



Harvard Family Research Project  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

## Exploring Quality Standards for Middle School After School Programs: What We Know and What We Need To Know

### A Summit Report

#### Introduction

A growing body of evidence confirms what makes sense intuitively—quality matters for participation in after school programs. Regular attendance in high-quality programs is associated with academic performance, task persistence, improved work habits and study skills, and better social skills.<sup>1</sup> However, many programs struggle with understanding and improving the quality of their programs. In fact, though only 6.5 million K–12 children (11%) participate in after school programs, polling data indicates that an additional 15.3 million would participate if a *quality* program were available in their community.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing that quality is a potential barrier to participation in programs and understanding the powerful influence that quality has on determining good outcomes for youth who do participate, we believe that the time is ripe to revisit the current state of quality standards for after school programs with the goal of program improvement to achieve results.

Nationwide, a chief concern among after school stakeholders is programming for middle schoolers—too “old” to be told what to do after school and too “young” to be left home alone. A national dialogue about the state of quality standards for programs that serve youth in the middle grades after school has already begun. At two national forums, researchers and practitioners have raised issues about the relevance of existing standards for middle school. In response to this concern, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) approached the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) and the National Institute for Out-of-School Time (NIOST) to cohost a working summit with its regional grantees to further explore current quality standards and move the dialogue forward concerning the unique programming needs of middle school students.

On December 9, 2005, the one-day summit honed in on the unique aspects of middle school after school programming and explored how quality assessment tools can support program development and implementation for that age group. Representative of the 59 after school programs and five intermediaries that are grantees of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation participated in the summit, as did additional members of the after school research and practice community nationwide, for a total of approximately 100 diverse summit participants.

#### Summit Structure and Process

While there is general agreement across tools on key areas of program quality (e.g., health and safety, administrative practices, human relationships, etc.), there is wide variation in how national, state, and local organizations have articulated standards within these key areas and in how they have developed

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<sup>1</sup> Vandell, D., Reisner, E., Brown, B., Dadisman, K., Pierce, K., Lee, D., & Pechman, E. (2005). *The study of promising after school programs: Examination of intermediate outcomes in year 2*. Madison, Wisconsin: Authors. Available at [http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/childcare/pdf/pp/year\\_2\\_report\\_final.doc](http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/childcare/pdf/pp/year_2_report_final.doc)

<sup>2</sup> Afterschool Alliance. (2004). *America after 3 PM: A household survey on afterschool in America*. Washington, DC: Author. Available at [http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/press\\_archives/america\\_3pm/Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/press_archives/america_3pm/Executive_Summary.pdf)

indicators to track their progress within the standards. Much of the variation can be attributed to the age of the program participants, with programming for elementary school youth “looking and feeling” different than programming for middle and high school youth. This is a central concern in the after school field right now and was the primary purpose of the December 9, 2005, summit. At the summit, participants had the opportunity to react to a composite of national, state, local, program, and youth development standards in five key areas that directly impact programming for middle school participants:

- Human relationships
- Positive youth development
- Staffing
- Family, school, and community partnerships
- Programming, activities, and opportunities.

Participants worked in small groups to identify key standards salient to the needs of middle school youth. They also contributed to a collective understanding of what middle school programs that successfully met an agreed-upon set of middle school program quality standards might look like.

Presentations at the summit provided additional information and background on the importance of middle school from a developmental perspective. Further results of the scan were introduced to inform and frame small group discussions. The outcomes of this meeting include:

- Providing access to a range of program quality standards and assessment tools
- Contributing to the ongoing dialogue about the unique programming needs of middle school youth
- Promoting the development and use of quality assessment tools in after school programs

Over the course of the day, summit participants listened to speakers and presentations and took part in productive discussions, both formal and informal, about how quality standards can be used to address the specific developmental needs of middle school youth. The many practitioners, administrators, and researchers from the after school community who attended this summit learned about a wide range of quality standards and tools available to them through a briefing by HFRP. Additionally, participants in the five breakout sessions discussed which standards in their category had significant relevance to middle school and began the process of inferring indicators for such standards. Among these breakout groups, a number of key themes emerged that unified summit participants’ thinking and provided insights into areas for future investigation. This section of the report summarizes results of

### A Note on Program Quality Language\*

It is difficult to find consensus in terminology across quality assessment tools and evaluation literature; words like key, standard, evidence, component, indicator, documentation, topic, competency, example, and benchmark often have different meanings depending on the context of their usage. This summit report makes reference to measuring program quality through standards and indicators, which can generally be defined as follows:

- *Standards* are conditions of quality for the program, its participants, and all stakeholders.
- *Indicators* are specific measures that quantify the attainment of program quality standards. .

