Furthermore, core competencies can help people within and outside the field understand the unique contributions afterschool professionals make to the lives of children and youth.

At the individual level, staff member assessment or self-assessment is perhaps the most common use of core competencies. Programs are particularly interested in using core competencies for hiring. The competencies can be helpful for writing job descriptions and interview questions; however, hiring agencies should consider which competencies should be a requirement of hiring and which can be met through training.

Spotlight on Baltimore

The Family League of Baltimore is creatively using its core competencies at the program level. To build program quality through staff training, the Family League is creating a menu of its contracted providers' training options, coded to show which core competency area each training covers. Programs need a certain number of professional development hours in each area and can choose which staff to train. Though an individual staff member may be trained in only a few competency areas, the program as a whole will have staff trained in all areas. Using the core competencies at the program level helps embed a culture of quality.

Spotlight on Louisville

BLOCS uses its core competencies to build the citywide system and even the OST field. With Jefferson Community and Technical College, it has developed a continuing education certificate program in youth development based on the core competencies. BLOCS is also discussing with the community college and Kentucky State University the creation of an associate's degree in youth development, which would also be grounded in the core competencies. Such certificate and degree programs not also raise staff and program quality, but also help build respect and credibility for the field.

Not all of the ASB partners embrace core competencies; some use other methods to define staff quality. St. Paul's Sprockets, recognizing the complexities of youth work and the importance of developing expertise, sees youth workers as always developing, not static. The Sprockets Quality Framework, rather than a core competency document, outlines its definitions of quality and the belief that, when youth worker engagement, youth engagement, and quality program features intersect, young people acquire the skills for lifelong success.

Defining Quality Practice: Considerations and Lessons Learned

Alignment is key to the strength of a CQIS. Program standards and core competencies are the main drivers of the system; other elements, such as assessment tools and professional development, should align with them. CQIS planners might consider aligning core competencies with other state frameworks or with early childhood core competencies.

Quality standards are useful only if they are **manageable**. PhillyBOOST initially developed an unwieldy set of over 200 program standards. Working with the state afterschool network, it then developed the Statement of Quality in Afterschool, which provides a broadly accessible common framework of standards for all Pennsylvania afterschool and OST programs. Similarly, the Denver Afterschool Alliance opted to develop Quality Pillars, a simple six-pillar framework that serves as a manageable introduction for organizations new to quality improvement.

Standards development is a **lengthy process**. Some afterschool networks find that adopting or adapting existing state or standards is a better alternative. For example, the Jacksonville Children's Commission adopted the Florida Afterschool Network Standards, and Grand Rapids ELO adopted the Michigan Out-of-School Time Standards of Quality. Though this approach eliminates the time and effort to develop a unique set of standards, it still requires work on the front end to achieve buy-in, a critical part of the process.

Though standards and competencies are an essential foundation of a CQIS, they can and should be **revisited** over time. The Quality Role-Alike Group suggests regular reassessment of how current definitions of quality reflect evolving research and best practices.

Core competencies are a **tool to be *used***. Putting core competencies into action helps integrate quality into a CQIS. Afterschool systems might explore ways to embed competencies — or other definitions of staff quality —at the individual, program, and system levels.

Defining Quality Practice: Featured Resources

- Louisville Quality Standards: https://louisvilleky.gov/government/youth-development/louisville-quality-standards-out-school-time-youth-programs
- Fort Worth SPARC Quality Standards: http://fortworthsparc.org/downloads/FW-SPARC-Quality-Standards-2014-11.pdf
- National Afterschool Association Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals: http://naaweb.org/images/Core-Knowledge-and-Competencies-web.pdf
- San Francisco Core Competency Toolkit (includes sample job interview questions): http://sfafterschoolforall.blogspot.com/p/core-competencies-and-toolkit-download.html
- St. Paul Sprockets Quality Framework: http://Sprocketssaintpaul.org/sites/Sprocketssaintpaul.org/files/documents/SprocketsQualityFramework_2%2012Update.pdf
- Philadelphia Core Standards for Youth Development Programs: http://dhs.phila.gov/intranet/scintrahome_pub.nsf/AttachmentsByTitle/Core+Standards/$FILE/Core+Standards.doc.
- Philadelphia Statement of Quality in Afterschool: http://www.psaydn.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=25&Itemid=226
- Michigan Out-of-School Time Standards of Quality: https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/MOST_SBE_APPROVED_031213_422342_7.pdf
- Florida Afterschool Network Standards: http://www.myfan.org/downloads/Florida%20Standards%20for%20Quality%20Afterschool%20Program.pdf

Assessing Quality Practice

Once quality practice is defined, this definition informs the assessment of practice. Several assessment tools are available to the OST field, including the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA, David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality), the Assessment of Program Practices Tool and Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (APT and SAYO, NIOST and Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education), and the School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and Concordia University, Montreal). These are the tools that are most commonly used by the Wallace ASB partners. Some organizations use their own assessment tools.

Selecting an assessment tool is not enough to ensure that data is being used to improve quality. Assessment has value when followed by a plan that leads to action. Further, assessment needs to be embedded in quality systems; it needs to be part of the programs' culture and budget, and it needs to be sustained by secure funding.

