Youth Engagement and Quality of Experience in Afterschool Programs

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Bringing in the Community:

Partnerships and Quality
Assurance in 21st Century
Community Learning Centers

CHARLES SMITH AND
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Afterschool Matters

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From the Executive Director

Dear Colleagues,

As we announced in the 2008 issue of *Afterschool Matters,* the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College is "adopting" the Robert Bowne Foundation's Afterschool Matters Initiative. The Afterschool Matters Initiative includes not only the journal *Afterschool Matters* and this publication, the Occasional Paper Series, but also the Edmund A. Stanley, Jr., Research Grants and the Research Fellowships that support practitioner research on issues in out-of-school-time programming. The Robert Bowne Foundation will continue to support the Afterschool Matters Initiative in partnership with NIOST.

The Afterschool Matters Initiative is all about leading and professionalizing the field of out-of-school-time education. NIOST shares this vision with the Robert Bowne Foundation: that all children and families should have access to high-quality OST programming. One facet of this vision is supporting and disseminating research on the theory and practice of afterschool education, and that's the mission of the Afterschool Matters Initiative.

NIOST has been leading the OST field and advocating for OST education for over 30 years, so the Afterschool Matters Initiative is a natural fit. What's most exciting is that NIOST's national reputation in the field will enable us to expand this vital work throughout the U.S. NIOST will be partnering with National Writing Project sites to launch new Research Fellowship groups outside of New York City, where the Foundation has led groups these past five years.

Sara Hill will continue to play a lead role in the Afterschool Matters Initiative under NIOST's auspices. Building on NIOST's experience, national presence, and reputation, the Afterschool Matters Initiative will expand its reach and impact on the field—to the ultimate benefit of children and families who depend on quality afterschool education.

Lena O. Townsend
Executive Director
The Robert Bowne Foundation

Youth Engagement and Quality of Experience in Afterschool Programs

By David J. Shernoff and Deborah Lowe Vandell

Executive Summary

Research on middle school participants' engagement in afterschool programs shows that such programs often serve as developmental contexts for promoting "flow" experiences. Compared to when they are in other settings after school, participants in afterschool programs are more likely to experience high concentrated effort and intrinsic motivation, experiences consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. Organized sports, arts enrichment, and academic enrichment activities were found to be particularly engaging program activities, in contrast to homework completion. The importance of high levels of engagement in promoting learning in afterschool programs leads to implications for practice and policy.

When students are engaged in activities that combine elements of both work and play, conditions are ideal to encounter the optimal psychological state that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has called flow. Flow is a state of deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically enjoyable, such as when athletes are focused on their play, dancers are immersed in their performance, or scientists are engrossed in solving a new problem (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The state of flow is all-encompassing, with no psychic energy left for distractions. When experiencing flow, individuals perceive their performance to be pleasurable and successful; the activity becomes worth doing for its own sake, even if no further goal is reached (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). During this state, individuals function at their fullest capacity, and the experience becomes its own reward (DeCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975). Highly creative artists and scholars have reported the experience of flow when they were involved in their best work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Flow is inherently related to learning. According to the theory, achieving a state of flow is based on a symbiotic relationship between new challenges and the skills needed to meet those challenges. As in Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* (Rogoff, 1990), most learning occurs just one step beyond the skills a person has already mastered. Flow occurs when individuals stretch their abilities to meet an obtainable challenge, so that their skills are neither overmatched nor underutilized. Because the state of flow is intrinsically rewarding, individuals tend to want to replicate it. Thus flow produces growth: As individuals attempt to master new challenges, they develop greater levels of skill; once they master a task, they seek out more complex challenges to match their new set of skills, so that the cycle of skill development is repeated (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). For teachers, coaches, and mentors, issuing an appropriate challenge is important, but so too is supporting a learner's skill development—for example, by providing scaffolding and feedback. Understanding and working with this challenge-skill dynamic to create opportunities for flow can be an important strategy to engage students and enhance learning.

For our research, we focused on school-based afterschool programs, conceptualizing engagement as being rooted in a state of flow. We wanted to know how students spent their time and experienced different motivational and emotional states when they were at an afterschool program compared to when they were elsewhere. We also wanted to know how the experiences of students attending afterschool programs compared to those of students who did not. After obtaining a general picture of the influence of afterschool programs on the motivational and emotional states of participants, we looked more deeply inside the programs themselves, identifying which activities and social arrangements were most fre-

quently reported. We then examined the specific influence of the most common activities and social arrangements on the engagement levels of participants. Before discussing our findings, we provide an overview of previous research to explain why we focused our own efforts on participant engagement in afterschool activities.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACT OF AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Organized afterschool programs help build talents and efficacy (Larson, 2000) and support social skills and relationships with peers and adults (Barber, Stone, Junt, & Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002), all in a safe environment with adult supervision (Posner & Vandell, 1994). A recent meta-analysis reviewing evaluations of 73 afterschool programs (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007) found that afterschool programs enhance the personal and social development of youth. Specifically, according to the meta-analysis, students participating in afterschool programs exhibited enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem, school bonding, and behavioral adjustment. They also achieved higher grades and test scores. The meta-analysis further reported that the most effective programs used evidence-based training approaches and, therefore, shared certain common characteristics: Their activities were sequenced, active, focused, and explicit.

As the meta-analysis illustrates, a variety of factors contribute to positive outcomes; however, we are specifically interested in the *motivational* and *emotional* factors—factors that can be more difficult to pinpoint.

In fact, studies have shown that during sports, arts, games, and other active leisure activities, children become engaged in learning and report higher levels of involvement, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and initiative than in any other class of activities.

Enhancing student motivation would seem to be an obvious benefit of afterschool programs. Students who attend afterschool programs spend more time in structured academic and non-academic activities with peers and adults than those who do not (Posner & Vandell,

1994). Developing varied competencies, motivational attributions, and social relationships is particularly important during the middle school years (Eccles, 1999). Unfortunately, junior high and middle schools are not always the ideal environments for students to develop these skills (Eccles et al., 1993). Students, therefore, seek to fulfill their social and emotional goals outside of school.

A great deal of research has found that extracurricular activities—such as sports, art, music, community projects, and special-interest academic pursuits—help children and adolescents negotiate salient developmental tasks (Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). Research correlates extracurricular activities with higher levels of self-esteem (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001) and more positive outlooks for the future (Jordan & Nettles, 2000). Because these activities tend to be supported by competent peers and adults, children involved in them develop social skills and a sense of belonging (Fredricks et al., 2002), as well as improved race relations (Holland & Andre, 1987). Afterschool programs that offer these types of extracurricular activities can therefore be seen as *motivational environments*: developmental contexts that promote positive motivation and social involvement.

In fact, studies have shown that during sports, arts, games, and other active leisure activities, children become engaged in learning and report higher levels of involvement, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and initiative than in any other class of activities, including productive activities such as school or employment, self-maintenance activities such as cleaning or grooming, or passive leisure activities such as watching television (Csikszentmihalyi & Kleiber, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). The specific competencies, interests, strengths, and friendships that develop during such activities appear to provide a foundation that affirms identity and encourages motivation in chosen pursuits (Barber et al., 2005; McIntosh, Metz, & Youniss, 2005). Recently, Larson and Browne (2007) suggested that school-based extracurricular activities supervised by adults, such as a school theatrical performance, can teach children and adolescents strategies for responding to, and taking ownership of, their emotions. Adolescents draw from the emotional culture of a particular setting; when program activities provide a predictable set of activities that encourage positive emotions, young people are more likely to learn and grow.

Not all accounts of extracurricular activities are positive, however. Some studies characterize them as

facilitating class-based exclusion, peer rejection, and anti-social behavior (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). A zero-sum model attributed to Coleman (1961) posits that time spent on one activity detracts from time spent on another. According to this model, extracurricular activities divert time from academic pursuits and subvert adult academic goals (Marsh, 1992).

DEBATE ON THE VALUE OF AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

Despite the meta-analysis of Durlak and Weissberg (2007), which determined that participation in afterschool programs was associated with improved school performance in terms of grades and achievement test scores (see also Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005; Miller, 2003), findings on this topic have been mixed and controversial. For example, a national evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, a major source of afterschool programming in the U.S., reported that 21st Century programs had little or no impact on academic performance and behaviors such as the completion of homework (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Poor program attendance was one possible reason. Though the evaluation has been sharply criticized as methodologically flawed (Jacobson, 2003; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005), the results have sparked a debate over the value of afterschool programs and their increasing emphasis on academic achievement following the No Child Left Behind Act (Archer, 2004). Because academics have become the primary if not exclusive focus of some afterschool programming, young people often regard programs as "more school after school" (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005, p. 410) rather than an opportunity to engage in intrinsically motivating activities. As a result, attendance can remain a challenge (Bartko, 2005).

The debate over the value of afterschool programs has primarily focused on such markers of program quality as support for autonomy, efficacy, skill-building, and supportive relationships (see Beck, 1999; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, et al., 2005). Successful programs are flexible (Pierce, Hamm, & Vandell, 1999) and engage children in activities and relationships with caring adults. This emphasis on program quality inevitably raises the question: What activities will best meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of children? Given the recent emphasis on academics, homework sessions and academic enrichment

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projects top the list of activities in need of further investigation. Despite the emphasis on program quality, however, few studies have looked specifically at time expenditures, levels of student engagement, and the subjective experiences of students during common afterschool program activities.

CONCEPTUALIZING ENGAGEMENT

One-time surveys say little about the immediate experience of children when they are engaged in activities. In addition, few studies have focused specifically on the perceptions and feelings of students participating in afterschool programs. In our studies, we used the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), which allowed us to assess levels of engagement and different mood states of the students as afterschool activities were taking place. While the researchers have identified several consequences of afterschool programs, none have addressed the question of why students choose, and continue to participate in, the specific activities in the programs—

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valuable information for understanding voluntary participation. An underlying assumption of our studies was that students choose activities that interest them, and that those who are highly engaged in an activity are more likely to continue their involvement with it (Bartko, 2005).

When school is in session, students report being bored, mainly because they feel unchallenged and uninspired in class (Larson & Richards, 1991). As motivational environments, afterschool programs are quite different from classrooms. When participating in afterschool programs, students are generally oriented toward the tasks they are undertaking and share a belief that success requires them to collaborate with their peers. Research has shown that such an orientation is associated positively with satisfaction and negatively with boredom (Duda & Ntourmanis, 2005). Afterschool programs are also thought to increase engagement in school by meeting needs that may not be met during the school day, for instance, by offering opportunities for attention from adults, positive interactions with peer groups, and activities designed to build self-esteem (Miller, 2003).

During afterschool program activities, students may experience heightened *concentration*, *interest*, and *enjoyment*—the emotional ingredients that characterize flow and foster learning (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi,

Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). A heightened state of *concentration* is most likely to occur when a person is working in an area that requires talent or skill (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). Concentration has been shown to be related to depth of cognitive processing and to academic performance (Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Such immersion in an activity is central to flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and to meaningful learning (Montessori, 1967). Environments that support autonomy generally increase *interest* and intrinsic motivation, whereas controlling environments decrease them (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986). When children are interested in an activity, they are more likely to identify with its goals and regard it as personally important (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Interest directs attention, stimulates the desire to continue to engage in an activity, and is related to school achievement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Hidi, 1990; Renninger & Wozniak, 1985; Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler, 1992). *Enjoyment*, which includes feelings of fun and pleasure, is the most common reason children say they participate in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2002). Enjoyment also reflects the perceived competence, recognition, and social support that students routinely receive while involved in afterschool activities. Enjoyment is related to the demonstration of competencies, creative accomplishment, and school

performance (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Nakamura, 1988).

