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

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Introduction

During the course of The Wallace Foundation's Next Generation Afterschool System Building (ASB) Initiative, representatives in "like" roles – namely "Quality Leads" – from the nine grantee cities (Baltimore, Denver, Fort Worth, Grand Rapids, Jacksonville, Louisville, Nashville, Philadelphia, and St. Paul) came together monthly with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) to discuss issues concerning the support and sustainability of continuous quality improvement systems (CQIS). The working group went beyond spelling out needed components of a successful CQIS; rather, they spent the three years looking at the inner workings of a system – sharing concrete, tested strategies and practices, and surfacing complexities, debates, and questions related to quality.

The group's conclusions? A strong CQIS depends on clearly defining, carefully assessing, and intentionally supporting quality. Intermediaries serve a critical leadership role in making a strong and sustainable system. Operational support, partnerships, communication plans, advocacy strategies, and embedding all aspects of quality into the culture of programs and organizations are additional safeguards that further protect a CQIS.

This report documents the work of the Quality Role-Alike Group and shares the collective lessons learned. It is organized by the identified key areas of quality:

- ***Defining Quality Practice*** – Quality standards and core competencies define and drive quality. This section explores how are cities putting them into action.

- ***Assessing Quality Practice*** – Many cities are already using various tools to assess quality. This section explores how organizations can get the most out of the data.

- ***Supporting Quality Practice*** – Professional development systems, including coaching, training, and professional networks, as well as other supports like

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family engagement initiatives, are key to supporting quality practice and promoting positive experiences for youth. This section explores specific strategies cities have used to support quality, as well as the most effective ways to implement those strategies.

- *Additional Safeguards* – A key concern for cities is how to sustain, safeguard, and strengthen their quality system. Though the first question that comes to mind is often, "How can the work be sustained after one funding stream dries?", a better question is, "How can intermediaries safeguard quality systems so that they are sustained through transitions in funding, leadership, and staffing?" Discussion of potential funding streams, beneficial partnerships, communications plans, advocacy strategies, and creative ways to embed quality are addressed specifically in the last section of the report, but also woven throughout.

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

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Quality Matters: Making the Case

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

While studies have shown that OST programs can produce results, this is no guarantee that they will; programs must be of high quality. We now know what quality looks like. In examining the programs that had short- and long-term effects on youth's academic and social outcomes, researchers have identified a number of common characteristics. High-quality OST programs: foster positive relationships between program participants and staff, build positive relationships among program participants, offer a blend of academic and developmental skill-building activities, promote high levels of student engagement, maintain an orientation toward mastery of knowledge and skills, and provide appropriate levels of structure as well as opportunities for autonomy and choice (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:
The National Afterschool Association's series of focus briefs on the State of Afterschool Quality (2015) highlight important research findings and may be a helpful tool when making the case for quality. These documents can be found at: http://naaweb.org/resources/item/258-naa-executive-members-new-resource-material-is-available-for-download

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A Continuous Quality Improvement System

The Wallace Foundation's Next Generation Afterschool System Building Initiative Quality Role-Alike Group began discussions with a model of a quality improvement system developed by Elizabeth Devaney, which includes three main parts: 1) defining quality, 2) assessing quality, and 3) supporting quality. The Quality Group found the "define - assess - support" language to be a helpful starting framework for continuing to expand and adapt the diagram to depict the inner workings of a strong QIS. [N.B.: This model also shares similarities to the David P. Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) "Assess – Plan – Improve" sequence (http://cypq.org/about/approach), but focuses on generic, broader systems and supports, rather than an individual OST program's improvement process.]