Deciding on an Assessment Tool

Resources to help afterschool systems decide which tools to use include these two examples:

- The Forum for Youth Investment's guide, *Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools* (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Fisher, & Shinn, 2009), compares the purpose, history, structure, methodology, content, and technical properties of several program observation tools, including YPQA, APT, and SACERS. This resource is available at http://forumfyi.org/content/measuring-youth-program-quality-guide-assessment-tools-2nd-edition.
- A companion document, *From Soft Skills to Hard Data: Measuring Youth Program Outcomes* (Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, DuBois, Ji, & Hillaker, 2014), reviews ten youth outcome measurement tools, including SAYO, that are appropriate for use in afterschool and other settings. It is available at http://forumfyi.org/content/soft-skills-hard-data-.

Strong assessment depends on an intentional approach to data collection and analysis. All data collected and analyzed should be both actionable and meaningful to the system and to programs. Furthermore, data analysis is an iterative process; every analysis should raise more questions.

The Quality Role-Alike Group explored a data planning framework.[2] The plan includes several steps:

1. **Forming questions and purposes.** What questions do we want answered? What outcomes are we hoping to achieve in our strategic plan?
2. **Collecting data.** What information do we want? Who will collect the data?
3. **Analyzing data.** How will we analyze the data? What relationships will we look at? Who will participate in the analysis?
4. **Disseminating findings and engaging stakeholders.** How and when will data be shared? With whom?
5. **Taking action.** How will we use the data? Who will do what with the information? What decisions will be informed by our findings?

The steps are not necessarily sequential; it is most useful to think first about the questions and then about actions before proceeding with data collection, analysis, and dissemination. A data system task list and work plan is also helpful to clarify steps and set a timeline.

Spotlight on St. Paul

Putting data into action can be challenging, especially when dealing with multiple data sets and even different assessment tools. How can the data be connected? St. Paul's Sprockets has developed a successful method of pulling together multiple data sets and translating them into action.

[2] The data planning framework was developed and adapted by the John W. Gardner Center.

Making Meaning with Multiple Data Sets, or M3, is Sprocket's comprehensive guided process to help programs make meaning of multiple data sets. The process is tool-neutral, so organizations that measure outcomes or use tools not aligned with Sprockets resources can still participate. M3 aligns future planning with existing continuous improvement cycles in four areas of data: quality practice, youth outcomes, program experiences, and participation. During the daylong facilitated M3 experience, participants talk about quality data, identify priorities, and then explore each area of data. The process is aspirational in that not all programs collect data in all areas; program teams can consider what data they are interested in collecting and how they might collect it. Next, program teams look for convergent areas and identify priorities for improvement. Finally, they engage in action planning.

This approach, which has been well received by programs, is becoming an embedded component of city and state systems. M3 is part of the formal improvement process with Sprockets' most highly engaged programs. The Minnesota Department of Education has embedded M3 in its 21st Century Community Learning Centers improvement process; the Minnesota state OST network has included the M3 approach in the best practices resource it disseminates statewide.

Assessing Quality Practice: Considerations and Lessons Learned

The first step in assessment is to consider what **questions** the assessment needs to answer and to articulate the **relationship** between the questions and data to be collected.

Using **common outcomes** can be a way to make sense of multiple data sets or to align data from different assessment tools. The Denver Afterschool Alliance has used an M3-like approach, providing a crosswalk of assessment tools to help programs more easily correlate data sets that might lead to key actions.

A crucial step in the process is **getting support** from providers. Data collection places significant demands on staff time; staff need to understand the impact data can have and their important role in the process. There is no easy checklist of steps. ASB quality leaders agree that getting buy-in is all about relationships and that it can take time.

Data sharing agreements with public schools or other organizations further strengthen assessment efforts. Getting agreements in place can be a lengthy process — one that depends on relationship building.

Assessing Quality Practice: Featured Resources

- Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality: http://cypq.org/
- Assessment of Program Practices Tool and Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (APT and SAYO), NIOST and Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education: http://www.niost.org/APAS/apas-overview
- School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS), Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and Concordia University: http://ers.fpg.unc.edu/school-age-care-environment-rating-scale-sacers
- Believe It. Build It. Minnesota's Guide to Effective Afterschool Practices: http://igniteafterschool.org/bibi/

Supporting Quality Practice

At the heart of quality improvement is support for quality practice. At the heart of this support is professional development, which can include coaching, training, and support from provider networks. Higher education and credential programs can also play a role. Research has established that a skilled, stable, motivated workforce is a key determinant of quality programming (Cost Quality & Child Study Outcome Team, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

A comprehensive professional development system includes more than training and workshops. The Quality Role-Alike Group did not focus on professional development *systems*, which can extend beyond the reach of a citywide organization. However, it recommends considering the following components of a professional development system (School's Out Washington, 2008; National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives, 2013; Starr & Gannett, 2014):

1. **Definitions of quality**: Definitions that include program quality standards and core competencies for individual staff.
2. **Academic pathways**: Possible paths — including training and workshops, certificates and credentials, and higher education degrees — that one can take to continue professional growth.
3. **Registries**: Professional registries (a central location for staff to record trainings attended and credentials or degrees earned) and training and trainer registries (a central hub for listing and advertising available trainings, as well as for trainers to receive feedback).
4. **Career pathways**: Steps of career advancement that are connected to professional development, sometimes called a career ladder or lattice.
5. **Compensation**: Salaries commensurate with education and experience, as well as benefits and other bonuses.
6. **Funding and sustainability**: Public and private sources of funding to support and sustain a career development system, as well as links to larger system-building efforts.