Larson (2000) characterized contexts for positive youth development as those in which children experience both high degrees of choice in their activities and high levels of concentration when engaged in them. Larson posited that this combination of motivational states is important for the development of initiative because it unites intrinsic motivation with concentrated effort, just as experiences of flow do. Extending Larson's research, we considered how likely young people were to experience four combinations of emotional sensations during afterschool hours:

- **High choice and high concentration,** which is ideal for fostering flow and initiative
- **High choice and low concentration,** which is most consistent with leisure and relaxation
- **Low choice and high concentration,** which is often reported during the school day in academic classes
- **Low choice and low concentration,** which occurs when individuals are disengaged or apathetic

A METHODOLOGY FOR STUDYING ENGAGEMENT IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

We collected data from eight afterschool programs in two medium-sized cities and one small town in three Midwestern states. All of the programs were based in middle schools. Five programs were federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers; the remaining programs were funded by local school districts and city governments.

Studying emotions and engagement during the afterschool hours presents several challenges. Because activities take place in multiple locations, systematic observation is difficult. Teenagers also spend considerable amounts of time alone and unsupervised during the non-school hours, engaging in behaviors that may be strongly influenced by an observer. To address these challenges, we used the Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM). Youth were provided with logbooks and pre-programmed wristwatches that signaled them at random moments during the afterschool hours. Each time they were signaled, the students recorded the time and their location, activity, social partners, and emotional states. By having students report on immediate experiences over the course of a week, the ESM solicited repeated "snapshots" of subjective experience, helping us avoid the issues of recall and estimation that are unavoidable byproducts of most surveys and interviews.

Our sample consisted of 191 middle school youth: 52 percent were male, 60 percent were children of color, and 47 percent reported an annual household income of less than $40,000. Of these, 160 were *program youth* who reported participating in an afterschool program at least once during the study, and 31 were *nonprogram youth* who did not participate in any organized program. In our studies, all 191 young people wore watches that were programmed to beep 35 times during one week in the fall and 35 times during one week in the spring during the 2001–2002 school year. Signals occurred at random times after school and during evenings and weekends. The youth responded, on average, to 33 of the 35 signals in both the fall and the spring, for a total of 12,143 reports. Of these experiences, 4,846 occurred after school, between the time school was dismissed and 6 p.m. Program youth responded to a total of 4,089 signals after school, 1,030 while at a program and 3,059 while not at a program. Nonprogram youth responded to 759 signals after school, which by definition occurred when students were not at a program.

In addition to recording the time, location, activity, and their social partners, participants rated the cognitive, affective, and motivational qualities of their experiences each time they were signaled, on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 meaning "not at all" and 4 meaning "very much." These qualities were assigned to the following categories:

- *Choice:* "How much choice did you have about this activity?"
- *Importance:* "How important was this activity to you?"
- *Interest*: "Was it interesting?"
- *Challenge*: "Was it challenging?"
- *Enjoyment:* "Did you enjoy what you were doing?"
- *Concentration*: "How hard were you concentrating?"
- *Skills*: "Were you using your skills?"
- *Wish*: "Did you wish you were doing something else?"

We used those factors to create three composite variables:

- **Concentrated effort** included high ratings for challenge, skills, and concentration.
- **Intrinsic motivation** included high ratings for enjoyment, choice, and interest, as well as low ratings for wishing to be doing something else.
- **Importance** was a stand-alone item.

Respondents were also asked, "How were you feeling when you were signaled?" Students then rated the following moods: *lonely, happy, angry, stressed, excited, bored, scared, sad, relaxed, proud,* and *worried.* Three factors emerged from this set of items:

- **Positive affect:** proud, excited, happy, and relaxed
- **Negative affect:** scared, worried, sad, angry, and stressed
- **Apathy:** bored and lonely

In addition, a composite variable for *engagement* was created based on the theory of flow. Engagement was defined as the combination of enjoyment, interest, and concentration.

THE QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

In the first study we summarize in this article (Vandell, Shernoff, et al., 2005), we asked two questions. The first question was, Do students who attend afterschool programs engage in different activities and experience different motivational and emotional states when they are at the afterschool programs compared to when they are elsewhere after school? *Program youth* were defined as students who reported participating in an afterschool program for at least one wristwatch signal during afterschool hours. "Elsewhere" typically referred to the respondent's own home, someone else's home, an outdoor space, or a public building.

We found that there were significant differences in the use of time and the quality of experience when students were at the programs compared to when they were elsewhere after school, as shown in Table 1. While attending the programs, program youth reported spending a higher percentage of time in organized sports, academic and arts enrichment activities, and completing homework than when they were elsewhere. Students in other settings reported spending a good deal of time watching TV and eating or snacking after school. Students in programs rarely reported engaging in these activities. Students in other settings also reported being alone or in "self-care" a

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF TIME IN ACTIVITIES AT AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS AND ELSEWHERE DURING AFTERSCHOOL HOURS

	Program youth at program	Program youth elsewhere	Nonprogram youth elsewhere
Academic/arts enrichment	22%	8%	8%
Sports	27%	8%	9%
Community service	3%	0%	0%
Homework	15%	9%	10%
Snacks/meals	6%	8%	10%
TV	5%	19%	19%
Socializing with peers	8%	11%	8%
Alone	0%	12%	13%

Categories are not mutually exclusive; a student may watch TV and be alone.
Not all activities and social groupings are represented.

TABLE 2. FEELING STATES AT AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS AND ELSEWHERE DURING THE AFTERSCHOOL HOURS

	Mean ratings on a 4-point scale ranging from 1, not at all, to 4, very much		
	Program youth at program	Program youth elsewhere	Nonprogram youth elsewhere
Intrinsic motivation	3.0	2.8	2.8
Concerted effort	2.6	1.8	2.0
Importance	3.0	2.5	2.6
Positive emotion	2.5	2.3	2.3
Negative emotions	1.3	1.3	1.3
Apathy	1.4	1.5	1.5

substantial percentage of the time. Not once did a student report being alone when at a program.

Moreover, students reported significantly higher intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, and positive states of mind while they were in afterschool programs than when they were elsewhere after school, as shown in Table 2. They also experienced their activities to be more important when they were at programs than when they were elsewhere.

In addition, program youth were almost twice as likely to experience high choice in combination with high concentration when they were at the afterschool program (40 percent of the time) than when they were elsewhere (21 percent). Program youth were also more likely to experience low choice and high concentration when at programs, a combination frequently reported during "homework help" sessions.

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Students reported high choice and low concentration—a combination characteristic of leisure and relaxation—less frequently when they were at programs (34 percent of the time) than when they were elsewhere (52 percent). They reported low choice in combination with low concentration, a state of mind consistent with apathy, very rarely when they were at programs. In contrast, students reported this combination almost one-quarter of the time when they were elsewhere after school.

In our second research question, we wondered how program youth spent their time and experienced activities when they were not at a program after school compared to how nonprogram youth did. If program youth used their time differently and experienced different emotional states when they were elsewhere after school compared to nonprogram youth, it would suggest that young people who attend programs may differ in fundamental ways from those who do not. If program youth did not use their time differently or experience different emotional states, the differences reported when program youth were at the program compared to when they were elsewhere would most likely be explained by the program context and not the predispositions of participants. This is exactly what we found. When not at the afterschool program, program youth engaged in activities at similar rates and had similar emotional states as did nonprogram youth during afterschool hours, as Table 1 illustrates. For example, nonprogram youth spent 9 percent of afterschool hours playing sports, 10 percent of their time completing homework, and 19 percent of their time watching TV, percentages that were not significantly different from those of program youth when not at programs. Nonprogram youth actually spent 10 percent of their time snacking or having meals, a greater percentage than program youth whether they were in programs or not. Differences in the use of time and quality of experience resulting from the influence of being in the program versus not being in a program were indeed much greater than any dispositional differences between program and nonprogram youth.

From these analyses, we concluded that school-based afterschool programs provide youth with sub-stantially different activities than they would otherwise be exposed to during afterschool hours. While at programs, youth spent more time engaged in productive, skill-building activities that are both challenging and intrinsically motivating, the defining features of flow. When they were not at a program, they spent more time in passive and indulgent activi-

> Overall, the young people reported increased engagement and more positive emotions during programs, and a greater sense of apathy when not in programs.

ties. Overall, the young people reported increased engagement and more positive emotions during programs, and a greater sense of apathy when not in programs; see Table 2. These findings underscore the potential of afterschool programs to be positive developmental contexts for youth.

LOOKING INSIDE PROGRAMS: WHICH ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS ARE MOST ENGAGING?

In a second report (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007), we asked two more questions. First, what were the average levels of subjective experience—that is, the levels of intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, positive and negative mood states, and engage-

ment—during the most common activities in afterschool programs? The most frequently reported activity was organized sports, at 32 percent of the time, followed by arts enrichment activities (12 percent), socializing (11 percent), completing homework (8 percent), academic enrichment activities (5 percent), and sit-down games (4 percent). Second, what were the average levels of subjective experience with the most common social partners in the afterschool programs? The most frequently reported social partners were peers and adults, 53 percent of the time, followed by adults only (37 percent). Only 4 percent of the time did program youth report that they were with peers only.

We compared the quality of experience for each activity to the quality of experience participants reported when engaged in all other program activities taken together. Participants reported being the most engaged and intrinsically motivated during organized sports and arts enrichment activities. They reported that they exerted the most concentrated effort and experienced the least amount of apathy when playing

sports. They also cited sports as the most subjectively important activity. Concentrated effort and feelings of importance were significantly higher in arts enrichment programs than in other program activities. Sports and arts enrichment activities elicited the rare combination of high intrinsic motivation and high levels of concentration that characterizes flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and is critical for positive youth development (Larson, 2000). By engaging in activities that elicit both playfulness and seriousness, students experienced the deep concentration and intrinsic reward characteristic of efficient learning and continuing motivation. Sports appear to be engaging to students because they find the activity not only subjectively important, but also challenging: They are driven to play to the fullest extent of their skills and concentration. Arts enrichment activities are engaging because they facilitate spontaneity, creativity, and social unity (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Folkestad, 2002).

Students reported high levels of positive affect not only during arts enrichment activities, but also during sit-down games and academic enrichment activities.

Academic enrichment refers to supervised activities such as hands-on science projects, discovery units, and computer education, but not homework. Unlike sports and the arts, which can occur spontaneously outside afterschool programs, academic enrichment activities almost exclusively occur in structured programs (Vandell, Shernoff, et al., 2005). During academic enrichment activities, students reported both higher positive affect and lower negative affect than when they were engaged in other activities.

In sharp contrast, participants reported the lowest intrinsic motivation, positive affect, and overall engagement during homework completion sessions. Perhaps when students were working on homework, they felt subject to the control and evaluation typical of classrooms, despite being physically in an afterschool program, while the choice and feedback offered by other program activities were absent. Completing homework can be beneficial both academically (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006) and developmentally (Bempechat, 2004); help with homework in supervised afterschool programs may be particularly important for students at risk for failure in school (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001). However, the contrast in the experience of completing homework compared to engaging in other academic enrichment activities is instructive. Unlike working on homework, which is generally a solitary activity, academic enrichment activities are similar to sports and the arts in that they support autonomy and facilitate group involvement with peers and adults.