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Continuous Quality Improvement System (QIS)
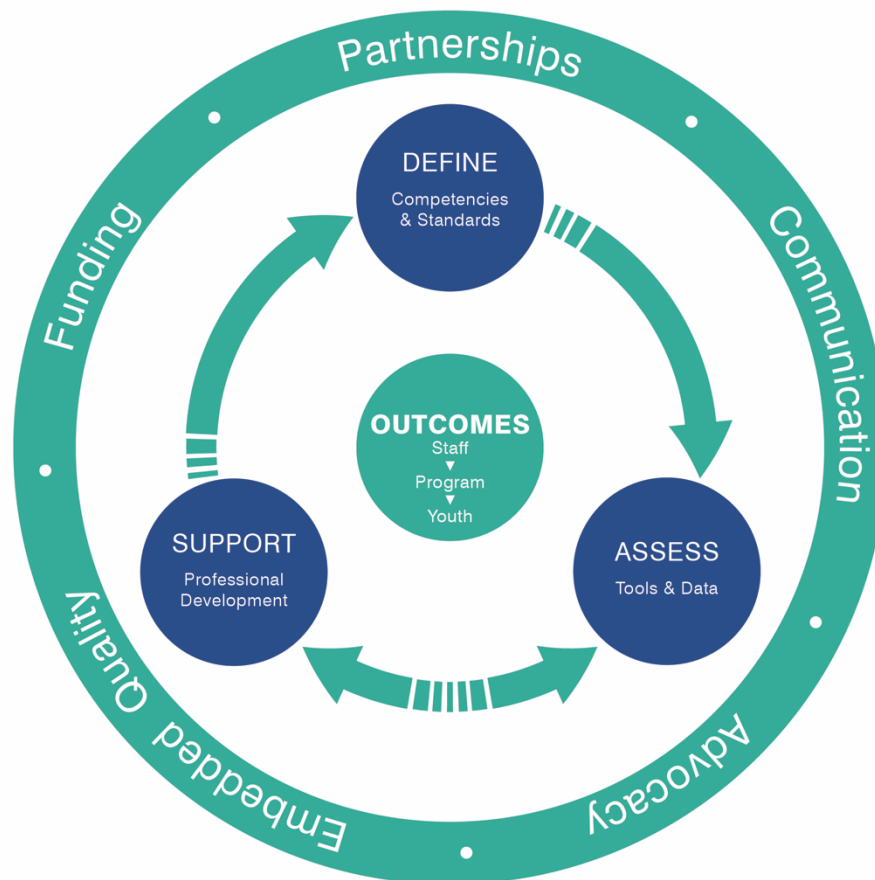
The current model includes three main parts:

Define Quality: Definitions of quality drive the system, and include both core competencies that define individual staff quality and standards which define program quality.

Assess Quality: Assessment is essential to determine if programs are of high quality. Collecting, analyzing, and making meaning of data, as well as engaging providers in this process, are critical components of assessment.

Support Quality: Supporting quality is perhaps the most demanding work of the system. Staff quality, which in turn leads to program quality, is supported through a professional development system. Such a system includes training and technical

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assistance, coaching, and mentoring, but may also include more formal credential and certification programs and other advanced degrees. A professional development system that supports quality also includes additional elements such as academic and career pathways, compensation for staff that is commensurate with education and training, and a sustainable source of funding.

Integral to this process is a **continuous improvement** feedback loop, where regular assessment constantly informs the type of support needed. Definitions of quality, though intended to be somewhat static, deserve revisiting, too.   For example, an organization may have achieved their goal in improving a targeted area of quality, and are now ready to expand into additional areas. Or perhaps a funder, responding to new research in the field that highlights an emerging issue like the importance of social-emotional learning in promoting positive youth outcomes, has now prioritized this issue as a targeted area of quality for OST programs.

Finally, support efforts impact **outcomes** for staff, programs, and youth. Professional development supports increase staff engagement and capacity. Increased staff engagement and capacity improves program quality, encouraging supportive staff-youth relationships and promoting high-quality OST experiences for youth. High-quality OST experiences in which youth are challenged, engaged, and socially and emotionally nurtured promote important positive intermediary and long-term youth outcomes.

The system does not work in isolation. In order to thrive, it depends on diverse funding sources, partnerships with local and state efforts, communication and advocacy to promote the good work being done, and attention to embedding quality work in the system.

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Defining Quality Practice

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

Quality Program Standards

Quality program standards are a set of guidelines that define a quality program. Based on research and best practices in the afterschool and youth development field, they outline the path and specific steps that lead to quality programs. While some cities or states require quality standards for licensure, others use them as voluntary guidelines. The basic process for developing and adopting a set of quality program standards involves forming a committee, researching and drafting standards, piloting and/or soliciting feedback, and revising the draft standards based on feedback. The Next Generation cities are in different developmental stages of program standards; some have them in place while others are beginning to explore their establishment. Louisville's experience illustrates a typical process from development to implementation of quality standards.

Spotlight on Louisville

Louisville had been using the YPQA for assessment, but soon realized they needed a more coordinated system to promote quality across their programs. They formed a representative committee which was tasked with the development of agency quality standards. Louisville, like other cities, found that the process of developing program standards can take a long time (in Louisville's case – two years). Initially, the city collaborated with a state-level organization. While collaborations and partnerships are often beneficial, in this case the partnership proved to be limiting because of differences in priorities, differences in requirements of funding streams, and differences in pace. Two members from the state organization continued to serve on Louisville's committee

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to maintain some collaboration, however Louisville ultimately decided to develop standards on their own.

The committee researched other city and state standards and held community meetings. Based on this, they established the *Comprehensive Standards* document, which included eight categories along with elements, standards, and indicators. A subset of the larger document – the *Minimum Quality Standards* – was piloted in 2012 and well-received.