The ASB organizations have used various strategies to support quality. The Quality Role-Alike Group discussed how system builders support staff to improve capacity and practice — and, by extension, program quality. Group members shared specific strategies on coaching, training, credentialing, provider support networks, and family engagement initiatives, all the while considering how to strengthen and safeguard these components.

Coaching

Coaching, a strategy used by many ASB partners, warranted deep exploration. The quality group heard from School's Out Washington (based in Seattle) and Prime Time Palm Beach (Florida), two mature quality improvement systems with successful coaching models.

The role of citywide systems is to hire coaches, broker the relationship between programs and coaches, and find funding for coaching.

What makes a good coach

Good coaches have a foundation in adult learning principles. They understanding that adults are in charge of their own learning. They use a hands-on approach, provide applicable information, and validate learners' experience. A coach should be "a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage."

Several groups, such as ASAPconnect in the Santa Clara County Office of Education in San Jose, CA (http://www.asapconnect.org/), have compiled coaching competencies. School's Out Washington offers a list of requirements for coaches that includes a bachelor's degree in a related field, youth development experience, competencies such as communication skills, a demonstrated understanding of program assessment tools, and the use of reflective coaching.

Finding a good coach

The Quality Role-Alike Group noted that one important choice is whether to look for coaches internally, from within a program, or externally. Internal coaches can be more cost-effective because they do not need time to build relationships or understand the

program culture. Perhaps more importantly, they can help to build capacity in their own programs. However, using internal coaches has significant disadvantages. For one, the role of a coach is quite different from the role of a supervisor or colleague; managing both relationships can be difficult, and confidentiality can be compromised. Also, internal coach may have blind spots when they are too close to the program.

The Prime Time Palm Beach representative agreed that using colleagues or supervisors as coaches is challenging. In attempting to institute peer coaching, they found that directors were too busy to provide successful coaching to their employees. School's Out Washington similarly found that coaching from a neutral party was critical, especially at the beginning of a quality improvement initiative. An external coach offers a broad perspective, objectivity, and the perception of neutrality. However, full-time external coaching may not be achievable due to funding constraints.

One sustainability strategy is to use a combination of internal and external coaches to build a *culture* of coaching within programs and across the system. An external coach can act as a mentor to program supervisors, teaching and modeling coaching techniques. Supervisors then gradually take over the coaching role. School's Out Washington uses a three-year model that makes this approach concrete: an external coach works with a site director for 40 hours during the first year, 20 hours during the second year, and 10 hours during the third year. This solution slowly builds the program's capacity, thus offering a realistic and financially sustainable approach to coaching for quality improvement.

Brokering coach-program relationships

When is a program ready to benefit from coaching? NIOST describes program quality improvement as a developmental process (O'Connor, 2005). The ability of a program to benefit from coaching depends on its stage in the quality improvement process: struggling, fair, good, or excellent. This is not to say that programs must meet a quality baseline before they can benefit from coaching, but they must be receptive to coaching and willing to participate with intention. Coaches can then adapt their approach to each program's developmental stage.

The Quality Role-Alike Group agreed that citywide systems need to know a program's developmental stage in order to broker a relationship with a coach. They might ask, for example, "Do you have regular staff meetings? Is staffing consistent throughout the year? Have you used an observation tool in the past?" The group suggests that brokering organizations clearly define the role and responsibilities of the coach and communicate expectations to both the coach and the program in order to ensure that the relationship is successful.

Building support for coaching

A successful coaching model relies on buy-in both from programs and from funders.

Programs have to commit time and staff resources to the coaching process. Both leaders and line staff must understand what coaching is and how to use their coach, according to the Quality Role-Alike Group. Communication and relationship building are crucial.

When approaching funders, coaching should be framed, according to the group, not as a long-term commitment, but as an investment strategy. External coaching ends when directors have received enough support to coach their staff themselves. The goal, ultimately, is to embed coaching into the culture of the program. The ASB partners have seen that funders find the vision of building internal capacity over time concrete and compelling. Supporting this notion, the Grantmakers for Education Out-of-School Time Funder Network (2016) espouses developing leadership and requiring programs to find matching resources to bolster capacity at the organizational level.

Telling a story with data is also helpful when making the case to funders; ASB quality leads recommend capturing pre-and post-coaching data with assessment tools and then sharing the data with funders. Experts from School's Out Washington said that data from the first three years of its coaching program, along with a report from the Washington Department of Early Learning, convinced funders to continue supporting the program.

When the Citywide System Is Also a Funder

When the citywide system that supports quality improvement is also a funder, the two roles can clash. PhillyBOOST, for example, had a quality specialist with the dual roles of compliance monitoring and quality improvement. Program leaders felt they couldn't be truly open with their coaches. PhillyBOOST therefore reorganized so that staff who do contractual compliance are separate from those who do program quality support.

The Quality Role-Alike Group came to a consensus that coaching and other improvement efforts are most successful when quality observations are not tied to funding. Programs can and should be held accountable for developing continuous strategies for meeting their own goals, but not penalized based on actual assessment scores. Articulating a program's participation in an improvement process can be built into a continuous reporting policy. Citywide systems might follow the example of the Denver Afterschool Alliance (though it is not a funder), which focuses on programs' agreement to participate in the coaching process rather than on the achievement of certain measures.