After school programs often define a best practice with a standard and articulate how to observe whether it is being met through one or more indicators. For example, safety can be ensured by the following standards and indicators:

#### *Standard*

- Youth are carefully supervised.

#### *Indicators*

- Staff note when youth arrive, leave, and with whom they leave.
- Staff keep track of where youth are and what they are doing.
- Staff are aware of potentially harmful activities and closely supervise youth engaged in those activities.

\* Adapted from Little, P., DuPree, S., & Deich, S. (2002). *Documenting Progress and Demonstrating Results: Evaluating Local Out-of-School Time Programs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project and The Finance Project.

HFRP's scanning work, lists key standards for middle school youth, as developed by consensus in the breakout sessions, and highlights some common themes related to programming for middle school youth.

### **Results of HFRP's Quality Standards and Assessment Scan**

Summit participants were briefed on the diversity of quality standards and assessment tools being used by the after school community. HFPR conducted a scan of existing after school program quality standards and assessment tools based on several data sources<sup>3</sup>:

1. A Web search of existing quality assessment tools
2. Ongoing tracking by the Council of Chief State School Officers
3. A Web-based poll
4. HFRP's own expertise in understanding and evaluating quality after school programs
5. Input from experts in the area of after school program quality

Overall, we scanned 42 documents of after school quality assessment tools and standards from national, state, local, program, and youth development agencies. Included in the set are 5 national tools, 10 state tools, 13 city/local level tools, 9 program or foundation tools, and 5 youth development focused tools. The resulting 15 major categories and approximately 3,000 standards from these documents were condensed and served as a starting point for summit discussions.

Over 80 after staff members from after school programs and administration, collaborative or funding agencies, and research and evaluation services responded to a Web-based poll conducted from October 6 to November 9, 2005. Of the respondents, 72% worked with after school programs that served elementary and middle school populations and 53% with programs that served high school students. While this is clearly not a representative sample, certain trends emerged that are relevant to our summit.

*A full 30% of respondents were not familiar with any quality assessment tools. Similarly, only 65% of those surveyed worked with an after school program that used a formal quality assessment process. This implies that implementing quality assessment must go beyond developing standards and tools that are developmentally appropriate. After school programs will need more information about how continuous improvement processes can positively impact their outcomes and how to access and choose quality assessment tools.*

*More programs report using the National School Age Childcare Association's (NSACA) program quality standards than any other single tool. About 40% of those applying a formal quality assessment tool to their program indicated that they used the National Afterschool Association's (NAA, formerly NSACA) Standards for Quality School-Age Care, while National Institute on Out-of School Time (NIOS) and School Age Childcare Environmental Rating (SACER) tools were used by 20% to 25% of respondents. Additionally, responses revealed that 42% of poll respondents worked with an after school program that developed its own quality assessment tool.*

*Common criticisms of quality assessment tools were that they are too broad and complicated, too heavily focused on child care and school-age populations, and unable to engage youth and staff in meaningful reflection about program improvement. When asked which tools were most appropriate and useful for after school, respondents cited a variety of licensing and programmatic tools that addressed such concerns. These are discussion points that were also relevant in the context of developing consensus on middle school specific standards during our summit.*

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<sup>3</sup> The scope of this project is to examine program quality tools. Therefore, we excluded tools and documents that solely addressed staff and/or youth competencies, as well as those focused on regulation and licensure.

*Most program quality standards and assessment tools are not age-specific.* Most after school program quality assessment tools were developed to span programming across the elementary, middle, and high school years. However, five tools in our scan were developed for programs that target middle and high school youth; six address program quality for programs that target elementary and middle school youth.