Louisville has strengthened their standards by tying them to funding. In July 2013, Metro Government and Metro United Way required anyone receiving funding to complete the self-assessment for the minimum standards and develop an action plan. In the first year of funding, programs just need to be working towards the standards, but in the future they will be required to meet them.

Louisville has also strengthened their standards by aligning them with other elements of their quality system, such as tools and trainings. Their next step is to align core competencies with their program standards. This alignment strengthens quality by further embedding definitions in the system.

Finally, Louisville has strengthened their standards by getting support and buy-in from providers. A common challenge is getting busy providers to complete assessments, so Louisville gave providers plenty of time to assess and report. In addition, Louisville offered trainings which focused on the benefits of quality standards and developed a communication plan to help explain how meeting the standards would help programs get additional funding.

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Spotlight on Fort Worth

In 2013, Fort Worth's SPARC went through a similar process to create a set of quality program standards. They convened a Quality Task Team of local providers and evaluators, including representatives from city departments which funding for afterschool. A subcommittee collected national, state, and local standards, analyzed and compared them, and established a framework of four categories: 1) positive youth development, 2) environment, 3) relationships, and 4) management. After determining categories, the subcommittee proposed and refined standards, elements, and indicators. The document was then released to providers and key stakeholders for feedback, and the Team hosted two feedback sessions with the community. Feedback comments were discussed with the Team and, where applicable, were incorporated in the final *Forth Worth SPARC Quality Standards*. A smaller document – *A Guide to Quality Standards* – was created to help communicate the standards to parents and families. Both documents were made publically available on the SPARC website, and providers were asked to endorse the standards in their organization.

In order to elicit buy-in from stakeholders, the Quality Task Team received training on quality improvement systems. The workshop included an explanation of how program standards, staff core competencies, assessment tools, and professional development supports are essential for robust continuous improvement. The workshop provided a much needed grounding in continuous improvement that benefited all providers. Taking steps to build a culture of quality has strengthened Fort Worth's standards by connecting them to the larger system.

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Core Knowledge and Competencies

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

Some cities, such as Philadelphia and Grand Rapids, have chosen to adopt the National Afterschool Association Core Knowledge and Competencies (Fort Worth is considering adopting them in the future). This not only eases the burden on time and effort to develop a framework, but also helps with consistency and alignment across and within states.

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

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

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Spotlight on Baltimore

The Family League of Baltimore is creatively using their core competencies at the program level. They want individual staff to gain skills that will collectively build program quality. To do so, they are aligning training by creating a menu of options offered by their contracted providers, coded to show which core competency area each covers. Programs need a certain number of professional development hours in each area, and can choose which staff to train. In other words, while an individual staff member may be trained in only a few competency areas, the program as a whole will have staff trained in all areas. Even if staff are not familiar with the core competencies, they can be introduced to them through this approach at the program level.

Spotlight on Louisville

Louisville offers an example of using the core competencies at the system, and even field building, level. In partnership with Jefferson Community and Technical College, they have developed a CEU certificate program in youth development based on their core competencies. They are also in discussions with the community college and Kentucky State University to create an associate's degree in youth development, which would also be grounded in the core competencies. Such certificate and degree programs not also raise staff and program quality through training, but also help build respect and credibility for the field.

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Not all of the ASB cities embrace core competencies – some use other methods to define quality at the individual staff level. St. Paul's Sprockets, in recognition of the complexities of youth work and the importance of developing expertise, sees youth workers as always developing, not static. The Sprockets Quality Framework outlines its definitions of quality and belief that when youth worker engagement, engaged youth,

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and quality program features intersect, young people acquire the skills for life-long success.

Defining Quality Practice: Considerations and Lessons Learned:

- A key to success and strength in a quality system is alignment. Program standards and core competencies are the main drivers of the system; other elements – assessment tools and professional development that supports quality – should align with them. Consider whether core competencies will be aligned with other state frameworks and/or early childhood core competencies.

- Quality Standards can only be useful if they are manageable. A large document may not be practical. Philadelphia initially developed a set of over 200 program standards, which proved to be unwieldy. On the other hand, Denver opted to develop Quality Pillars, a simple five-pillar framework defining the fundamental elements of program quality which was a more manageable introduction point for organizations new to quality.

- Expect standards development to be a lengthy process. As an alternative, some find that adopting or adapting existing state standards works well. For example, Jacksonville has adopted the Florida Afterschool Network Standards. This approach eliminates the time and effort to develop a unique set of standards, but it still requires work on the front end to achieve buy-in, a critical part of the process.

- Though standards and competencies are an essential foundation of a CQIS, they can and should be revisited over time. Consider whether currently held definitions of quality continue to reflect evolving research and best practices in the field.