Spotlight on Jacksonville

The Jacksonville Children's Commission (JCC) is both a citywide system and a funder. It created a non-threatening, low-stress environment for continuous quality improvement by establishing a one-year Sweet 16 pilot with 16 sites representing eight diverse agencies. At a kick-off meeting at a local sweet shop, programs were told that the pilot was for learning, not for program evaluation. JCC used widely adopted tools to assess program quality and youth outcomes. Throughout the year, JCC offered pilot providers professional development for leaders and staff. The coach provided networking

opportunities and one-on-one technical assistance on the assessment tools. A low-stress, supportive approach helped gain the pilot programs' trust and engagement.

Training

Professional development typically includes training. Citywide systems play a key role in designing and implementing or coordinating training opportunities.

Spotlight on Grand Rapids

Professional growth and development of youth workers has been a priority for Grand Rapids' ELO Network for many years. The organization has been working collaboratively on a training model with the local Youth Development Network (YDN). The YDN Training Committee aligns training with the ten content areas of the NAA Core Knowledge and Competencies, prioritizing topics in response to training feedback, improvement plans, and trends in the field. The ELO Network also shares information about other youth worker trainings in the community. A training database tracks participation, offering transcripts and attendance reports. This database is helpful for program staff working toward the Michigan School Age Youth Development Certificate or Credential, which requires training hours in each of the NAA Core Competency areas.

The trainings, which provide continuing education credits, are engaging and practical. They are also low cost — just $10 for ELO network members. (Originally the trainings were free; fees were introduced to get better commitment from attendees.) The low cost is possible because presenters are paid only a nominal fee of $200 for a three-hour session. The ELO Network is upfront about the small fee, suggesting that these trainings allow presenters both to give back to the field and to advertise themselves to potential paying clients, such as a school district whose staff might attend.

How can a citywide system ensure that its trainings are of high quality? Most ASB partners ask attendees for training evaluations; some also use informal feedback from colleagues to inform their assessment of trainings and trainers. Some states and many early childhood systems have training registries, which may include quality ratings for trainers and trainings. Some ASB partners are looking into adding a school-age component to existing early childhood registries.

In order to deliver a high-quality training, expert facilitators need more than subject matter expertise and presentation skills. One trainer assessment tool[3] lists competencies in four categories:

- **Knowledge** both of content and of adult learning principles
- **Skills** to facilitate effectively, such as active listening
- **Behaviors** such as communicating enthusiasm, responding to participant behavior, and remaining calm when faced with obstacles
- **Attention to logistics** such as workshop timing, materials, attendance, and evaluation

Use of a trainer assessment tool gives sponsoring organizations a concrete and consistent way to ensure that they are maximizing resources by providing high-quality trainings.

Spotlight on Philadelphia

PhillyBOOST is intentionally building an experienced cadre of trainers to strengthen its system. In the first year, a committee reviewed current trainer selection practices and criteria. Next, it created a job description for trainers using The After School Corporation (TASC) After School Trainer Competencies. Incumbent trainers were required to participate in a yearlong peer learning community to share best practices and receive professional development. Finally, external reviewers used the TASC

[3]Facilitator Assessment Tool, developed by Brodrick Clarke, an independent consultant in the Baltimore, MD, area.

Trainer Competencies to conduct trainer observations, followed by individual debriefing sessions to review observation data and discuss ways to change practice. Such efforts help to ensure that trainings are of high quality.

Credentials

Credentials are another tool in a system of support. They allow a profession to recognize an individual's performance based on a set of defined skills and knowledge (Dennehy, Gannett, & Robbins, 2006). Credential programs typically define the types of training (based on core competencies), number of training hours, and evidence of skill development that are appropriate for certification. Such programs provide a clear, consistent path for professional development and recognize those who demonstrate competence and skill (Gannett, Mello, & Starr, 2009).

Credentialing offers many significant benefits to the field at multiple levels, but it brings several potential risks. Research has shown that credentialing can improve program quality and outcomes for children and youth by supporting individual youth workers and advancing the field (Gannett et al., 2009). At the same time, however, some fear that credentialing may actually deter people from entering the field, rather than encouraging them, because the cost of the credential would limit access. Another argument is that credentialing could set the bar too low, reducing youth work to purely technical skills while ignoring nonacademic skills, such as ability to reflect on one's practice, that are vital but difficult to define. Finally, many fear that credentialing would not guarantee an increase in compensation. Leaders and policymakers must consider and mitigate such concerns in order to pursue credentialing as a valuable asset to the field.

Spotlight on Grand Rapids

The recently established Michigan School Age Youth Development Credential elevates the role of youth workers while addressing some of the possible drawbacks of credentials. The rigorous requirements ensure that the state credential is not just a written test of skills. Based on the NAA Core Knowledge and Competencies (Levels I and II), the credential requires 120 hours of documented training and 480 hours of

experience in five years. Also required are observation of skills by an external assessor, performance of two program assessments, and a portfolio. The ELO Network supports candidates by providing two meetings with an advisor to help them create a portfolio, and provides coaching and scholarships for the credential through grants from local foundations and other sources.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities, sometimes called provider networks, can be valuable for program staff and the citywide systems that support them. Providers get much-needed support, and system builders foster relationships, thus getting buy-in from providers for quality improvement efforts while staying connected to work in the field.