Socializing yielded less positive experiences than most other program activities. Though students reported lower levels of negative affect while socializing, they also reported lower levels of engagement, concentrated effort, and importance. Apparently students socialize to stave off negative emotions, such as boredom and loneliness, but socializing alone does not produce heightened engagement—at least not in the afterschool programs we studied. The experience of playing sit-down games was also mixed. Participants reported significantly higher intrinsic motivation and concentrated effort, as well as lower negative affect, than in other activities, but they also indicated that games were less important than other program activities. This finding is not trivial: Youth are unlikely to continue building skills they do not consider to be important or meaningful, even if they are enjoyable in the moment.

With respect to social partners, students reported higher apathy and lower importance when they were with adults only than with peers only, but they also reported higher intrinsic motivation when with adults than when with peers. More significantly, however, students reported being the most engaged and intrinsically motivated when they were with peers *and* adults, and the least engaged and intrinsically motivated when with peers only. Adult supervision and involvement combined with peer interaction may be an essential characteristic of activities that are both motivating and

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meaningful. In fact, the predominantly supervised and interactive structure of afterschool programs may help to explain why students reported significantly more positive experiences when they were at programs than when they were elsewhere.

SHAPING AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS TO EMPHASIZE ENGAGEMENT

Our analyses of the time youth spent in programs compared to elsewhere after school highlight the value of programs in the actual day-to-day experiences of youth. We found few significant differences in how program youth and nonprogram youth spent their time when they were not at a program. Both groups spent much of this time watching TV, eating, and socializing with peers. The experience of both groups was also similar: These activities left youth feeling apathetic and disengaged. Thus the afterschool program itself—and not self-selection on the part of afterschool participants—seems to be the reason that program youth were involved in more developmentally beneficial experiences than were nonprogram youth.

Afterschool programs offer adolescents positive and engaging experiences, which can, in turn, support their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Our findings suggest that researchers and policymakers should pay more attention to the potential role of organized sports, arts enrichment activities, and academic enrichment activities in shaping quality youth-driven afterschool programs. The social and emotional benefits of engagement in organized sports cannot be overemphasized. Participating in sports can help youth develop self-efficacy, confidence, and feelings of com-

petence by virtue of mastering complex physical and social skills (Broh, 2002; Henschen, Edwards, & Mathinos, 1982; Kirshnit, Ham, & Richards, 1989). Our findings suggest that the experiential pathway to such outcomes is the peak engagement and intrinsic motivation characteristic of flow.

Moreover, youth were physically active in over one-third of their experiences sampled during program time. When they were not at a program, they were much more likely to be watching TV and snacking. This suggests that afterschool programs may help prevent declines in physical activity and sports participation as youth grow older, serving as a protective factor against increasing obesity and other weight issues among U.S. children and adolescents (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005).

Our findings also suggest that programs may better serve their students by considering alternatives to a strong or exclusive emphasis on homework in response to mandates for improving achievement.

> Policymakers must learn that organized sports and enrichment programs can enhance learning, promote interest in school, and build necessary skills.

Programs might also consider restructuring homework sessions to make them more like arts and academic enrichment activities. Providing only "more school after school" can reasonably be expected to undermine student engagement and decrease attendance. Offering intensive homework sessions to improve achievement may be especially misplaced at the middle school level. The relationship between the amount of homework given and the achievement of junior high school students is not linear. According to Cooper (1989), up to approximately one hour of homework a night improves achievement. After an hour, the correlation between homework time and achievement is sharply reduced, disappearing entirely beyond several hours per night. Middle school children may become satiated with homework after a certain point and therefore need constructive social, artistic, and athletic activities in order to continue to develop.

Activities, as the most visible aspect of an afterschool program, are often what initially attract students to programs and keep them involved—or cause them to drop out. By embedding academic content in authentic enrichment and learning activities (Walker et al., 2005), programs can offer meaningful and engaging alternatives to "more school after school." Researchers have documented a variety of engaging and effectively structured programs that intentionally combine developmental, academic, and long-term achievement goals; for example, see Beck, 1999; Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005; Mahoney, Lord, et al., 2005; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004; Vandell & Shumow, 1999).

Policy Implications

Policymakers frequently regard extracurricular activities and afterschool programming as superfluous, if not a distraction. In times of fiscal constraint, such programs are often the first to be cut. Therefore, policymakers must learn that organized sports and enrichment programs can enhance learning, promote interest in school, and build necessary skills. Some of the most valued outcomes of sports, arts, and other enrichment activities are immediate sensations of appreciation, joy, interest, deep concentration, and overall engagement. Though such positive experiences enrich the lives of youth, they are not easily measured. Once we can measure engagement, however, such activities show their intrinsic justification: Activities that facilitate flow help young people develop the character and skills they need to meet their life goals.

Since low attendance in afterschool programs has been attributed to lack of interesting and enticing activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), improving attendance depends on identifying, and then offering, activities young people find appealing. Furthermore, replacing unstructured activities such as watching TV and unsupervised socializing with engaging afterschool activities can increase students' identification with school (Jordan, 1999; Marsh, 1992) and ultimately improve academic achievement (Cooper et al., 1999). Policymakers should therefore provide sufficient resources for afterschool programs to offer not only strictly academic activities, such as homework help, but also the non-academic activities, such as organized sports and arts enrichment, that ultimately may be more effective in helping children achieve academic goals.

The Value of Engagement

The fact that students reported feeling high levels of engagement in afterschool programs is particularly important in comparison to their lack of engagement in

school or in unstructured activities outside of school (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson, 2000). By offering a rich array of activities that promote engagement, after-school programs can enable youth to experience flow. Afterschool programs thereby provide young people with a new way of relating to the world: an orientation of being open to new experiences, of being interested in the world, of being deeply involved with activities and people, and, ultimately, of becoming lifelong learners. Rather than stopping with the immediate experience of a satisfying activity, this orientation carries into the future. Engagement is not a means to an end, but an end in itself—one whose value as a school outcome is as worthy of consideration as any other.

HEAF

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Bringing in the Community:
Partnerships and Quality Assurance in 21st Century Community Learning Centers

By Charles Smith and Laurie Van Egeren

Executive Summary

As a matter of policy, 21st Century Community Learning Centers rely heavily on community organizations to provide a variety of instructional programs. In this way, 21st Century sites tap the depth and breadth of knowledge available in their communities to provide non-traditional learning experiences that can better meet young participants' need for engagement and relevance than can a simple extension of school-day routine. However, the inclusion of multiple partners along with school-based site staff at any given 21st Century site means that the quality of instruction can be extremely uneven. How do school districts that receive 21st Century grants, and the coordinators of each of their sites, ensure high quality across a wide variety of offerings led by staff from many different organizations? To begin to answer this question, we first explored the extent to which 21st Century sites in Michigan are actually partnering with community organizations. We then researched selected high-quality sites to arrive at an instructional partnerships model of quality assurance practices whose wide adoption could have significant impact on 21st Century policy and on the youth development field as a whole.

Over the past decade, the legislation authorizing 21st Century Community Learning Centers has undergone changes with each reauthorization. Originally a small community development initiative, 21st Century is now a billion-dollar afterschool program focused on school success (McCallion, 2003). Throughout this evolution, partnerships between school-based 21st Century grantees and community-based organizations have remained a central component of the policy (Dynarski et al., 2002; Harvard Family Research Project, 2002; McCallion, 2003). Such community partnerships hold potential to provide exactly the kinds of non-traditional learning experiences called for by a wide range of school-day reformers: increased access to community settings, projects that require expression and application of knowledge, and development of real-world skills. These modes of learning can not only produce more equitable learning outcomes for individuals (Gutierrez, in press; Sternberg, 2003), but may also support the nation's economic competitiveness (Levy & Murnane, 2004; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006; Time, Learning and Afterschool Task Force, 2007). They can also complement the narrowing school-day curriculum with alternative pathways to learning (Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004).

In principle, community partnerships are good sources for alternative learning experiences that the traditional school day is ill-suited to produce. But how do school-community partnerships affect the learning of children and youth in 21st Century programs? What are the characteristics of effective school-community partnerships that support out-of-school learning?

As policies that affect program quality have received increasing recognition in the afterschool field, the High/Scope Foundation has had extensive opportunities to look inside 21st Century programs as both researchers and technical assistance providers. Over the past five years, we have conducted observations at dozens of 21st Century sites and have delivered training and technical assistance to hundreds of 21st Century staff in programs across the country. We almost always saw staff from community partner organizations working directly with children during

any given program week—that is, community partner staff were leading a significant number of the learning opportunities offered at these 21st Century sites. However, review of dozens of weekly program schedules showed that staff from community partners came and went on an extremely irregular basis, so there was little consistency in terms of *who* was leading the learning. When we conducted research that spanned the program year, we frequently found that staff members who were part of the pre-observation were no longer with the program at the post-test. Furthermore, when we delivered training on quality systems or youth development strategies, we rarely saw administrators or direct-service staff from community partners—even when the training was conducted at a specific program site rather than statewide.

> Use of the instructional partnerships model of quality assurance could affect not only 21st Century programs but also the entire afterschool field.

Because of these observations, we started to wonder who was keeping track of the quality of learning experiences provided by community partners. How do 21st Century site managers assure that staff from community partner organizations are competent, stay on task, and fit the activities they lead into the site's curriculum? Turnover rates are high both for staff employed directly by the site and for staff from partner organizations. How do site managers ensure continuity for the children and youth in the program? The fact that we did not see community partner staff involved in training and technical assistance provided by the state department of education led us to wonder in what ways—if any—the state's regulation, knowledge resources, and performance incentives trickle down to reach these staff members who are so crucial to children's learning.

These questions led to broader issues about the role of community partnerships in 21st Century policy. Is the quality of services provided by community partners a major component of the policy or a peripheral concern? In order to address this question, we wanted to look at such basic data as how many community partners were involved in 21st Century programs and what proportion of the learning experiences they provided. We quickly learned that little information was publicly available about this critical question. In a summary review of agency reports on state

department of education 21st Century websites, community partnerships were frequently mentioned, but few details were available about how much contact time community partners provided.[1]

Thus, we set out to study community partnerships and quality assurance practices in 21st Century afterschool programs. Using unique and detailed data from a statewide program evaluation conducted by Michigan State University, we explored the structure, scale, and scope of community partnerships in Michigan's 21st Century program. To our knowledge, this is the first study of a large sample of community partnerships that extends to the level of individual sites and community partners. We then addressed the quality assurance issue by selecting a subset of high-quality programs with which to conduct structured interviews with staff from both the school-based 21st Century sites and their community partners. This article summarizes some of the findings of our larger report (Smith, Van Egeren, & Karabenick, 2007).

We found that partnerships and quality assurance are key elements in what we refer to as an *instructional partnerships model* that is emerging from the ways in which high-quality 21st Century sites implement 21st Century policy. This model enables school-based afterschool programs to ensure quality in the process of mobilizing the non-traditional educational assets of their communities. Though 21st Century programs, at least in Michigan, have been remarkably effective at building partnerships with an impressive array of community-based providers, 21st Century policy has not given those sites much help in addressing the quality of the educational opportunities community partners provide. Use of the instructional partnerships model of quality assurance could affect not only 21st Century programs but also the entire afterschool field. By influencing organizational performance and workforce development practices across communities where 21st Century programs are located, quality assurance measures could help ensure that children in afterschool programs receive high-quality instruction no matter which organization is providing it.