- Core competencies are a tool to be used. Putting core competencies into action helps integrate quality into a CQIS. Consider how they – or other definitions of staff quality – can be used at the individual, program, and system levels to embed quality.

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Defining Quality Practice: Featured Resources

Louisville Quality Standards: https://louisvilleky.gov/government/youth-development/louisville-quality-standards-out-school-time-youth-programs

SPARC, Fort Worth Quality Standards: http://fortworthsparc.org/downloads/FW-SPARC-Quality-Standards-2014-11.pdf

National Afterschool Association Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals: http://naaweb.org/images/Core-Knowledge-and-Competencies-web.pdf

San Francisco Core Competency Toolkit (includes sample job interview questions): http://sfafterschoolforall.blogspot.com/p/core-competencies-and-toolkit-download.html

Sprockets, St. Paul Quality Framework: http://Sprocketssaintpaul.org/sites/Sprocketssaintpaul.org/files/documents/SprocketsQualityFramework_2%2012Update.pdf

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Assessing Quality Practice

Once quality practice is defined, this definition informs the assessment of practice. Several assessment tools are available to the OST field, including the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA, David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality), the Assessment of Program Practices Tool and Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (APT and SAYO, National Institute on Out-of-School Time and Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education), and the School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and Concordia University, Montreal). The tools that are most commonly used by the Next Generation cities are the YPQA, the APT and the SAYO. In addition, some cities use their own self-assessment tools.

Selecting a tool to assess quality is not enough to ensure data is being used to improve quality – the value of assessment comes when there is a plan that leads to action. Further, assessment needs to be embedded in quality systems; in other words, it needs to be part of the programs' culture, budget, and be sustained by secure funding sources.

The Forum for Youth Investment's guide, *Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools, 2nd Edition* (2009), compares the purpose, history, structure, methodology, content and technical properties of different program observation tools, including the YPQA, APT, and SACERS. This resource is available online at: http://forumfyi.org/content/measuring-youth-program-quality-guide-assessment-tools-2nd-edition.

A companion document, *From Soft Skills to Hard Data: Measuring Youth Program Outcomes* (2014), reviews ten youth outcome measurement tools that are appropriate for use in afterschool and other settings, including the SAYO. It is available online at: http://forumfyi.org/content/soft-skills-hard-data-.

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Using Data to Improve Quality

A strong assessment component does not just mean using an assessment tool; it depends on a thoughtful, intentional approach to data collection and analysis. Several principles of data collection and analysis are important to keep in mind. First, all data collected and analyzed should be actionable – only collect data that are necessary to inform improvement. Second, data collection and analysis should be user-focused – only collect data that are meaningful to the system and to programs. Third, data analysis is an iterative process – every analysis should raise more questions.

The group explored a data planning framework for quality, adapted by the John W. Gardner Center (a partner in this initiative). The plan includes several steps:

1. **Forming questions and purposes:** What questions do you want answered, and what outcomes are you ultimately hoping to achieve in your strategic plan?
2. **Data collection:** What information do you want, and who will collect the data?
3. **Data analysis:** How will we analyze the data? What relationships will we look at? Who will participate in the analysis?
4. **Dissemination and engagement:** How and when will data be shared? And with whom?
5. **Action:** How will we use these data?   Who will do what with the information? What decisions will be informed by our findings?

The steps are not necessarily sequential – the Gardner Center recommends starting at the two ends, always thinking first about the questions and then actions. A data system task list and work plan is also helpful to clarify steps and set a timeline.

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Spotlight on St. Paul

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

Making Meaning with Multiple Data Sets, or *M3*, is St. Paul's comprehensive guided process to help build the internal capacity of partners to make meaning of multiple data sets. The process is tool neutral, so organizations measuring outcomes and experiences unique to network strategies or organization utilizing tools other than the Sprockets-supported resources can also participate. It aligns future planning with existing continuous improvement cycles around four areas of data: Quality Practice, Youth Outcomes, Program Experiences, and Participation. During the day-long M3 experience, participants first talk about quality data and identify priorities, and then explore each area of data more deeply. The process is aspirational in that not all programs collect data in all areas; the program team can consider what data they are interested in collecting and how they might collect it in the future. After this, the program team has an opportunity to look for convergent areas and identify priorities for improvement. At the end of the experience, program teams engage in action planning.

This approach has been well-received by programs, and is becoming embedded throughout Sprockets and even at the state level. Sprockets has made participation in M3 part of the formal improvement process with their most highly engaged partners. The Minnesota Department of Education has embedded it in their 21st Century Community Learning Center's improvement process and the Minnesota state OST network, Ignite Afterschool, has included the M3 approach as a tool in its best practices resource that is disseminated statewide.