*There is variation in the categories of standards that programs address.* Across the set of documents, 15 standards categories emerged. Many key categories of standards such as human relationships, youth development, and programming are included in all 42 documents. However, there is great variation among tools about the nesting of some standards within categories. For example, early standards documents tend to nest standards related to evaluation within a general category of program planning and management. Later tools, such as the *New York State Afterschool Network* tool<sup>4</sup> have a separate section on “outcomes and evaluation.” Similarly, standards related to engaging families in after school programs are nested with a category called “human relationships” in *NSACA’s Standards for School-Age Quality Care*.<sup>5</sup> Several years after the creation of that tool and with a greater recognition of the critical role of families in young people’s learning and development, many newer standards documents have an entire category of standards related to family–program linkages.

*Quality assessment tools differ by the number of levels of detail and analysis.* For example, 15 of the 42 tools have three higher order levels (such as categories, standards, and indicators), while most have two levels and some even only one. Summit round table discussions focused on identifying the standards most relevant to programs serving youth in middle grades and then beginning to unpack what indicators would let after school programs know how those standards looked in practice.

### **Key Standards for Middle School Youth**

Round table groups analyzed a condensed list of standards from the HFRP quality assessment scan in five major middle school categories—human relationships; positive youth development; staffing; family, school, and community partnerships; and programming, activities, and opportunities. *Below is a list of the standards and related programmatic examples that summit participants felt were particularly salient to middle school after school programming.* With more time, the list might have been longer; therefore, the list is meant as a guide to future work, rather than a comprehensive roadmap for the field. It is clear from the lists below that many aspects of program quality transcend the age of the participants.

### **Human Relationships**

- Staff relate to participants in positive, nurturing, and consistent ways.
  - Program has written guidelines about expectations for staff–participant interactions.
  - Staff know participants’ names and about their lives.
  - Staff are relaxed and calm.
  - Staff enjoy their work.
  - Staff greet participants each day.
  - Youth enjoy participating in the program.
- Staff support learning and development of all participants.
  - Staff encourage participants to make good choices.
  - Activities and staff facilitate youth self-confidence.
- Staff encourage youth to interact in positive ways with each other, family members, school personnel, and other individuals important in their lives.
  - Staff encourage conversations among participants.

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<sup>4</sup> Available at <http://www.tascorp.org/programs/building/Final%20SA%20tool.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Available at <http://www.naaweb.org/pdf/PublicationsOrderForm.pdf>

- Acceptance of alternative viewpoints is encouraged.
- Staff build respect for differences among youth.
- Staff are committed to the development of positive youth–adult partnerships.
  - Opportunities for mentoring and one-on-one tutoring are provided.
  - Opportunities for developing social skills in groups are provided.
  - Staff are engaged in conversations with participants and interested in their lives.
  - Youth are given time and guidance for reflection.
- Activities and groupings are conducive to relationship-building.

### **Positive Youth Development**

- Youth ownership of the program and voice is encouraged in:
  - Program planning and implementation
  - Policy development and behavioral expectations
  - Assessment and evaluation
  - Decision making and governance
  - Fundraising
  - Choice in activities
  - Leadership opportunities
  - Setting their own goals and self-monitoring
- Youth voice is respected and valued.
- Program takes an assets-based approach to youth.
- Program has high expectations for all students.

### **Staffing**

- Staff show mutual respect and model positive relationships with youth and each other.
- All staff have the training and/or experience required by the program:
  - Training on working with families
  - Training on health and safety
  - Training on positive youth development
  - Training for site director on hiring and managing staff
  - Training on adult–youth partnerships and relationships
  - Training on activity development and implementation
- The program hires and promotes passionate, competent, and diverse program staff who are representative of the community.
- The program assesses training needs of staff and provides relevant training and ongoing professional development activities that support their own growth and build more effective program practice.
- The program recruits, screens, and trains volunteers (teens, adults, retirees).
- Staff and youth develop a plan for policies for behavior and enforce that plan.
  - Behavioral demands are developmentally aligned
  - Rules are applied consistently and fairly
- Staff supervise youth at all times and know their location while in the program.
- Staff are qualified to work with after school programs.