PARTNERS OR VENDORS?

In a fundamental sense, study of community partnerships tells an important story about effective implementation of 21st Century policy. Through extensive patterns of partnership, school-based 21st Century programs appear to have created a platform for access to non-traditional sources of instruction. Although students who attend 21st Century programs spend time

working alone on homework and in unstructured play, they also spend a substantial amount of time in what can only be described as an instructional context, in which expert adults are teaching novice youth, whether the subject is soccer or watercolor painting or math. In this sense, divisions between academic content and enrichment are artificial. Both entail adult-youth processes that are focused on instruction. Our study showed that community partners provide instructional services to support learning in many content areas, as described below.

A small literature on school-community partnerships suggests that deeper collaborations between schools and community partners, involving such aspects as shared goal setting and joint management, are more likely to produce strong organizational performance and sustainable collaborations (Deich, 2001; Melaville, 1998). Work specifically on afterschool partnerships suggests that when partners share a joint mission, merge staff into close working relationships, and develop a sense of purpose that is associated with the partnership itself, they are more likely to "provide children with a sense of belonging essential for their development and their learning" (Noam, 2001, pp. 13–14; Noam & Tillinger, 2004).

The single study that addresses this issue in relation to 21st Century programs (Dynarski et al., 2002) suggests what our interviews with Michigan experts confirm: Most partnerships between 21st Century sites and community-based partners are not deeply integrated. The national evaluation of 21st Century programs noted, "In general, centers contracted with community agencies to provide specific after-school sessions rather than as partners with shared governance or combined operations" (Dynarski et al., 2002, pp. 3–4). Although some 21st Century sites have established true school-community partnerships as described above, most community relationships seem to represent a kind of outsourcing. Community organizations essentially serve as vendors that are contracted to provide specific content to site participants for a specified number of days or hours. Community partners that function as vendors are not likely to be involved in developing the program's vision and goals. Shared governance and goal setting or devel-

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PARTNER SERVICES IN A HYPOTHETICAL PROGRAM
This activity and staffing schedule for a hypothetical 21st Century site is based on numerous program schedules we reviewed. The enrichment period is typically delivered by a mixture of site staff and partner staff. Site staff generally include full-time site coordinators and part-time permanent staff, usually school-day teachers. As you can see, partner organizations, and therefore partner staff, change regularly during the program year.

Time	Program Component	Provider
3:30–4:25	Snack, greeting circle (20 min); Homework or independent reading (35 min)	Site staff
4:30–5:30	Enrichment time: Scheduled offerings (see below), board games, or independent reading	See Enrichment Time Calendar
5:35–6:15	Outdoor time and pick-up	Site staff

Schedule	Activity	Provider
M & W	Basketball OR	Site staff
	Girls' drill squad (Sept–Dec) Hip-hop dance (Jan–Apr)	YMCA
T & Th	Life science (Sept–Dec) Physical science (Jan–Apr)	4-H
F	Crafts OR	Site staff
	Life skills (Sept–Dec) Build your own games (Jan–Apr)	Faith-based organization

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opment of a new shared identity combining school-based and community-based staff occur less frequently. The 21st Century sites are more likely to focus on individual learning rather than on adopting the broader vision of youth and community development that community-based organizations could bring to the table.

In this context, the 21st Century site staff employed by the host schools assume primary responsibility for making sure that community partners are accountable to the programmatic mission of the sites. If the community partner serves as a vendor rather than a true partner, then the purchaser of services—the 21st Century site—must adopt accountability tools to ensure quality. Quality assurance practices like those described in our instructional partnerships model provide tools for negotiating and evaluating partnerships to ensure that the instruction delivered is effective in serving the needs of young participants.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

In educational contexts, *quality assurance* is a form of accountability that focuses on improving the performance of staff members as they deliver learning experiences. In this era of high-stakes testing, the idea of accountability has taken on negative connotations for many educators and youth workers, primarily due to

problematic assumptions that link test results to staff effectiveness and program improvement (Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2005; Laitsch, 2006; Ryan & Brown, 2005; Wiggins, 1993). In contrast, we define *quality assurance* as a form of accountability that draws on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and knowledge management theory (Mason, 2003). In this model, motivation to achieve higher levels of performance is likely to occur where:

- Reliable information about individual performance is available
- A group of staff who share a vision of the meaning of their work collaborate to link this data to subsequent behavior change
- Successful change is actually possible

Accountability, in these terms, is a quality assurance process that empowers professionals to raise their level of performance according to known standards. It uses fair and meaningful assessment to mark progress toward or satisfaction of goals. Quality assurance focuses on active processes—how staff perform as they work with children at what we call the *point of service*.

Program Quality

The traditional indicators of program quality have been such program-wide markers as staff retention and education, program funding, and various forms of community outreach. More recent publications suggest that the field is beginning to identify quality assurance practices as levers of change that more directly affect staff performance with youth (Akiva & Yohalem, 2006; Hilberg, Waxman, & Tharp, 2003; Pianta, 2003; Smith & Akiva, in press; Wilson-Ahlstrom & Yohalem, 2007). These tools include:

- Program standards that are clearly communicated to all staff
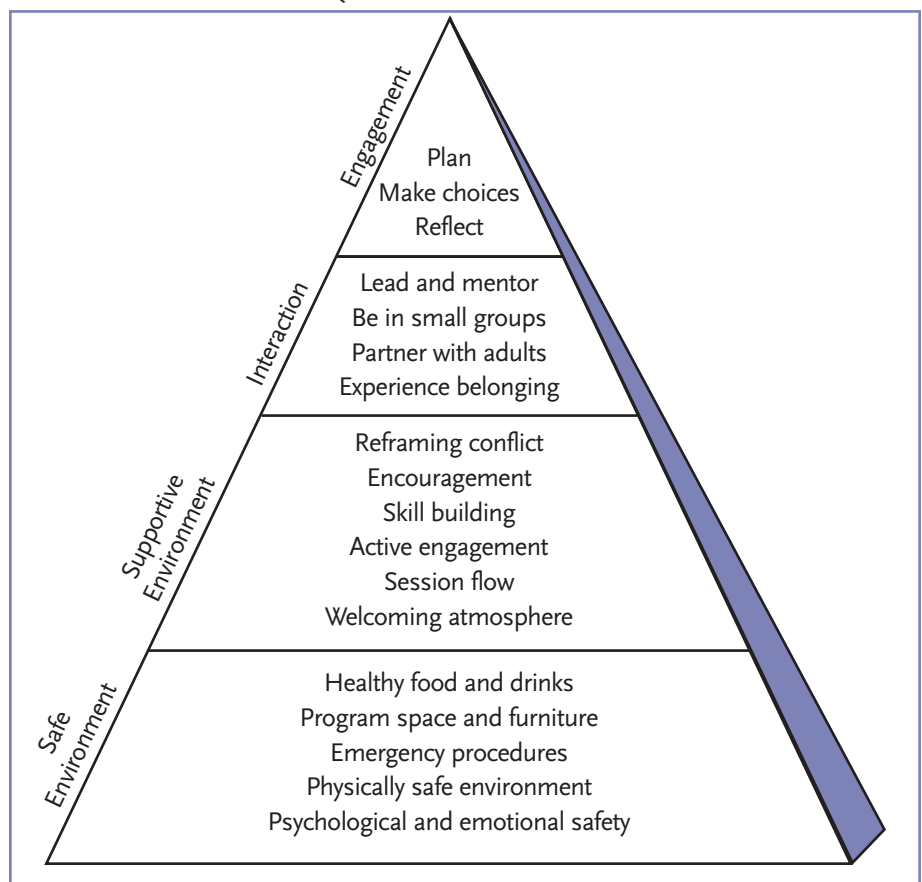- Observational assessment focused on enabling improvement

- Training in developmentally appropriate methods of instruction
- Ongoing coaching of less experienced staff by more experienced staff

All of these tools are focused on how children and youth experience afterschool programming. These quality assurance practices constitute *learning features* that, as we will outline below, must be coupled with management practices that we call *focusing features*. Focusing features concentrate evaluation efforts on the interaction between staff and children. The combination of learning features and focusing features in quality assurance practices can improve the quality and continuity of instruction in 21st Century programs.

Point-of-Service Quality

In order to explore the relationship between community partnerships and quality assurance, we need a definition of *quality* that is focused on the point of service, where adults and youth meet and instruction occurs. Our construct for point-of-service quality is

FIGURE 1. POINT-OF-SERVICE QUALITY CONSTRUCT

provided in Figure 1. This model of instructional qual-
ity, the product of a formal validation study (Smith &
Hohmann, 2005; Smith, 2005), has been widely vet-
ted among both researchers and practitioners (Akiva &
Yohalem, 2006). With several other research-based
constructs, it parallels a converging definition of qual-
ity in the afterschool field (Yohalem & Wilson-
Ahlstrom, 2007). Each level of the pyramid includes
activities that lead to the four quality markers: safe
environment, supportive environment, interaction, and
engagement. Each level of the pyramid builds on the
one under it; for example, a safe environment provides
the foundation for an environment that is also sup-
portive, and the environment cannot be supportive
unless it is first safe. A supportive environment in turn
provides the foundation for the next level of quality,
interaction. Several studies have demonstrated that
higher levels of point-of-service quality, especially the
higher levels of the pyramid, are positively associated
with program attendance, youth interest and motiva-
tion, social-emotional skills, and academic achieve-
ment (Blazevski, Van Egeren, & Smith, 2007;
Intercultural Center for Research in Education &
National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005;
Russell & Reisner, 2005; Smith & Hohmann, 2005).

In our research on point-of-service quality, we have
found that afterschool programs, school-based and
community-based alike, generally provide moderate to
strong levels of safety and support, so that the two base
levels of the pyramid are in place. However, the fre-
quency of activities that promote interaction and engage-
ment, represented in the two higher levels of the quality
pyramid, is low across the majority of programs.
Regardless of the program type, content focus, or age of
children served, programs are less likely to promote such
sophisticated interactive learning strategies as coopera-
tive learning, teaching others, or partnering with adults;
they are also less likely to provide opportunities for cog-
nitive engagement through planning, goal setting, and
reflection (Smith, Blazevski, Akiva, & Peck, in press).

Furthermore, across several samples, quality
scores vary as much *within* programs as *between* pro-
grams. Apparently, the performance of individual staff
members has at least as much effect on quality as do
the practices of the site as whole. By contrast, the
instructional partnership model exists precisely in
order to regularize children's experience of the instruc-
tion—across staff and therefore across partners. Figure
1 describes a model of point-of-service quality that is
independent of the particular content of instruction,

Harlem After 3

whether "academic" or "enrichment." It can be used to
assess the performance of individual staff members,
whether they are employed by the 21st Century site or
by a community partner. Exemplary quality assurance
practices then link information about individual per-
formance to known standards in order to spur
improvement. Such quality assurance practices are
especially important in settings where multiple inde-
pendent providers provide what should be a seamless
programmatic experience for young participants.