Spotlight on ASB Partners

In some communities, such as Nashville, participation in provider networks is mandatory for funding. NAZA network members are required to provide quality assessment data in order to have access to technical assistance and peer networking. NAZA has monthly meetings where providers talk about data and program policy. The Jacksonville Children's Commission, a funder, also requires participation in a monthly community of practice.

Citywide system builders that are not funders may offer voluntary networking opportunities. St. Paul's Sprockets has a well-established neighborhood-based system of peer networking. Its Neighborhood Network Teams, which are open to all providers, meet monthly for youth worker discussions and collaborations. The Neighborhood Network Teams are also represented on Sprockets Community Advisory Council. Putting such structures in place provides much-needed consistency in the face of frequent turnover of frontline staff.

Like Sprockets, the Denver Afterschool Alliance offers entirely voluntary support. The model uses a tiered approach. At the broadest level of support, all direct service

providers engage in monthly learning community meetings that are led by managers from several participating programs with the support of a Denver Afterschool Alliance staff member. At the next level, organizational program leaders connect monthly to discuss shared training needs, delve deeply into issues, and share their expertise. These meetings are supported by the system's coaches and its quality lead. Initially, the alliance's quality lead designed and coordinated learning community meetings, but lack of program buy-in led to a compliance mentality. A shift to having the program leaders design and facilitate the meetings has led to deeper engagement and strengthened the learning community.

Fort Worth SPARC offers another model for peer networking. The Fort Worth SPARC Resource Fair is an opportunity for network members to interact with each other and with OST vendors. It is a large event, with 50 exhibitors and over 100 attendees. Participants interact with youth-serving organizations, enrichment and engagement providers, and community resource providers.

Family Engagement Initiatives

Family engagement was once characterized as simply "parent involvement": sporadic add-on events for parents, with little or no supporting infrastructure. Research on how family engagement contributes to positive youth outcomes has led to the current conception of family engagement as a systemic, learning-outcomes-oriented, integrated, and sustainable strategy for supporting quality OST experiences.

Citywide system builders can play an important role in supporting programs by developing and sustaining intentional family engagement initiatives that promote quality practice. For ASB partners, these activities range from hosting annual family showcases to requiring programs to address family engagement strategies as a condition of funding. Although individual programs and communities have unique needs and interests, some of the ways citywide systems can support them are common to all. These include creating or endorsing a common family engagement framework and supporting programs in implementing meaningful opportunities for families.

Creating a common framework for family engagement

Before starting on a family engagement initiative, Quality Role-Alike Group participants agree, citywide systems should assess the needs of families in the communities being served by programs. Most school districts conduct such assessments. Alternatively, citywide system builders can convene key stakeholders — families, school district personnel, community organizations that serve families, and others — to develop their own needs assessment and then to evaluate and act on the information collected. The National Association for the Education of Young Children guide on creating family surveys for early childhood programs includes an extensive list of questions that can be modified for use with afterschool programs. Citywide systems can also host focus groups or town hall meetings with families to hear about their perceptions of the system's current services and about issues that are not currently being addressed.

Once citywide systems have a better sense of the needs of families, the next step is to collaborate with core stakeholders to create a framework or set of standards to guide their family engagement initiatives. They may want to look at other city, state, or national standards. One example of national family engagement standards is the National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships, which provides a framework for strengthening family and community involvement programs in school districts.

Supporting programs in implementing family engagement opportunities

Building program and staff capacity to implement meaningful family engagement strategies is an important and demanding role for citywide systems. Citywide systems need to help programs make the case that family engagement in afterschool is critical for child, family, program, and community outcomes.

In addition, citywide systems can help programs build a culture of family engagement by providing the resources and infrastructure to sustain the work over time. This support can include showing programs how to embed an emphasis on family engagement in routine processes and how to train staff.

The Family League of Baltimore works in a community schools model, in which aligned and systemic family engagement is central. The Family League requires funded

programs to address family engagement strategies directly. The organization is currently considering how regular program assessment might include such family engagement outcomes as increased family participation in program leadership, increased value placed on education, and increased time spent reading at home as a result of family literacy work.

A family liaison or another program staff person dedicated to family engagement initiatives can effectively support family engagement efforts. However, the Quality Role-Alike group agreed that *all* program staff should focus on family engagement so that the effort is truly embedded in every program's culture. Citywide systems often support staff quality by coordinating or providing professional development on family engagement. Staff need explicit training to learn how to build trusting relationships with families, make space for families in their work, and engage families with cultural competence and proficiency. The Family League of Baltimore, for example, has added professional development for staff on beginning Spanish and family engagement; it has also added a Common Core workshop focusing on how to engage parents in supporting their children's learning. Programs also need to be knowledgeable about other community organizations that serve families. Citywide systems can help by building partnerships with other systems that engage directly with families and by serving as an information warehouse.

In addition to building a culture in which family engagement is embedded in programs, citywide systems can safeguard family engagement initiatives by building strong relationships with other community organizations and systems that engage with families and, most importantly, by making sure that programs have sufficient funding and training to support the work.

Supporting Quality Practice: Considerations and Lessons Learned

Supporting quality means **more than simply providing training**. Professional development encompasses coaching and peer support; it may also include credentials and higher education degrees — all, ideally, as part of an academic pathway. The learning system should provide incentives for increases in education and skills, such as compensation increases and advances along a career pathway.