### **Family, School, and Community Partnerships**

- A plan for family involvement outlining roles has been developed, activated, reviewed, and updated for effectiveness.
- Family participation in the program is welcomed and encouraged.
  - Involving extended as well as immediate family members

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- Through event, activities, and celebrations
- Through decision making and planning the program
- Through program assessment and evaluation
- Through informal conversations with staff and visits to the site
- The program provides youth and their families with information about community resources to meet their needs and assists them in connecting with these resources.
- The program provides learning opportunities for the families of participants.
- The program helps to strengthen family and youth relationships and communication.
- The program builds an integrated mission and vision with local schools to support youth development.
  - Through complementary, not competitive, scheduling
  - Through staffing and professional development
  - Through curriculum and standards-based testing
  - Through joint marketing
  - Through funds and resources
- The program engages in community collaborations (e.g., with libraries, civic clubs, art organizations, police/fire department, etc.) that enhance program activities and/or sustainability.
- Links are built between youth in the program and the community.
  - By educating youth about their community
  - By encouraging youth to give back to their community through service projects
  - By encouraging youth representation in community organizations

### **Programming, Activities, and Opportunities**

- Activities and curriculum reflect the needs and wants of youth, families, and schools.
  - Youth help develop and plan activities.
  - Youth help implement and lead activities.
- Activities and programs are well-planned and address specific youth outcomes and skills.
  - Aligned with age and abilities of students
  - Aligned with interests of students
  - Aligned with multiple intelligences and learning styles
- Programs include daily opportunities that are fun, exciting, and different from school that can attract and retain youth.
- Youth have opportunities to learn through experiential learning and in real world contexts.
- Program provides opportunities for youth to develop personal responsibility, self-direction, and leadership.
- The program has an appropriate schedule, flow, and duration of activities.
  - Schedule is predictable
  - Structured and unstructured time
  - Continuum of depth
  - Time for social connections and community building
  - Allows for individual pacing and mastery
- Programs offer both directed and self-directed activities with varying levels of leadership.
- The program enables participants to interact with staff and other professionals at all levels.
- Programs emphasize the importance of community inclusion.
- Youth development principles are infused into programming.

### **Emerging Themes About Middle School Programming**

Across the five breakout groups, some common themes emerged about the challenges and opportunities of working with middle school-age youth.

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*Middle school youth “vote with their feet.”* Attracting and retaining middle school youth in after school programs can be accomplished through intentional staff and program practices and policies. Within the middle school after school program, activities need to be based on youth choice and voice, culture, individual needs, multiple intelligences, and personal engagement. Staff should spend time developing mutual respect with youth and investing in their positive development. As programs spend more energy connecting with and committing to the lives of middle schoolers, they will create a “buzz” around their program through the informal marketing done by their dedicated youth.

*Middle school youth are active creators of their own after school experiences.* Beginning to show more autonomy, middle school youth need to be given opportunities to make decisions, have leadership roles, coconstruct program offerings and policies, set personal goals, and develop their role model potential. This cannot be done without the skilled help of stable staff members who are connected to participants and are able to both explicitly instruct and subtly model these positive behaviors.

*Quality standards for after school programs should be assets-based.* Programs serving middle school students need to have tools available that recognize the positive attributes youth bring to their programs. This includes their growing ability to take leadership for program structure and process, as well as to construct boundaries and goals for themselves. The role of after school programs and staff shifts from management to facilitation of experiences for middle schoolers. Standards and tools to measure quality need to take this assets-based youth development approach.

*Staff credibility and interactions are an essential component to recruiting and retaining middle school students in after school programs.* By middle school, youth play a more active role in choosing the activities and people that will be part of their lives. After school programs need to pay particular attention to hiring, training, orienting, supporting, and evaluating staff based on their relationships with youth, not just on their administrative or supervisory capacity. Popular school staff can “cross over” to after school to lend programs credibility and school connections. Staff in middle school after school programs should model positive adult behavior and interactions both with each other and with youth.

*Staff and volunteer training and orientation should be middle school-specific.* For example, homework help in middle school is often focused on group projects and independent research and needs to be approached differently when students need help. Because of the wide range of developmental differences for middle schoolers, those working with them need to be able to adapt their assistance and communication to a variety of contexts. Staff need to be trained to balance building flexibility and structure, creating opportunities to be social and independent, and developing relationship with youth that are nurturing and challenging.