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Assessing Quality Practice: Considerations and Lessons Learned

- Before collecting any data, consider what questions you want to answer, and articulate the relationship between the questions and data.

- Using common outcomes can be a way to make sense of multiple data sets, or align data from organizations that may use different assessment tools. Denver has found a M3-like approach helpful, providing organizations with a crosswalk of assessment tools to help them more easily triangulate data sets that might lead to key action or focus areas.

- A crucial step in the process, between selecting tools and conducting assessments, is getting support from providers. Data collection places significant demands on staff time; staff needs to understand the impact it can have and their important role in the process. There is no easy checklist of steps to gain this buy-in – ASB quality leaders agree that it is all about relationships, and can take time.

- Data sharing agreements, with public schools or other organizations, further strengthen assessment efforts. It can be a lengthy process – one that depends on relationship-building – to get agreements in place.

Assessing Quality Practice: Featured Resources

YPQA, David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality: http://cypq.org/

Assessment of Program Practices Tool and Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (APT and SAYO), National Institute on Out-of-School Time and Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education: http://www.niost.org/APAS/apas-overview

School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS), Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and Concordia University: http://ers.fpg.unc.edu/school-age-care-environment-rating-scale-sacers

Believe it. Build it. Minnesota's Guide to Effective Afterschool Practices: http://igniteafterschool.org/bibi/

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Supporting Quality Practice

At the heart of improving quality is supporting quality practice. This typically means professional development, which can include coaching, training, support from provider networks, and can also include a larger professional development system where higher education and credentialing programs play a role. Research has established that a skilled, stable, motivated workforce is a key determinant of quality programming (e.g., Cost Quality & Child Study Outcome Team, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

A comprehensive professional development system includes more than providing training and workshops. While the group's focus was not on professional development systems (which can extend beyond the reach of an intermediary), the following components of a professional development system need to be recognized (School's Out Washington, 2008; PDW Center, 2013; Starr & Gannett, 2014):

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

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The Next Generation cities have used different strategies to support quality. During the Quality Group calls, quality leads discussed in general how intermediaries and system builders support staff to improve capacity and practice – and by extension program quality. In addition, the group shared specific strategies on coaching, training, credentialing, provider support networks, and family engagement initiatives, all the while mindful of how to strengthen and safeguard these components.

Coaching

Coaching, a specific strategy used in many cities, warranted deep exploration, including hearing from School's Out Washington (based in Seattle, WA) and Prime Time Palm Beach (based in Palm Beach, FL), two mature quality improvement systems who have successful coaching models.

The role of the intermediary is to hire coaches, broker the relationship between a program and coach, and find funding for coaching. Within these roles, there are many nuances to examine:

What makes a good coach?

A good coach has a foundation in adult learning principles (e.g., understanding that the adult is in charge of their learning, using a hands-on approach, providing applicable information, and validating the learner's experience). A coach should be "a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage," as the NIOST is fond of saying.

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

Where can a good coach be found?

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One choice to make is whether to look for internal coaches (within a program) or external coaches (from outside of a program). While internal coaches are more cost-effective because they do not need to take time to build relationships or understand the program culture, and – perhaps, most importantly – help to build capacity within programs, they come with significant cons: the roles of supervisor and colleague versus coach are very different, thus making relationships and confidential information difficult to navigate. Also, an internal coach may have blind spots when they are too close to the program.

Prime Time Palm Beach agreed that using practitioners as coaches is very challenging. In attempting to institute a peer coaching model, they found that directors were too busy with their own organizations to provide successful coaching to others. School's Out Washington similarly found that having a neutral party was critical, especially at the beginning. An external coach offers a broader perspective and objectivity, and has the advantage of being perceived as neutral. A full-time, external coach may sound ideal, but may not be achievable due to funding.

A sustainability strategy is to build a culture of coaching within programs and across the system by using a combination of internal and external coaches. An external coach can act as a mentor to program supervisors, teaching and modeling coaching techniques. This solution builds the program's capacity, and it is often a more realistic and financially sustainable approach. School's Out Washington uses a three-year model which makes this approach concrete: during the first year, an external coach works with a site director for 40 hours, the second year, for 20 hours, and the third year, for 10 hours. The approach slowly builds capacity.

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How are relationships brokered?

When is a program ready to accept and benefit from coaching as an improvement strategy? NIOST describes programs' quality improvement as a developmental process – depending on what "developmental" stage a program is at (struggling, fair, good, or excellent), they will be more or less ready to accept and benefit from coaching. This is not to say that there is a baseline for quality before using coaching as a support; rather, there first needs to be evidence of program's receptiveness to and intentionality in participating. A coach can then adapt their approach based on where a program is developmentally.