Sustaining a **coaching** model ultimately depends on building internal capacity. External coaches can provide temporary support to help program leaders learn how to coach their own staff.

Low stakes are important in order to foster a culture of quality improvement. Program evaluation and assessment can be separated from evaluations that inform funding decisions.

Provider networks can play an important role in building relationships and trust with programs. Professional learning communities, especially those designed for program leaders, are most effective when participants have significant input on the design and implementation of their own learning activities.

Citywide systems can prioritize and set the tone for **family engagement** initiatives by providing the resources and infrastructure to sustain the work over time.

Supporting Quality Practice: Featured Resources

- ASAPconnect Coaching Core Competencies: http://www.asapconnect.org/asap-quality-framework/coaching
- TASC Afterschool Trainer Competencies: http://www.tascorp.org/sites/default/files/after_school_trainer_competencies.pdf
- Michigan School Age and Youth Development Certificate and Credential: http://miafterschool.com/michigan-school-ageyouth-development-certificate-and-credential/
- National Association for the Education of Young Children guide on family surveys for early childhood programs: https://www.naeyc.org/familyengagement/resources/conducting-family-survey
- National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships: http://www.pta.org/nationalstandards
- SPROCKETS Parent Guide: http://Sprocketssaintpaul.org/sites/Sprocketssaintpaul.org/files/documents/parent%20guide%5B1%5D.pdf)

Safeguarding Quality

A strong CQIS depends on a strong foundation of quality definition, assessment, and support. In addition, the Quality Role-Alike Group kept coming back to the need to *safeguard* a well-built CQIS, protecting it during inevitable changes in funding and leadership. Diverse funding sources, partnerships, efforts to embed quality, and communication and advocacy strategies are important contextual elements that safeguard a CQIS. Safeguarding a CQIS is not really a final step in a process; protecting the CQIS should be a priority in all stages of its evolution.

Diverse and Secure Funding

Though sustainability is not synonymous with funding, funding is undeniably a large piece of the puzzle. The ASB partners have found a variety of sources of funding for quality efforts.

Funding for professional development

One potential source of funding for professional development can be found in collaboration with early childhood. The Jacksonville Children's Commission is exploring a relationship with the state's T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarship program, which provides financial support for early childhood practitioners, to incentivize professional development for school-age practitioners. Collaborating organizations Prime Time Palm Beach and the statewide Florida Children's Forum, an early care and education advocacy organization, successfully piloted expansion of the T.E.A.C.H. program in 2009. T.E.A.C.H., which aims to improve quality by reducing staff turnover, increasing compensation, and enhancing staff professional development, is typically funded through Child Care and Development Block Grants. These grants are restricted to licensed programs serving children birth through age 13. Because many licensed early child care programs serve school-age children aged 6–13, it was logical to offer the program to school-age practitioners.

Prime Time Palm Beach has also coupled T.E.A.C.H. with WAGE$, an early childhood program that provides salary supplements based on practitioners' level of education. By

securing local funding that did not come with age restrictions, Prime Time Palm Beach extended WAGE$ to offer salary supplements for many OST programs in Palm Beach County serving grades K–12, a big expansion beyond elementary-age child care.

City- or statewide systems in any state with a T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood program can advocate for including OST providers in the scholarship and salary supplement programs and market to school-age providers who already qualify (those who work in licensed early childhood programs serving school-age children). The sponsoring OST programs must have clear guidelines for quality, similar to those of a licensed child care program. Florida's OST system builders have seen increases in salaries, advances in position, and reductions in turnover for participants in the T.E.A.C.H expansion. The ultimate goal is to find legislated state funds or private funding, without age restrictions, for both T.E.A.C.H. and WAGE$.

Finding diverse funding sources

Finding funding beyond the current grant is an obvious goal, but it is not easy to achieve. ASB partners have used the following sources to fund quality initiatives:

- ***School districts.*** St. Paul Sprockets received a small amount of support from the school district. Fort Worth SPARC receives in-kind support from its district.
- ***Municipalities.*** SPARC is pursuing funding from Fort Worth's sales tax, which is dedicated to the city's Crime Control and Prevention District. SPARC already receives in-kind support from the city in the form of staff time, facility use, and printing. St. Paul Sprockets has some funding through in the Parks Department. The Denver Afterschool Alliance receives funding from the city's general fund and from marijuana tax revenue.
- ***Local foundations.*** Grand Rapids ELO Network and the Denver Afterschool Alliance have received funding from local foundations.
- ***State and federal grants.*** Child Care and Development Block Grants and 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grants are the biggest sources of dedicated federal funding for school-age child care and afterschool. The 21st CCLC language in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 gives additional

flexibility to state education agencies to dedicate more resources to training, professional development, and quality improvement. It also allows states to work with external organizations, such as citywide systems, to provide training and support to grantees.

- ***Boards.*** The board of directors of Fort Worth SPARC follows the "give and get" model; all members have pledged to give financial support as part of their service and get others to support SPARC as well.

Partnerships

Partnerships with local foundations, public schools, and other stakeholders can add strength to systems. The idea of "collective impact" is a frequent part of the conversation in the afterschool field (see, for example, Collective Impact Forum, 2016). The Quality Role-Alike Group noted that partnerships specifically with statewide systems and with early childhood organizations can serve as important means of safeguarding quality efforts. Such partnerships may even lead to new funding streams.