RESEARCHING QUALITY PARTNERSHIPS

This study proceeds from two separate but related sets
of research questions, one set investigating the nature
of school-community partnerships and one focused on
the quality assurance practices used by managers of
21st Century sites in Michigan.

Our research on the nature of partnerships
between 21st Century school sites and community-
based partners in Michigan focused on three aspects:
structure, scale, and scope.

• **Structure** refers to organizational practices that
  accommodate extensive partnerships: How are
  grantees set up to manage relationships with multi-
  ple community-based partners? Do specific types of
  partners become specialized in certain kinds of serv-
  ices that fit the needs of many school sites?
• **Scale** refers to the basic descriptive numbers: How
  many community-based partners are active at how
  many sites? What kinds of organizations get involved
  in afterschool programming? How many students are
  they serving? These questions are of particular inter-
  est because 21st Century policy has the potential
  both to attract new private-sector resources for after-
  school programming and to reach deep into networks
  of community partners to leverage development of a
  community's overall afterschool workforce.

• **Scope** refers to the level of transaction between partnering organizations: Is the relationship one of true partnership, or simply a purchaser-vendor relationship? Are the partnerships deeply integrative, drawing on the core resources of both organizations to fulfill a joint mission? Or are the partnerships merely time-limited commitments in which instructional services are purchased from (or donated by) a community-based partner that delivers the agreed-upon service and then leaves?

Our second set of questions has to do with quality assurance practices used by managers of afterschool programs—that is, the grantee directors and site coordinators who oversee 21st Century sites. In the sites that employ an identifiable *instructional partnerships model* with a wide array of community-based partners, what practices are being used to make sure that those partners delivery high-quality services? How do managers ensure that the experiences of participants at the point of service are of high quality every single day—not only on a given day but also over time? Because the primary goal is quality instruction, we were especially interested in how the performance of front-line staff sent by community-based partners is monitored, evaluated, and improved.

Context: Michigan's 21st Century Program

In Michigan, the school districts that receive 21st Century grants are called *grantees*. Each grantee typically operates several sites, usually at elementary and middle schools, where afterschool programs are mounted during the school year. Many grantees also offer summer programming. During the 2005–2006 school year, Michigan's 21st Century program funded 36 grantee agencies that managed 187 afterschool sites. These sites served 25,792 children, of whom about 40 percent attended for at least 30 days during the year (Van Egeren & Sturdevant-Reed, 2006).

Michigan is an ideal system in which to investigate quality assurance practices. The Michigan Department of Education agency responsible for afterschool programming, the Office of Early Childhood and Parenting, mounted a major initiative in 2002 to raise the quality of afterschool services, as defined by the pyramid in Figure 1. The 2004 Michigan Model Out-of-School Time

Standards, applicable to all afterschool providers, informed a major revision of state licensing laws to align them with the standards. The state education agency has also begun to implement a quality initiative (Wilson-Ahlstrom & Yohalem, 2007) that requires an annual team-based quality assessment at all 21st Century sites. In addition, an online data-reporting process makes annual performance and improvement reports, based on uniform measures of program quality and student outcomes, available to all 21st Century sites. Though the impact of these efforts is yet to be recorded, they represent a major investment in uniform standards and quality assurance on the part of the Michigan Department of Education. The state education agency has thus moved beyond the usual regulatory and monitoring functions to act as a capacity-building intermediary in the statewide afterschool system (Blank et al., 2003; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1998).

Methods and Data

In describing the structure, scale, and scope of community partnerships in Michigan's 21st Century Community Learning Centers, our goal was not only to provide a system-level perspective. We also separated the data down to the level of individual sites and community-based partners wherever possible in order to describe how the instruction affected the point-of-service experience of children and youth.

Data sets were made available for this study by the evaluator for Michigan's 21st Century program, the

TABLE 1. YOUTH SURVEY ON POINT-OF-SERVICE QUALITY

Scale	Corresponding Survey Items
Governance and decision making	Staff and kids decide together how to do the activities; staff and kids decide the rules together; kids get to choose their activities; all kids get a chance to be a leader; kids get the chance to do a lot of different things; kids and staff set goals for what should happen; kids and staff talk about what the kids learned
Peer support	Kids treat each other with respect; kids work together to solve problems; kids make sure that other kids follow the rules; kids treat staff with respect; kids help each other out; kids tell one another when they do a good job
Staff support	Staff care about kids; staff treat kids with respect; staff try to be fair; staff help kids understand homework and school subjects; staff make activities interesting and fun

Community Evaluation and Research Center in the Office of University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University. The data sets represented total reporting on partnerships for the 2005–2006 school year. They included 91 percent of grantees and 87 percent of the sites in Michigan. These data sets consisted of linked data for:

- 2,195 *offerings* or planned sequences of activities with the same staff and youth (for example, the sewing club at Madison Middle School), provided by…
- 352 community-based partners that delivered services, for pay or as an in-kind contribution, to…
- 163 school sites, nested within…
- 28 grantee organizations[2]

The remaining four grantees did not report using any outside partners to provide services.

In the second step of our investigation, we conducted interviews about quality assurance practices at a subset of seven exemplary sites determined to have high point-of-service quality. First, we used youth survey data from all the 21st Century sites that reported use of community partners to construct a point-of-service quality measure, outlined in Table 1. The three scales—governance and decision-making, peer support, and staff support—roughly correspond to the top levels of the point-of-service quality pyramid in Figure 1.

We constructed a list of 20 sites with the highest youth survey scores and then asked expert informants—reviewers from the Michigan Department of Education and evaluators from Michigan State University—to evaluate the list based on their own experience. This selection process, as well as site staff's willingness to be interviewed, yielded seven high-quality 21st Century sites where we conducted a total of 17 interviews with grantee directors, site coordinators, and directors of community-based vendor organizations. All 17 staff interviews included the following questions:

- What is your personal definition of quality for the afterschool program at the site?
- What kind of accountability practices are used to monitor the quality of vendor services at the site, and what is your role in the process?
- How well do community-based vendors meet their own service missions through the collaboration with the 21st Century site?

We coded the interview data by analyzing responses to develop a set of categories for each of the three questions. After the coding, our primary interpretive approach was simply to count the number of times that interviewees mentioned particular practices or values. To provide background for the study, we also conducted four expert interviews with two lead consultants at the Michigan Department of Education, a local evaluator for a large urban district, and an expert with extensive experience in state licensing reform in 21st Century sites.

STRUCTURE, SCALE, AND SCOPE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Successful implementation of 21st Century policy is rooted in access to the diverse resources of communities where afterschool sites are located. Community-based organizations offer a wider variety of program options than any site could deliver alone, from sports and arts programming to life skills and youth development. What, then, are the characteristics of the relationships between 21st Century sites and their community partners?

Structures That Support Partnership

Michigan 21st Century grantees generally use one of two management models, which we refer to as the *grantee-manager model* and the *grantee-fiduciary model.* In the **grantee-manager model,** the school district that receives the grant manages its own 21st Century sites, employing its own personnel as lead administrators and site coordinators. The school district grantee contracts both with school-day teachers and with community-based partners to deliver programming. In smaller cities and towns, the pool of community-based resources is often much smaller than in large urban areas, so that the relationships between individual community-based partners and 21st Century sites are often long-term and multipurpose, rather than short-term and specialized. For example, in the City of Port Huron, two longstanding community-based organizations were asked to join the original 21st Century proposal and have been the primary outside service providers over the entire lifetime of the 21st Century grant. Each of these organizations has come to deliver a mix of services that cover the primary academic, enrichment, and prevention emphases of the program.

Two of Michigan's largest school districts, Detroit and Grand Rapids, use the **grantee-fiduciary model.** These 21st Century grantees maintain fiduciary responsibility but outsource site management to

local high-capacity nonprofit organizations that have extensive experience as service providers, evaluators, and consultants in the education and human services sector. Examples include municipal recreation departments, nationally affiliated afterschool management organizations such as Communities in Schools, and local entities including Detroit's Youth Development Commission.

In 2005–2006, Detroit had five organizations managing 50 sites; Grand Rapids had three organizations managing 22 sites. These management organizations then hire permanent coordinators for each site. Like the grantee-manager school districts, these management organizations also contract with school-day teachers and with community-based partners to deliver services. However, the mechanisms for matching community-based resources to school sites in these large urban systems is very different from those used by the grantee-manager districts. For example, in Detroit, the management organizations host annual fairs at which community-based partners present their content to all 50 site coordinators, who then select partners for the upcoming semester. The management organizations coordinate the necessary contractual relationships and support the community partners in scaling up to deliver services. Further, Detroit's management organizations offer technical assistance and system-wide training in youth development methods to community partners at low or no cost. For example, Detroit's Youth Development Commission provides several dozen training opportunities each year to 21st Century grantee staff at a nominal fee, with content ranging from nonprofit board development to youth work methods.

Throughout the analyses that follow, we present evidence broken out by the two management models—which also represent differences between Michigan's largest urban districts and the rest of the state. Though we discovered some interesting differences, we generally found that grantee-managers and grantee-fiduciaries use their community partners in similar ways.

Scale of Partnerships

The 163 21st Century sites in our data set reported partnerships with 352 unique community partners. Grantee-manager districts accounted for 301 distinct partners, with grantee-fiduciaries partnering with the other 51 community organizations. These partners typically delivered multi-session offerings, frequently repeating the service at multiple sites. In order to provide a picture of the scale of programming pro-

vided by community partners, we use the following terminology:

- *Activities* are the scheduled content for every subdivision of time in a program. Activities include not only instructional offerings but also less structured pursuits such as homework help, snack, and unstructured play.
- *Offerings* are planned sequences of multiple sessions with a stated learning purpose, involving the same staff and group of participants. A sewing club, book group, or softball league that meets a certain number of times each week throughout a semester at a particular site constitutes an offering.
- *Sessions* are one meeting of an offering sequence, for instance, the October 19 meeting of the sewing club.
- *Slots* refer to a single student's attendance at one session of an offering. When seven students participate in the October 19 sewing club, that constitutes seven slots.
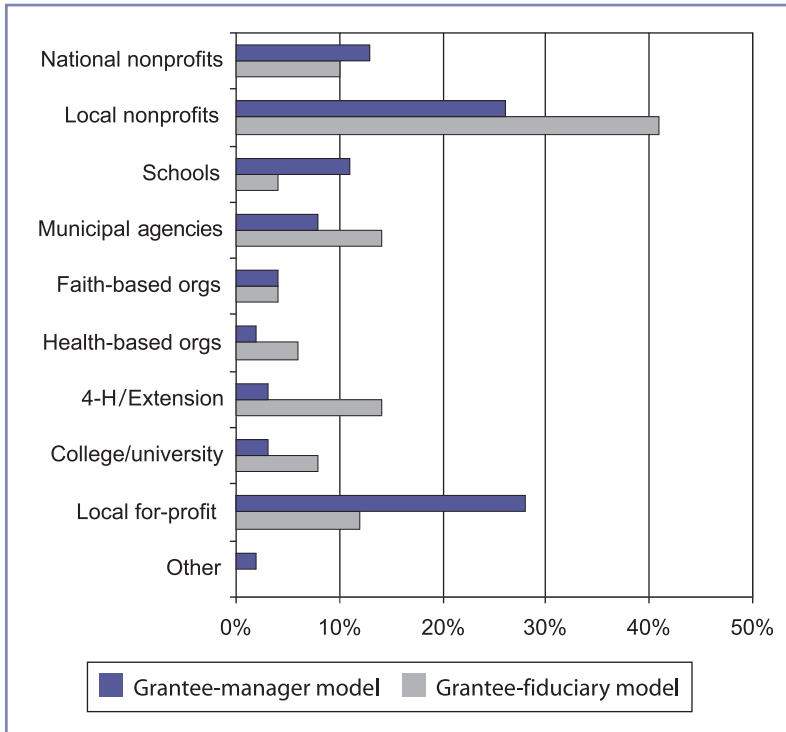
Community-based partners at all sites for which we had data provided 2,195 offerings with 98,433 distinct slots. On average, partners served 17 children per session and served 36 distinct children across the average offering sequence.