As an intermediary, when you begin to broker a relationship between a program and coach, it is important to know a program's developmental stage. Some good questions to ask are, "Do you have regular staff meetings?", "Is staff consistent throughout the year?", and, "Have you used an observation tool in the past?" A key to success is then clearly defining the role of the coach, and helping to build positive relationships.

How can the case be made – to programs, staff, and funders – that coaching is important?

Ultimately, programs have to commit to making the time for coaching, so it is important for staff and leadership to understand what a coach is and how to best utilize the process. Communicating and building relationships makes the difference in getting the support of program staff.

Though coaching is a continuous process, it is an investment strategy, not an indefinite relationship. When approaching funders, coaching should not be framed as a long-term commitment, but rather a job that should end when progress is achieved. There is an arc of service where, as directors are supported, they are able to take on more of the coaching of staff themselves. The goal is to ultimately embed coaching into the culture of the program. A vision of building internal capacity over time can be concrete and compelling for a funder.

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Telling a story with data is also helpful when making the case to funders; try to capture pre-and post-coaching data from assessment tools that can then be shared. Experts from School's Out Washington agree – data from their first three years of their program convinced funders to continue supporting the program, as did a report from the Department of Early Learning that showed coaching made a difference.

Special considerations for intermediaries who are also funders

How does the role of a funder impact the ability to help programs with quality improvement effort like coaching? Some cities, such as Philadelphia, have had a quality specialist with the dual roles of compliance monitoring and quality improvement. [Organization] in Philadelphia, PA, found that programs couldn't be truly open and honest with coaches. As a result, PHMC reorganized staff so now those who do contractual compliance do not also do program quality support.

It is of the utmost importance that the stakes are low; quality observations should not be tied to money. Programs can and should be held accountable for developing continuous strategies for meeting their own goals, not for reporting on assessment scores. Articulating their participation in the process should be built into a continuous reporting policy. For example, though Denver's intermediary is not a funder, Denver's demonstration project organizations agree to participate in the coaching process. The focus is on participation, not the achievement of certain measures.

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Training

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

Spotlight on Grand Rapids

Professional growth and development of youth workers has been a priority for the Grand Rapids area for many years, and its intermediary, ELO, has been working collaboratively on a successful training model with the Youth Development Network (YDN).   The YDN Training Committee aligns training topics with the ten content areas from the National Afterschool Association Core Knowledge and Core Competencies, and prioritizes topics by reviewing training feedback, improvement plans, and trends in afterschool. Sharing information about other related community trainings for youth workers is ongoing. A training database is developed and housed with Kent Regional 4C to track all training participation. Participants are able to get a transcript of trainings attended and reports can be generated for attendance. This is helpful for those earning the Michigan School Age Youth Development Certificate or Credential who need training hours in each of the NAA Core Competency content areas.

The trainings offered are engaging and practical, are linked to the NAA Core Competencies, and provide CEU credit. They are also low-cost – just $10 for ELO network members. (Originally the network offered trainings for free; fees were introduced as a way to get better commitment from attendees). The low-cost is possible because presenters are paid only a nominal fee of $200 per 3-hour training. The network is upfront about the small fee, suggesting that it is a way for presenters both to give back to the field as well as to advertise themselves to potentially higher paying audiences (e.g., a school district who might in attendance).

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Assessing trainings/trainers

How can an intermediary ensure that the trainings offered are of high quality? Most organizations ask attendees to evaluate the trainings they have attended, and some use additional informal feedback from colleagues to inform their assessment of trainings and trainers. Some states have training registries, which may include the quality of trainers and trainings. Many early childhood systems offer such registries, and one option some cities are looking into is adding a school-age component to existing early childhood registries.

Brodrick Clarke, an independent consultant in the Baltimore, MD, area, has developed a Facilitator Assessment Tool to formally assess trainers. (N.B.: The terms "presenter" and "trainer" connote a more directive role than "facilitator", however these terms are often used interchangeably.) In order to deliver a high-quality training, it is not enough to be a subject matter expert or even to make a good presentation; expert facilitators need to have a full complement of competencies.   This tool lists competencies in four categories:

- **Knowledge**, which includes content knowledge as well as knowledge of facilitating learning experiences (e.g., adult learning principles);
- **Skills** to facilitate effectively, such as using active listening;
- **Behaviors** exhibited by a facilitator, such as communicating enthusiasm, responding to participant behavior, and remaining calm when faced with obstacles; and
- **Logistics**, meaning an individual's ability to attend to the details and ensure, for example, that the workshop activities are conducted in a timely manner, materials are prepared, attendance is recorded, and evaluation instruments are administered.

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Such a tool gives intermediaries a concrete and consistent way to assess trainers and to ensure they are maximizing resources by providing the highest quality trainings.