Partnerships with statewide systems

The ASB organizations are connecting with state efforts and policies in varying degrees. For example, St. Paul Sprockets has found the statewide OST network to be a supportive partner with which to share training and data work. Grand Rapids ELO Network has supported state efforts locally by participating on state working groups and steering committees. Partnering with state organizations can expand the reach of local initiatives.

Spotlight on Philadelphia

PhillyBOOST has been working closely with statewide organizations on CQIS. Pennsylvania's quality improvement and rating system, Keystone STARS, includes children up to age 12. However, key partners in Philadelphia (initially led by the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey) wanted to extend this system to older youth and to coordinate resources to support quality across networks. Now a

project of the Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool Youth Development Network, this initiative has expanded statewide, with key partners recognizing the important impact it can have on youth outcomes.

In light of multiple efforts to improve the quality of programs for older youth, a citywide pilot coordinated such quality efforts. The 20 participating programs from four afterschool networks included a representative mix of age groups served and funding sources. The work was guided by a selected set of shared youth outcomes and a common program assessment tool.

The pilot taught PhillyBOOST valuable lessons:

- Centralized communication is the key to keeping everyone on the same page.
- Having a coordinator with dedicated time to oversee the process is optimal.
- The readiness of network providers to participate in a collaborative process is key.
- Partnerships with city and state governments can help with leveraging resources to support the work.

Partnerships with early childhood systems

Participants in the Quality Role-Alike Group agreed that a major task of afterschool system builders is to ensure that they coordinate services with organizations working in related arenas. Public officials are largely interested in coordination and accountability; no one wants to choose between competing interests or to fund duplicative programs. Currently, the momentum in public investment is in early childhood, with most funding coming from the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). One-third of children served by early childhood programs are of elementary and middle school age (CLASP, 2015). Of the funds dedicated to programming for school-age children, 4 percent is specifically allocated for quality activities. Afterschool systems need to be at the table with early childhood to advocate for funding. A key sustainability strategy is to braid CCDF money with 21st CCLC funds, along with other youth development money from city governments and private foundations.

CQIS builders such as the organizations represented in the Quality Role-Alike Group are working to strengthen their professional development systems by partnering with early childhood in a number of ways:

1. **Aligning core knowledge and competencies** with national standards for early childhood and afterschool and aligning both sets of quality standards
2. **Creating comprehensive career pathways** that include both afterschool and early childhood
3. **Building program capacity** by creating aligned technical assistance systems, embedding technical assistance in programs, and taking advantage of online learning
4. **Increasing access to professional development** by linking providers to opportunities such as career advising and other personal and professional supports (including T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood, as described above)
5. **Advocating with the state for investments** in compensation, benefits, and workforce conditions

The Wallace ASB organizations are seeing the benefits of partnering with early childhood systems. The Family League of Baltimore uses a community schools model, which by its nature focuses on children and youth of all ages. The Jacksonville Children's Commission is increasingly connecting afterschool and early childhood quality efforts; it created a position for a director of quality administration who works in both arenas. Funding from a community foundation supports both kinds of programming. Several projects span the continuum of ages, such as a grade-level reading campaign that includes school readiness.

Grand Rapids ELO Network engaged the afterschool field in determining how best to include school-age programs in the Great Start to Quality, Michigan's early childhood tiered quality improvement and rating system. Recommendations to expand this system to include licensed programs that serve school-age children and their families have been submitted to the Michigan Department of Education. Including afterschool providers in

Great Start to Quality will expand quality improvement supports such as training, materials, and coaching.

Embedding Quality

ASB partners are finding that sustain the work means embedding quality throughout organizations and programs, so that quality initiatives become a natural part of how things are done. Members of the Quality Role-Alike group have successfully engaged providers as leaders, required quality efforts on the part of programs with which they work, and helped programs build a culture of quality.

Engaging providers as leaders

Beyond supporting providers to improve their practice through peer networks, citywide systems can engage providers as leaders in building program capacity and strengthening the CQIS. They can foster provider leadership by:

- ***Changing the message.*** In St. Paul, the message is that Sprockets is made up not only of its four-person staff but all the providers in the network.
- ***Acting with intentionality.*** Sprockets has identified leaders who can be ambassadors for the citywide system. It finds opportunities for them to lead quality efforts by, for example, serving as trainers or coaches.
- ***Taking time.*** Getting organizations to buy in to quality work is "all about relationships" — a common mantra of the Quality Role-Alike Group. Quality leads need to meet face to face at sites with coordinators to sell "what's in it for them."
- ***Providing training.*** Citywide systems can build program directors' leadership skills using trainings specifically designed for that purpose, such as Leading with Influence, developed by a Grand Rapids ELO network member, or NIOST's Leading for Quality.

Spotlight on Denver

At the foundation of the Denver Afterschool Alliance's organizational structure is the notion of providers as leaders. Rather than a full-time staff, the alliance's staffing model includes part-time support from a core staff team from the city, the school district (which is also an afterschool provider), and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver. Additional part-time staff are embedded in these organizations. This grassroots model ensures that providers' voices are represented in all decision-making processes.