Partner Delivery of Services

To get a sense of the extent to which partner staff rather than site staff are used to deliver activities, we examined the use of partner staff in 163 21st Century sites in Michigan. Partners were part of the delivery of 30 percent of 8,201 total activities during the 2005–2006 program year. Site staff alone conducted 71 percent of activities, partner staff alone conducted 9 percent, and partner and site staff together conducted 21 percent. Remember that *activities* include not only instructional offerings but also less structured activities such as informal choice time and outdoor play. Since permanent site staff are generally responsible for these activities, the total proportion of purposeful instructional *offerings* delivered by partner staff is certainly higher than these figures indicate.

Differences emerged between the two management models in the division of labor between site staff and community partner staff. Grantee-fiduciaries were more likely to use a combination of site and partner staff, with such a combination leading 36 percent of activities, as compared to 15 percent for the grantee-manager model.

FIGURE 2. PARTNER TYPES

Kinds of Community-based Partners

In Figures 2 and 3, community-based partners are divided into a typology that includes:

- **Nationally affiliated nonprofit organizations** or program models, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, or YM/YWCA
- **Local nonprofit organizations** of varying purposes and capabilities, such as a community arts organization or soccer league
- **School organizations,** including public schools, charter schools, and school districts
- **Municipal agencies and institutions**, such as parks and recreation departments, museums, or police and fire departments
- **4-H** clubs and services from county **Extension** programs supported by Michigan State University
- **Colleges and universities** (other than 4-H and Extension)
- **Local for-profit organizations**, such as bowling alleys or other sports, entertainment, or arts venues, as well as self-employed individual vendors
- **Faith-based organizations**, including not only individual houses of worship but also larger organizations such as Catholic Charities
- **Health-based organizations**, such as hospital systems or nursing centers
- **Other types of organizations** that do not fit within

the categories above, for example, state agencies or the National Guard

Figure 2 presents the distribution of types of partners, out of a total of 352 partners, with the grantee-manager sites representing the lion's share of those partners. Figure 3 shows what percentage of the 2,195 unique offerings were delivered by each type of partner. The grantee-manager model accounts for 1,552 of these offerings and grantee-fiduciaries for 640.

The two most active types of partners were local nonprofits and local for-profits. The greatest difference in the two management models was reflected in the use of these two types of partners, with the grantee-manager model using more local for-profit partners and the grantee-fiduciary model using more local nonprofits. Other frequently used partners included nationally affiliated nonprofits, schools, municipal organizations, and, for grantee-fiduciaries, 4-H/Extension. However, the proportion of *offerings* delivered by these partners did not always reflect their numbers. For example, although the organizations using the grantee-fiduciary
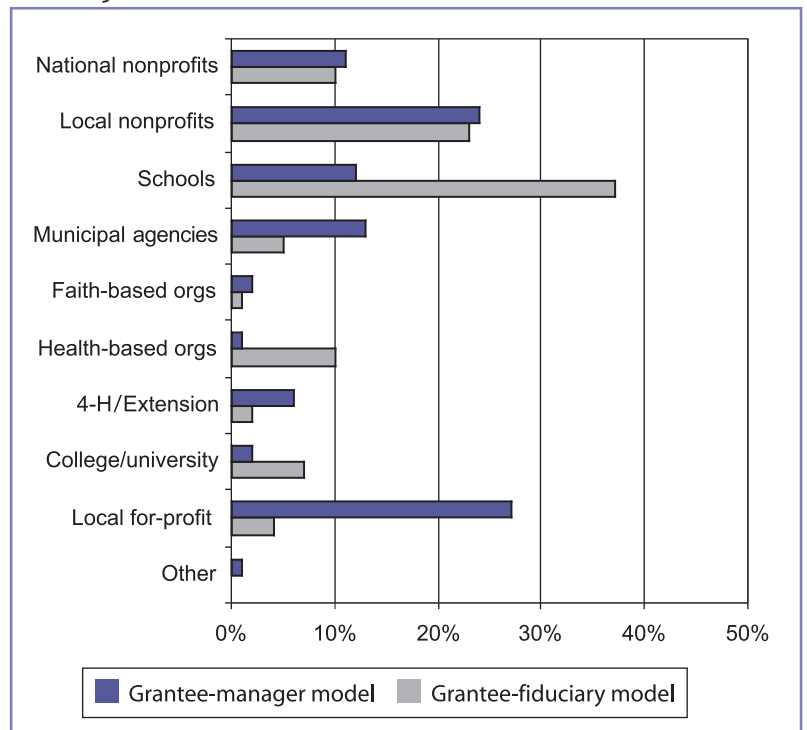
FIGURE 3. OFFERINGS BY PARTNER TYPE

TABLE 2. CONTENT OF COMMUNITY PARTNER OFFERINGS

Offering Type	% of all offerings by partners*		Examples of Offerings	Offering Objectives
	Grantee-Manager Model	Grantee-Fiduciary Model		
Recreational	33%	24%	Movie to support theme	Raise enthusiasm for theme used in instruction
			Roller skating	Roller skate together and with family
Youth development	29%	20%	M.I.N.D.: Men In Need of Direction	Promote conflict resolution, self-respect, respect for others
			4-H Teen Club	Increase quality of educational and recreational opportunities, grades 6–10
Arts	18%	24%	Music around the House	Create music with materials found at home
			Dance lessons	Learn dances while socializing in a new environment
Academic enrichment**	14%	12%	Disguised learning	Learn fundamental skills using fun resources and games
			Creative writing	Brainstorm
Homework/tutoring**	11%	17%	Homework	Support academic achievement and enrichment
			Reading aloud	Allow students to relax and just enjoy being read to
			Family Life Enhancement	Provide family development, asset building, character education, support services
Technology**	3%	5%	Technology	Practice using a variety of computer and technology applications
			LEGO League	Collect and assemble data; explore representation of data

*Column does not total 100% because some offerings were coded into multiple types.
** These offering types, typically led by permanent site staff not included in this data, actually represent a much higher proportion of offerings than reflected in these percentages.

based on their content, as determined by the Michigan State University evaluator. The first column shows each offering content type. Most of the categories are self-explanatory. As defined in the statewide 21st Century evaluation data, the *youth development* category includes offerings focused on life skills, character education, conflict resolution, leadership, community service, mentoring, and drug and alcohol resistance. The second column in Table 2 displays the percent of total offerings that were of that content type, regardless of which partner delivered the service. Individual offerings often fell into more than one category, so that percentages in each column add up to more than 100 percent. Table 2 does not describe the "dosage" of offering content, since the number of sessions for any specific offering is not reflected. The table also does not reflect the total number of site offerings, since many, especially academic support and homework help, were provided by school-day teachers or other regular program staff employed by the 21st Century sites.

The most common offering types delivered by partners were recreation, youth development, arts, and

model reported that only 4 percent of their partners were school organizations, those partner schools provided 37 percent of their offerings.

Sites' Use of Partner Services

Across the 163 sites, the mean number of community-based partners per site was 5.5. On average, they provided 286 hours of service. The mean value of subcontracting with all community partners at a given site was $45,098. This suggests that, on average, site coordinators are responsible for monitoring the performance of staff from five different organizations over the course of a program year. However, there are enormous variations in each of these figures for individual sites. Where one site might have five partners, another could have 12, while another has only one; similar variations are found in the hours of service and the value of the services provided. At some sites, then, each of these figures is substantially higher.

Kinds of Offerings Partners Provided

Table 2 profiles partner services for both management models by types of offerings

TABLE 3. OFFERING CONTENT SPECIALIZATION BY PARTNER TYPE

	Recreational	Youth development	Arts	Academic enrichment	Homework/ tutoring	Technology
Nationally affiliated nonprofits	**42%**	**40%**	11%	5%	10%	4%
Local nonprofits	23%	30%	31%	14%	8%	3%
School organizations	20%	7%	8%	21%	**41%**	7%
Municipal agencies/ institutions	**48%**	14%	16%	14%	8%	9%
4-H/Extension	9%	15%	6%	**51%**	6%	0%
Colleges and universities	**49%**	11%	23%	16%	7%	1%
Local for-profits	29%	33%	27%	3%	11%	1%
Faith-based organizations	2%	**73%**	17%	4%	7%	7%
Health-based organizations	**48%**	31%	12%	1%	3%	0%
Other types of organizations	**48%**	22%	22%	4%	4%	0%

academics in the form of both academic enrichment and homework or tutoring help. Partners were least likely to provide special events, parent involvement, and technology programming; however, part of the reason is simply that the sites tended to provide these types of offerings less frequently than the others.

Partner Specialties

We also analyzed the categories of offerings by the types of community-based partners to identify the offering content each type of partner most frequently provided. Table 3 provides a profile of offering content specialization by partner types. We highlighted a partner type as specialized in an offering content area if 40 percent or more of offerings were classified in a single content category.
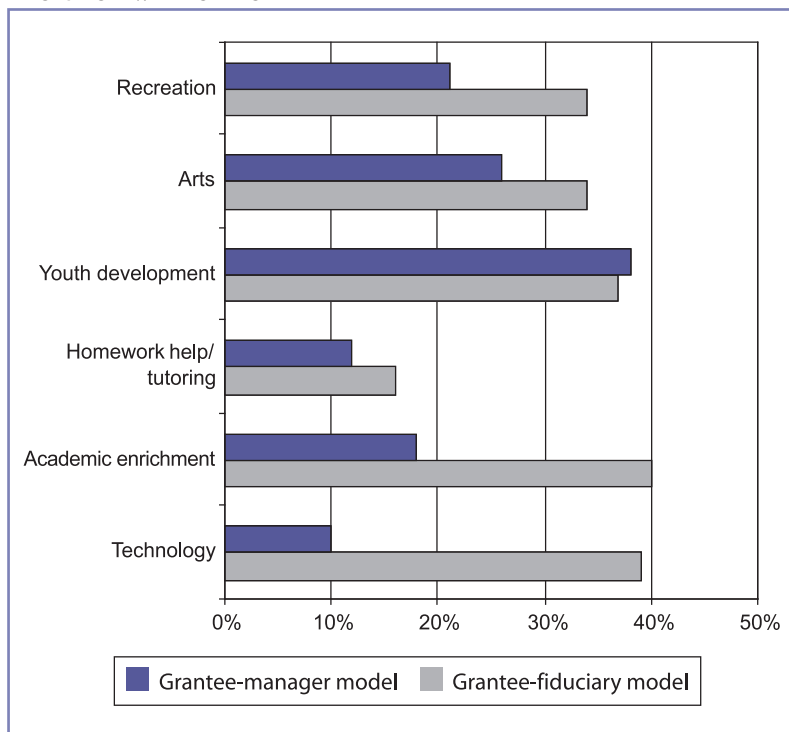
School organizations and 4-H/Extension were the types of partners most focused on academic offerings, with 62 percent of all offerings from schools and 58 percent of those from 4-H/Extension having an academic component, whether academic enrichment or homework and tutoring help. Of all the partner types, school organizations dedicated by far the largest proportion of their time to homework help and tutoring, 41 percent of their offerings, whereas 4-H/Extension devoted 51 percent of its offerings to academic enrichment.