Credentials

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

Credentialing offers many benefits to the field, but brings with it several potential risks to be mitigated. Research has shown that credentialing can benefit the field in significant ways and at multiple levels by improving program quality and outcomes for children and youth, supporting individual youth workers, and advancing the field (Gannett et al., 2009). At the same time, some have concerns about credentialing, fearing that it may deter – rather than encourage – people from entering the field. This argument posits that the cost of obtaining the credential would limit access. Another argument is that credentialing could set the bar too low, reducing youth work to purely technical skills and potentially ignoring non-academic skills that are difficult to define. Finally, many fear that credentialing would not guarantee an increase in compensation. It is important to consider and mitigate the concerns around credentialing when pursuing this valuable asset to the field.

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Spotlight on Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids has access to a recently established state credential, the Michigan School Age Youth Development, giving them a way to elevate the role of the youth worker while addressing some of the concerns about credentials. The rigorous requirements ensure it is not just a written test of skills – it covers Levels I and II of their core competencies, as well as requiring 120 hours of training and 480 hours of experience in the last five years. Also required are observation of skills by an external assessor, performance of two assessments with the YPQA tool, and a portfolio. Candidates also receive two meetings with an advisor in addition to support with creating a portfolio. The ASB grant from the Wallace Foundation funded scholarships for the first round of credential candidates; Grand Rapids' ELO continues to provide coaching and scholarships for the credential through grants from local foundations.

Provider Networks

Provider networks, sometimes called professional learning communities, can be a valuable source of support for staff and intermediaries. Providers get much-needed support and system builders foster relationships, thus getting buy-in from providers for quality improvement efforts while staying connected to work in the field.

Participation in some provider networks is required for funding, as is the case in Nashville. NAZA network members know they need to provide quality assessment data in order to have access to technical assistance and peer networking. NAZA has monthly meetings for providers where they talk about data and program policy. The Jacksonville Children's Commission also has a monthly community of practice.

Intermediaries who are not funders offer voluntary networking opportunities. St. Paul's Sprockets has a well-established system of peer networking. Their Neighborhood Network Teams are open to any provider, and meet monthly for area-based youth worker discussions and collaborations. Meetings are facilitated by Sprockets staff. The Neighborhood Network Teams are represented on St. Paul's Community Advisory

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Council. Given the frequent turnover of frontline staff, it is helpful for the structure to be in place; Sprockets staff can provide consistency.

Like Sprockets, Denver has an entirely voluntary support model and uses a tiered approach. At the deepest level of support, all providers engage in monthly learning community meetings that are led by multisite managers from participating organizations. In addition, organizational leaders connect monthly to discuss shared training needs, themes that require a deep dive, and areas of expertise that one organization can share with others. The meetings are also informed by the system's coaches and quality lead. The Denver Afterschool Alliance staff team member provides guidance and support to the multi-site managers.

Fort Worth SPARC offers another creative model for peer networking – the Fort Worth SPARC Resource Fair, which is an opportunity for their network members to interact with each other as well as OST vendors. It is a large event (50 exhibitors and over 100 attendees), where attendees can interact with youth serving organizations, enrichment and engagement providers, and community resource providers.

Family Engagement Initiatives

Family engagement was once characterized as simply "parent involvement" – that is, primarily events-driven, sporadically scheduled, add-on activities for parents, with little or no infrastructure to support it. Research on the importance of family engagement as it contributes to positive youth outcomes has elevated family engagement to its current conception: a systemic, learning-outcomes oriented, integrated, and sustainable strategy for supporting quality OST experiences for children and families.

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Intermediaries play an important role in supporting programs by developing and sustaining intentional family engagement initiatives that promote quality practice. While individual programs and communities will have unique needs and interests, some of the ways intermediaries can support the system include creating or endorsing a common framework to talk about family engagement, providing resources to support programs in implementing meaningful experiences and opportunities for families, and building partnerships with other systems that engage directly with families.

In 2015, the Wallace Foundation Next Generation After School Systems Building Initiative convened a Family Engagement Learning Cohort, with participation from five of its grantee cities (Ft. Worth, Jacksonville, Louisville, Nashville, and St. Paul). Representatives from city teams participated in a series of three webinars to discuss how intermediaries could support system-wide family engagement initiatives. A special insert to this report, *Supporting Quality Practice Through Family Engagement Initiatives,* discusses the role of intermediaries in supporting programs implementing family engagement initiatives through the *Define/Assess/Support* lens, sharing resources and lessons learned from these webinars.