The Denver Afterschool Alliance's demonstration project offers a further model of providers as leaders. A cohort of organizations is engaged in deep training and coaching to support their implementation and integration of data-driven decision making, while the Denver Afterschool Alliance is determining the efficacy of its delivery model. Organizations not only opt into participation, but also have a manager serve in a leadership role. All participating organizations provide at least one individual to serve as an external assessor for another site; many organizations provide two or three such managers and have begun to have site leaders serve as external assessors. In addition, representatives from participating organizations serve as trainers to support improvement and lead professional learning communities. Providers have found great value in this model. It deepens their knowledge of quality by allowing them to see how other organizations deliver quality programming and continues to strengthen relationships in the learning community.

Requiring quality efforts

High standards of quality can be built into the process in each area of a CQIS. For example, Louisville BLOCS is embedding quality by requiring use of its quality standards as well as participation in program quality and youth outcome assessments. These requirements are written into contracts with Metro United Way and into grants from external agencies. BLOCS had support from the mayor's office from the outset; one of the deputy mayors had served on the executive committee that decided on the requirements. This champion has since left the office, but the requirement remains — thus illustrating the safeguarding effect of embedding quality.

Citywide systems must budget for quality efforts in all areas. Many already routinely budget for assessments. Louisville BLOCS has added funders to its sustainability planning committee, which is drawing up budgets for quality efforts including infrastructure support; data collection, analysis, and reporting; and outreach and advocacy.

Building a culture of quality in programs

The ultimate goal in building a strong CQIS is for quality to become part of the culture of programs. Participating in a quality improvement process that includes assessment and reflection typically leads to the development of a common language of program quality and an organizational culture focused on quality improvement.

Sometimes even simple strategies can shift the culture of an organization. For example, Grand Rapids ELO Network has created three-ring binders for each provider organization with sections for each of the areas of the quality improvement system: define quality, assess quality, and support quality. Each area has subsections for the organization, program, staff, youth, and family levels. The binders are an important reference for the programs, documenting quality efforts so that essential institutional knowledge is not lost with transitions in staff.

Communication and Advocacy

Getting the word out about the good work being done by OST programs is essential for sustaining a CQIS. Stakeholders — including funders and legislators — should be well informed about quality efforts in OST and their positive effects on youth. This kind of communication can be done in a variety of ways, from informal conversations to website content to formal meetings with funders and legislators.[4]

The Denver Afterschool Alliance has made quality a consistent theme in conversations with the funding community. In its twice-a-year funder meetings, the alliance provides information about the CQIS and tells them specifically how they can participate through

their funding. Conversations are underway to consider a system for tracking more publicly how providers are engaging with the CQIS — not necessarily their level of quality, but their participation in the system. Such a system could facilitate communication about quality between funders and providers.

The families of youth who participate in OST programs may be highly motivated to advocate for their programs and the system as a whole. When OST programs implement meaningful family engagement strategies, families are more likely to perceive these programs to be essential community resources in which they have a personal stake. Though citywide systems may not be able to participate directly in advocacy, they can support partners who train families in leadership and advocacy skills by, for example, identifying critical needs, developing talking points, describing avenues for sharing the message, and providing opportunities for parents to speak with policymakers and the media.

Safeguarding Quality: Considerations and Lessons Learned

Partnerships can help **leverage and maximize resources**.

Stable funding is important, but is not the sole definition of sustainability. Other elements – partnerships, embedding quality, and communication and advocacy – are equally important.

Seeking diverse funding, building partnerships, embedding quality, and effectively communicating your message are all **ongoing efforts** that take **time**. Building systems – and the steps along the way, such as developing standards or implementing assessment tools - can take many years. Relationships – with partners, programs, and providers – are key.

Too often the work of quality initiatives can be lost when they are not able to be sustained. **Safeguarding** a quality system helps ensure that the hard work that has gone into defining, assessing, and supporting quality can be sustained and therefore impact desired outcomes for children and youth.

Safeguarding Quality: Featured Resources

- TEACH Early Childhood National Center: http://teachecnationalcenter.org/
- Child Care and Development Block Grant information: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occ/ccdf-reauthorization
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers information: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html
- Every Student Succeeds Act information: http://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn
- Pennsylvania Keystone Stars: http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=programs_stars
- Michigan Great Start to Quality: http://greatstarttoquality.org/
- The 2016 Every Hour Counts Messaging Tool can help organizations strengthen their message and communicate with various audiences: http://afterschoolsystems.org/content/document/detail/4080/

Summary and Conclusion

The ASB Quality Role-Alike Group engaged in deep exploration of the nuances of a CQIS and of potential challenges and their solutions. This work has taken previous thinking on quality improvement systems to the next level: from strengthening systems to safeguarding them. The ASB quality leads have shown great commitment and dedication, both in their independent work in their citywide organizations and in their work together as a peer learning community.

The Quality Role-Alike Group agreed that a strong CQIS defines, assesses, and supports quality in order to improve staff, program, and youth outcomes. However, the group kept returning to the idea that a sustainable CQIS needs to *safeguard* quality through funding, partnerships, embedded quality, and communication and advocacy. The system itself is dynamic; it requires constant care and maintenance.

The ultimate goal is to build a culture of quality, one in which all stakeholders see quality as essential to all aspects of an afterschool system because it is critical to positive youth outcomes. The lessons learned and shared by the ASB group will help others in similar roles on their own path to continuous quality improvement.

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