On the other hand, youth development was the primary focus of the traditionally defined community-based sector. Forty percent of the offerings delivered by nationally affiliated nonprofits were in this area, as were 73 percent of offerings by faith-based organizations. Recreation was a specialty for nationally affiliated nonprofits, municipal organizations, colleges and universities, health-based organizations, and organizations in our "other" category, as each had 40 percent or more of their total offerings in the recreation category.

In addition to patterns of specialization, Table 3 also shows some trends toward generalization. First, local nonprofits clearly tended to be generalists, delivering 20 percent or more of their offerings in each of the following content areas: recreation, youth development, arts, and academics. Second, none of the partner types were entirely specialized. For example, though school organizations were primarily focused on academic offerings, they also delivered substantial numbers of recreational, youth development, arts, and technology offerings. Similarly, while faith-based organizations clearly specialized in the youth development category, they also delivered substantial numbers of offerings in the arts, academic, and technology content areas.

The differences between the two management models, which were small, emerged primarily around recreation and youth development. Partners working with grantee-managers were more likely to conduct these offerings than were grantee-fiduciary partners, which were somewhat more likely to deliver arts and academic offerings.

FIGURE 4. OFFERINGS DELIVERED BY PARTNERS, ALONE OR WITH SITE STAFF

Kinds of Instruction 21st Century Sites Seek from Partners

While Tables 2 and 3 describe the ways in which partners' skills are distributed, they do not identify the areas in which sites are likely to seek instructional expertise from community-based partners rather than from their own staff. Figure 4 shows the percentage of each type of offering in which partners deliver the services, either alone or in conjunction with permanent site staff. The results suggest that grantees were particularly likely to seek partners to deliver content in youth development, the arts, recreation, and academic enrichment, and less likely to use partners for focused academic support, particularly homework help and tutoring.

However, the two management models showed some distinct differences. Sites in the grantee-fiduciary

model were much more likely to use community-based partners to deliver technology and the more interactive component of academic offerings, academic enrichment, than were sites managed by school district staff. Part of the reason may be that the large urban areas that use the grantee-fiduciary model simply have more community partners available. Another explanation may be philosophical differences between the administrators of the two models: Grantee-manager administrators tend to reflect the orientation of school districts, while grantee-fiduciary administrators tend to reflect that of community-based organizations, whose strengths may lie in youth development.

Scope of Partnerships

Our question about the scope of partnerships centered around whether the community partners are true partners or merely vendors: Did community-based partners have the opportunity to contribute their non-instructional time and expertise to form a deeply

> Flexibility and responsiveness on the part of community-based partners means that more types of services are available, regardless of the specific infrastructure in a given community.

integrated combined entity with the 21st Century sites? While our data do not permit us to evaluate the depth of collaboration, we do have information on the financial and time resources exchanged between 21st Century sites and community partners. A huge proportion of partner services, at least in the grantee-manager model, are donated to the afterschool sites.

We have data only for partnerships in the grantee-manager model, so these numbers represent something less than half of the total time and financial resources exchanged through the 21st Century system in Michigan. However, the numbers suggest deep engagement on the part of at least some community partners. Community partners delivered 27,902 hours of on-site service, with a reported value of over $5.5 million, in 2005–2006. The amount grantee directors reported paying community partners from their 21st Century funds totaled about $2.7 million. The value of partners' in-kind contributions, which consisted primarily of staff time spent delivering instructional offer-

ings, was therefore $2.9 million. Only 43 percent of partners contracted for pay; the majority donated their services. Most likely to be paid as contractors were local for-profits (64 percent), local nonprofits (44 percent), municipal organizations (40 percent), and health-based organizations (40 percent). Paid contract relationships were least likely among other organization types (0 percent), colleges and universities (11 percent), and faith-based organizations (27 percent).

Diversity and Flexibility

Analysis of the data indicates that in many ways and at many sites, Michigan's 21st Century afterschool program is indeed tapping the potential benefits of partnerships with community organizations. Nearly all 21st Century grantees have developed partnerships, averaging more than five distinct community partners per site in 2005–2006. Furthermore, on average across all sites, each federal dollar invested by 21st Century sites in purchased services from community partners was nearly matched by services that were donated.

One advantage of these partners is the potential for diversity in instructional offerings. Many different combinations of partners—from traditionally defined community-based nonprofits to institutions of higher education to municipal departments and the armed forces—provide instructional services in both academic and non-academic areas. In most cases, several different types of partners delivered different types of content. Although some patterns of specialization emerged, such as school organizations providing more academic support and local nonprofits more youth development, these patterns had many exceptions.

The use of community partners also appears to provide flexibility in terms of staffing and content expertise. Flexibility and responsiveness on the part of community-based partners means that more types of services are available, regardless of the specific infrastructure in a given community. If no nearby university is available to offer science enrichment, perhaps the Boys and Girls Club in the next county can.

The two management structures that accommodate extensive partnerships, the grantee-fiduciary model in larger cities and the grantee-manager model in medium-size and smaller communities, were associated with some differences in the types of community partners with which the school sites connected and the content of offerings partners delivered. However, the larger patterns of organizational diversity and content flexibility were similar across the two manage-

ment models. All 21st Century grantees in Michigan have access to a wide variety of partner types, and each partner type offers a wide variety of content.

The extent to which 21st Century sites in either model partner with community organizations raises the question of point-of-service quality. Many staff members from many different organizations are likely to deliver instructional services at a given site in a given week. How can site coordinators ensure consistency in the quality of the instruction children and youth receive?

QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES IN INSTRUCTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

While it is clear that assurance of quality at the point of service is an issue that applies to all staff at afterschool sites, this study focuses on staff from community partner organizations for two reasons. First, staff from community partners are likely to have impermanent relationships with 21st Century programs, posing a challenge to the continuity and quality of experiences delivered by different staff to the same children. Second, because the 21st Century policy explicitly requires use of community partnerships, partnerships and quality assurance should be addressed as a matter of policy.

In order to address these issues, we wanted to determine how site managers think about quality "on the ground," at the point of service where adults foster learning with children and youth. We also wanted to compile best practices that can ensure high-quality programming day in and day out, no matter what organization's staff is leading instructional offerings. To that end, we interviewed staff from seven 21st Century sites identified (through the methods described above) as providing consistently high-quality services. These sites included three in elementary schools, three in middle schools, and one in a high school, located in both urban and rural areas. At four of the sites, we captured complete nested data for all three key players: the grantee director, the site manager, and the director of a community partner organization. We asked interviewees about their definition of *quality* for the afterschool program and about the practices used at the site to assure the quality of services provided by community partners. This data helped us construct the *instructional partnerships model* that describes how afterschool programs can assure point-of-service quality corresponding to the pyramid of four quality features in Figure 1. Below we outline the definitions of quality and the quality assurance practices our interviewees supplied. We then group these practices into

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sets of *learning features* and *focusing features* that inform the instructional partnerships model.

Definitions of Quality

In our interviews, we asked 21st Century grantee directors and site managers, as well as staff representing community partners, to define elements of afterschool quality at their sites. Importantly, their answers parallel many elements of the quality pyramid in Figure 1, suggesting that at these higher-quality sites, staff are focused on the quality at the point of service. We list below the categories of quality, the frequency with which they were mentioned in our 17 interviews, and the specific elements of staff definitions of quality that were coded into that category. We have maintained the language and terminology of the interviews where possible.

Engagement and relevance (33 mentions) were the most frequently mentioned elements of quality. This category corresponds in large part to the top level of the quality pyramid in Figure 1. *Engagement* refers to offerings that are driven by students' interests and are hands-on, requiring purposeful action on the part of the students. *Relevance* refers to offerings that youth see as meaningful for their own lives, such as homework for school success or skills needed for life outside of school. Most respondents saw diversity of program content as a primary pathway to content relevance; offering more types of program content was equated with meeting more youth interests. The primary staff skill set associated with youth engagement and relevance was positive youth development methods. The terms *youth-centered* and *youth-focused* were used by 13 of 17 staff respondents in reference to the site's approach to working with youth.

Meaningful relationships (20 mentions) includes references to a broad range of relationships in which youth and their families attain a sense of connection to

the program and its staff. This category corresponds closely with the quality pyramid's supportive environment and interaction levels. Relationships that support a young person's sense of connection included those among youth and adults within the program, between students' families and program staff, between the program and its broader community, and between program staff and the students' teachers. Mentoring relationships between youth and adults including program staff were also part of this category.

Youth voice structures (five mentions) includes references to youth governance structures that gave youth an active and ongoing role in program planning and in evaluating partners. This category also includes less formal methods of getting feedback from students about their preferences. Elements of this category correspond to both of the top levels of the quality pyramid.

Staff at the high-quality sites we examined were focused on tapping into youth motivation through an emphasis on engagement and relevance, while also recognizing the critical nature of adult-youth relationships as a platform for learning. A focus on youth-centered practice appears to be a part of the institutional fabric at these sites; staff from five of the seven high-quality sites said that they had explicit structures in place to capture youth input on program offerings and procedures.

Quality Assurance Practices

How, then, do 21st Century sites ensure that their definitions of *quality* are enacted consistently by both site and partner staff? When we asked our interviewees about quality assurance, they named specific practices that ensure continuity across all program staff. Again, we list these practices according to the frequency with which they occurred in the interviews.

Ongoing collection of data and information (15 mentions) refers to staff review of a variety of sources of information about program quality, including youth and parent surveys, observations, checklists, and many others. Site coordinators stressed that keeping informed of the needs and views of parents and youth allows them to ensure relevant programming. Three consistently important sources of information were youth activity interest surveys, academic tests, and, most importantly, the state-mandated program quality assessment tool. In 11 of the 17 staff interviews, the staff member reported that the
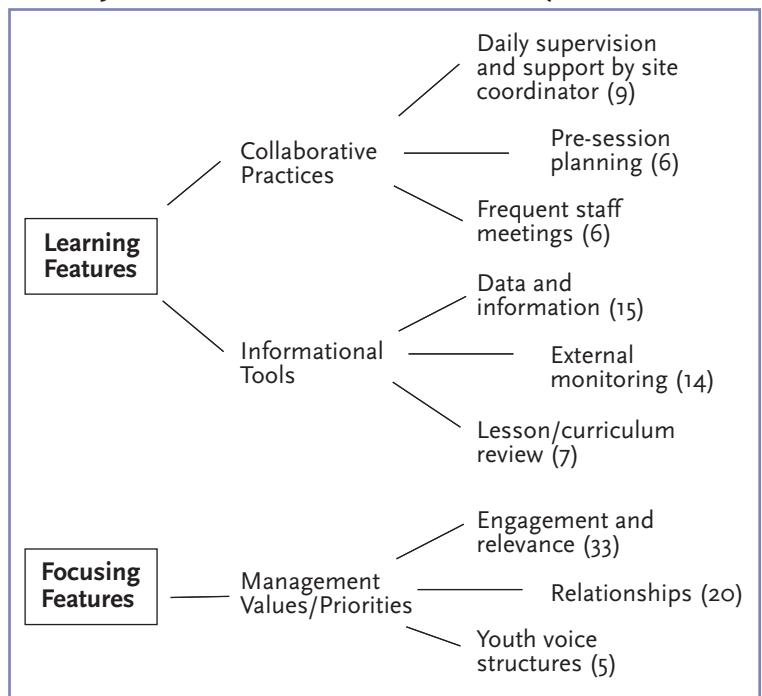
state-mandated quality assessment tool was used at the site; however, the depth to which data was integrated was not great in all cases.