*Strong programs balance connection to and independence from school.* Middle school after school programs need to be inherently different from the school day, yet inextricably linked to its curriculum, personnel, and other after school offerings. Youth want engagement and fun that is distinct from school, but they also need a complementary web of academic, social, and emotional support. Middle school after school programs should build an integrated vision with schools to support youth development. This moves after school programs away from aligning or competing with schools toward collaborating with them to think holistically about how best to serve middle school youth.

*Family connections are even more important in middle school even though they are more difficult to cultivate.* Linking to families is more challenging for middle school students because both family members and youth often feel that youth are ready to be autonomous. After school programs can overcome this challenge by reaching out to extended family members, such as cousins, siblings, or

grandparents, of middle schoolers. Programs also need to provide learning opportunities for both youth and families to strengthen their sometimes tenuous relationships. Staff need to think more creatively about outreach to families beyond orientations—any gathering of family members can be an opportunity to connect with them. After school staff who have strong relationships with family members and school staff can bridge the often compartmentalized lives of middle school students.

### **How Can Program Quality Standard Be Used to Improve Middle School Programming?**

The *local context* of after school programs serving middle schoolers needs special attention. The structure and content of quality standards and tools reflect the varying perspectives about how these tools will be used for program improvement. Many of these diverse contexts, such as rural or urban settings, school- or community-based programs, fee-based or free admission, and academic or enrichment focused, can be targeted at the indicator level of quality assessment. Policymakers, evaluators, and researchers creating new quality standards and indicators will need to consider both developmental differences in how their instruments will be implemented for middle school programs as well as how local context can be incorporated in their usage.

While we have made significant gains in infusing salient middle school issues into quality standards, more work needs to be done to *articulate their indicators*—how these standards look in practice and how programs know that they are providing quality staff and programming for middle schoolers. Sometimes the nuances of the relationships among categories, standards, and indicators are difficult to interpret without an assessment framework. Differentiation between quality standards and indicators can be facilitated by the knowledge of skilled evaluators and researchers that can help explain these nuances and guide discussions about indicators.

*Reviewing additional categories* can help create a cohesive framework for thinking about quality assessment for middle school programs. By looking more broadly at the range of categories used in quality assessment tools, we can continue asking if and how standards need to be modified to be the most useful for after school programs serving middle school youth. An examination of other categories, such as program administration; safety, health, and nutrition; physical space and environment; and more, will glean an understanding of how broad principles of middle school youth development can be applied to new standards.

Middle school youth can offer valuable guidance in developing quality instruments for after school programs. Many quality standards include the importance of giving youth voice in the development and running of the after school program. As after school programs serving middle schoolers are beginning to demand more developmentally appropriate quality assessment standards, the opportunity is ripe for the *inclusion of middle school students in this discussion*. Middle schoolers can reveal their own priorities and values when choosing a quality after school program and deciding if they will stay in it. Some initiatives have begun to focus on qualitative research regarding how middle school students initiate and sustain involvement in after school programs. Engaging these students in continuous discussions about program quality standards and what those standards look like to them is essential.

*Research and evaluation* play a significant part in the development and implementation of quality standards and tools. A number of studies have shown that quality after school programs are linked to many positive outcomes for youth but less is known about how programs use quality tools for continuous improvement in their daily practice and interactions with youth and their advocates. Data about how programs bring life to quality assessment documents will be useful for agencies developing tools and standards specific to after school programs for middle schoolers.

After school programs need to learn more about how quality assessment can lead to continuous program improvement and learning. Agencies taking leadership roles in the after school field need to *advocate for the widespread use of quality standards to promote program improvement*. In addition to program improvement, quality assessment has become a significant accountability practice and often helps after school programs sustain funding and/or licensure. As the HFRP scan revealed, there are a number of after school staff, administrators, researchers, funders, and evaluators who are not familiar with any quality assessment tools. More attention needs to be paid to understanding how these instruments can be marketed to after school programs to promote their sustainability and good practice.

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Related resources will be posted on the HFRP website in the coming months. To be notified of them, as well as other out-of-school time resources, please sign up for our free e-alerts at [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/subscribe.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/subscribe.html).

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### **About Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP)**

Founded in 1983 by Dr. Heather Weiss, HFRP conducts research about programs and policies that serve children and families throughout the United States. By publishing and disseminating its research widely, HFRP plays a vital role in examining and encouraging programs and policies that enable families and communities to help children reach their potential.