External monitoring, monthly or more (14 mentions) includes close attention to actual offerings and activities by grantee directors or others charged with monitoring the quality of partner staff performance. Frequent visits to the site and structured observation of program activities were the primary means by which this monitoring was accomplished. Directors of community partner organizations also routinely engaged in such external monitoring in coordination with grantee administrators.

Daily supervision and support by the site coordinator (nine mentions) encompasses the site coordinator's formal responsibility for supervising the offerings delivered by partner staff. Site coordinators regularly observed and participated in program activities, reporting their findings to the grantee director or other administrators. Our interviews with four experts who had broad experience with 21st Century programs confirmed the importance of this daily supervision. All four cited the failure of site coordinators to advocate for the quality of the program or to monitor the performance of partner staff as a major shortcoming.

Lesson and curriculum review, monthly or more (seven mentions) includes any practice that for-

FIGURE 5. PROGRAM FEATURES THAT PROMOTE QUALITY

Learning Features
- Collaborative Practices
  - Daily supervision and support by site coordinator (9)
  - Pre-session planning (6)
  - Frequent staff meetings (6)
- Informational Tools
  - Data and information (15)
  - External monitoring (14)
  - Lesson/curriculum review (7)

Focusing Features
- Management Values/Priorities
  - Engagement and relevance (33)
  - Relationships (20)
  - Youth voice structures (5)

mally provided site staff with opportunities to review partner lesson and curriculum plans. Several references to these practices specifically noted the site coordinator's role in reviewing partners' lesson plans each week. Site coordinators stressed the importance of being aware of what partners' lesson plans look like and thinking carefully about how various curricula meet the needs of their particular students.

Pre-session planning (six mentions) includes any practices that brought site and partner staff together before program start-up. Site staff worked with partner staff to develop the content and sequence of offerings, using age-appropriateness and students' interests as selection criteria. Site staff also used the previous year's data and information to find partners that fit the needs and interests of their youth.

Frequent staff meetings, monthly or more (six mentions) includes practices that formally provided site coordinators and grantee directors with opportunities to discuss partner performance. In addition to regular meetings with site partners, some site coordinators reported meetings with parent organizations, teachers, school administrators, and youth committees to discuss partner performance and future directions for partner programming.

This set of quality assurance practices described by staff at high-quality 21st Century sites provides rich insight into how relationships with community vendors can be transformed into instructional partnerships in which the quality of instructional experiences is maintained across multiple providers.

Learning and Focusing Features for Quality Assurance

The interview data on definitions of quality and on quality assurance practices informs our *instructional partnerships model*, presented in Figure 5. Our research suggests that higher-quality sites engage in a set of practices we have categorized as *learning features* and *focusing features.*

Learning features in the instructional partnerships model include both *collaborative practices* and use of *informational tools. Collaborative practices* include daily supervision and support from the permanent site coordinator, pre-session planning, and frequent staff meetings in which partner staff join in planning and reviewing program objectives while site staff review and guide partner performance. Such collaborative practices, because they situate information about youth preferences and staff practices in a context of

shared meanings and responsibilities, are likely to support translation from information to action. High-quality sites also use *informational tools* to learn about point-of-service quality: observational assessment and survey data, in-person monitoring of partner staff, and frequent review of lessons and curriculum. Whatever method is used, feedback about partner performances is made available to the site management and, frequently, to the community partners themselves. Since much of the information is generated when site coordinators and grantee directors actually attend program sessions, the data is laden with rich contextual knowledge of the program, its staff, and its participants. A well-developed set of learning features fosters accountability in the true sense—support for individuals and for the staff as a whole to improve their performance based on meaningful, shared standards and goals.

Focusing features are a set of management values and priorities that *focus* the learning features on the point of service, where staff from partner organizations work with children and youth. According to the definitions of quality expressed in interviews, afterschool programs should seek to engage children and youth

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Our research suggests areas in which federal and state 21st Century policies could have significant impact on the quality of 21st Century programs.

Federal policy should:
- Include guidelines on best practices for selecting community partners
- Require partner staff to be familiar with federal program goals, their state's 21st Century program standards, and the content of their grantees' proposals
- Set aside a proportion of existing funding for outreach by state agencies to provide training and technical assistance for partner organizations
- Mandate use of a validated quality assessment tool or process

State policies should:
- Provide an annual institute on quality assurance for all 21st Century site managers
- Target training and technical assistance for administrators of community-based partners that receive or donate more than $15,000 in services to 21st Century sites
- Use the knowledge and tap the capacity of large management organizations that are already focused on quality assurance with community partners

Harlem After 3

through diverse and relevant content, hands-on activities, strong relationships, and structures that promote youth voice. These priorities provide strong incentives for involving young people in making decisions about their own learning and for adults to represent their needs and interests. Adopting these values also requires managers to monitor and observe program sessions consistently to see if students actually are engaged and relationships really are supportive. The values and priorities that constitute the focusing features, because they direct the learning features toward providing high-quality instruction, are particularly vital when multiple partners are providing learning experiences for young participants.

INSTRUCTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND QUALITY AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMMING

Over the past year or so, leading policy entrepreneurs have called for stronger integration between community resources and policies designed to augment youth learning and development (America's Promise Alliance, 2007; Benson et al., 2006; Time, Learning & Afterschool Task Force, 2007). All these reports link the parallel concepts of *positive youth development* and *asset building* with definitions of learning that extend beyond traditional school-day content and routines.

The scale and scope of community partnerships uncovered in our study confirm that Michigan's 21st Century sites are successfully leveraging partnerships as potential gateways to the soft skills, expressive talents, and expert resources their communities have to offer. However, true integration between school sites and their community partners, characterized by shared goal-setting and joint management, is rare. Emerging in its place is an *instructional partnerships model* in which site coordinators select and purchase services from community partners who specialize in various content areas. Because the service being purchased is instruction—the substantively complex process of educating

children and youth—quality assurance is a crucial component of this model. Site staff must continuously evaluate and improve the instruction provided by community partners in order to ensure continuity of high-quality learning experiences for program participants. The less-than-perfect evaluation findings that have dogged the 21st Century program nationally, including weak attendance and small academic effects (James-Burdumy et al., 2005), may be due in part to the lack of emphasis on quality assurance practices.

Addressing the issue of quality in afterschool education in order to implement pertinent policies requires an understanding of the community resources and nested organizational relationships in which afterschool programs operate. The 21st Century instructional partnerships model emphasizes cross-community relationships among the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Partnerships informed by this model are flexible and specialized enough to provide high-quality afterschool programming—not only creating safe and supportive environments, but moving higher on the quality pyramid (Figure 1) to offer opportunities for interactions and engagement that are most likely to influence youth development outcomes. Furthermore, the instructional partnerships model offers a major opportunity for 21st Century funding to influence the quality of a community's wider youth development assets. Individual staff members may be shared among several 21st Century sites as well as partner organizations. Improving staff members' performance through quality assurance practices, even at a single site, thus has the potential to grow the skill base of the local afterschool workforce. If such quality assurance practices were built into 21st Century policy and implemented throughout the 21st Century system, the effect would be exponential. The instructional partnerships model thus could not only improve the quality and effectiveness of 21st Century programs but extend the impact of 21st Century investments throughout the field of afterschool programming and youth development.

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NOTES

[1] See table and citations for reports reviewed in Smith, Van Egeren, & Karabenick, 2007.

[2] For a full discussion of data sets, missing data, and issues that arise from site-based self-reporting, see Smith, Van Egeren, & Karabenick, 2007.

AFTERSCHOOL MATTERS INITIATIVE

The Robert Bowne Foundation (RBF), seeking to have a long-term and substantial effect on the field of out-of-school education, launched several initiatives to accomplish this mission. Afterschool Matters is one of the initiatives, the goals of which are to:

- Generate and disseminate research about community-based organizations serving youth during out-of-school hours
- Build a network of scholars studying community-based organizations serving youth
- Contribute to basic knowledge and the improvement of practice and policy in the area of community-based youth programs

AFTERSCHOOL MATTERS/OCCASIONAL PAPERS

One of the projects of the Afterschool Matters Initiative is the journal *Afterschool Matters*, a national, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting professionalism, scholarship, and consciousness of the field of afterschool education. The journal serves those involved in developing and running programs for youth during the out-of-school hours, in addition to those engaged in research and in shaping policy. Articles for the journals are solicited from the field, and a range of academic perspectives are considered along with personal or inspirational narratives and essays, book reviews, artwork, and photographs.

Copies of both *Afterschool Matters* and the Occasional Papers are available on the RBF website, www.robert bownefoundation.org.

RESEARCH GRANTS/RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

The RBF sponsors a national Research Grant competition. Grants are awarded to support either original empirical research in or about community-based youth programs during the non-school hours or research syntheses or policy analyses of community-based youth programs.

Now in its fifth year, the RBF Research Fellowship is dedicated to building the capacity of youth program staff to design and conduct research in the areas of youth development and education during the out-of-school hours. The goals of the Research Fellowship include generating and disseminating research in the area of education in community-based organizations serving youth during the out-of-school hours, building a network of scholars, contributing to basic knowledge and the improvement of practice, and informing policy in the area of community-based youth programs.

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Phipps Community Development Corporation

Phipps Community Development Corporation is the nonprofit affiliate of The Phipps Houses Group. Phipps CDC provides a comprehensive network of educational, vocational, and community development services for residents and their communities in the Bronx and Manhattan, where Phipps owns and operates a substantial amount of affordable housing. Phipps CDC operates Head Start, afterschool, GED, literacy, college prep, job readiness, and summer camp programs. These services are funded by government grants and by contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. For more information, visit www.phippsny.org.

HEAF

HEAF is a comprehensive supplemental education and youth development organization that works to help motivated students develop the intellectual curiosity, academic ability, social values, and personal resiliency they need to ensure success in school, career, and life. HEAF identifies scholars in middle school and supports them until they are successfully admitted to four-year colleges, through a variety of afterschool, Saturday. and summer educational and youth development programs. For information, visit www.heaf.org or contact info@heaf.org, 212-663-9732.

Harlem After 3

Harlem After 3 was a 21st Century Community Learning Center afterschool program at P.S. 200 in central Harlem, begun in 2003 by the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, in partnership with The After-School Corporation. The program offered safe and comprehensive programming to help students improve their academic performance; to enhance the transition between elementary and middle school; to promote healthy emotional and physical development; and to aid parents in acting as advocates of change in education.

Your Program in Pictures

Does your youth development program have photos that you would like to contribute to the Afterschool Matters Occasional Papers? If so, please submit high-resolution photos of youth, staff, and community members in a range of activities during the out-of-school time. We will ask you to fill out a form indicating that you have permission from all participants who appear in the photos. Send to:

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