St. Paul's Sprockets has created a tool to help families determine program quality, and has a program finder on their website to help families locate programs. Several city systems, like Nashville's and Fort Worth's SPARC, host annual showcases for families. The Family League of Baltimore is unique in that it is part of a community schools model; family engagement is central to their approach. Their family engagement approach is aligned and systemic – OST programs are required to address family engagement in their scope of work. The Family League is currently considering approaches to measure outcomes related to family engagement, such as increased family participation in leadership, increased value placed on education, and increased time spent reading at home as a result of family literacy work.

Having a family liaison or other dedicated staff person to work on family engagement initiatives is an important support for programs and families. However, it is also important for all staff to focus on family engagement so that the effort is embedded in the culture of programs. The Family League, for example, has added professional

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development for staff on Spanish 101, Family Engagement**,** and a Common Core workshop focusing on how to engage parents in the process.

Supporting Quality Practice: Considerations and Lessons Learned:

- Supporting quality means more than simply providing training. Professional development also encompasses coaching, peer support, and potentially credentials and higher education degrees, all ideally part of an academic pathway. It also includes incentives for increases in education and skills, such as compensation increases and advances along a career pathway.

- Sustaining a coaching model is ultimately depends on building internal capacity.

- Low stakes are important in order to foster a culture of quality improvement.

- Provider engagement is largely about building relationships and trust, and provider networks can play an important role. In Denver, initial attempts for the quality lead to design and coordinate the learning community meetings led to lack of buy-in and a compliance mentality. A shift to having the organizations design and lead the meetings has led to deeper engagement in conversations and trainings and has strengthened their impact.

Supporting Quality Practice: Featured Resources

ASAPconnect Coaching Core Competencies: http://www.asapconnect.org/asap-quality-framework/coaching

Michigan School Age and Youth Development Certificate and Credential: http://miafterschool.com/michigan-school-ageyouth-development-certificate-and-credential/

SPROKETS Parent Guide: http://Sprocketssaintpaul.org/sites/Sprocketssaintpaul.org/files/documents/parent%20guide%5B1%5D.pdf)

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Supporting Quality Practice Through Family Engagement Initiatives

In February, March, and June, 2015, the ASB Family Engagement Learning Cohort (with representatives from Ft. Worth, Jacksonville, Louisville, Nashville, and St. Paul) participated in a series of three webinars to discuss how intermediaries could support system-wide family engagement initiatives. This insert uses the *Define/Assess/Support* lens to discuss the role of intermediaries in supporting programs implementing family engagement initiatives, sharing lessons learned from these webinars as well as useful resources.

Define

Before starting on a family engagement initiative, it is essential to first determine the needs of families in the communities that are being served by programs. Most school districts conduct self-assessments or needs assessments to evaluate partnerships between schools, families, and communities. By capitalizing on existing relationships with school districts – or by developing new ones – intermediaries can help programs access the data from these assessments and even potentially broker opportunities to customize or augment the questions in order to learn more about families' needs as they relate to OST programming. The potential benefit to school districts from partnering with the OST system is a higher rate of return for these surveys – OST program staff tend to be the last people to see families each day, and programs provide additional opportunities to make surveys accessible, to explain how the information will be used, and to remind families to complete and return the surveys.

Alternatively, intermediaries can convene a group of key stakeholders (e.g. families, school district personnel, other community organizations that serve families) to help develop their own needs assessment survey as well as to evaluate and act on the information collected. Questions should always be geared towards determining the needs of families, not what the programs or the system needs. Examples of surveys from school districts and other organizations that serve families are available online. For instance, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has a guide on creating family surveys for early childhood programs, including an extensive list of questions that can be modified for use with OST programs – it can be found at https://www.naeyc.org/familyengagement/resources/conducting-family-survey.   Intermediaries

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can also host focus groups or town hall meetings with families to hear more about their perceptions of the services that are currently being provided by the system, as well as to better understand concerns or issues that are not currently being addressed.

Once intermediaries have a better sense of the needs of the families in the communities they serve, the next task is to create a framework or set of standards that will guide the system's family engagement initiatives. Working with a core group of stakeholders – including families, school staff, representatives from the community, and representatives from other systems that support families (such as organizations that work with immigrant and migrant communities, mental health experts, child welfare organizations, etc.) – intermediaries need to determine their goals for family and community engagement in OST. In addition, the working group should identify indicators they will use to measure whether those goals are being met.

The working group may want to look to other city, state, or national family engagement standards to serve as a guide in creating their own framework. One example of national family engagement standards is the National PTA's Standards for Family-School Partnerships, which provides a framework for strengthening family and community involvement programs in school districts. These standards focus not on what schools should do to involve parents, but on what parents, schools, and communities can do *together* to support student success. The PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships and supporting information can be found at http://www.pta.org/nationalstandards.

Assess

Once the intermediary has endorsed or developed a set of standards and indicators that will guide the system's family engagement initiatives, the next step is to assess the status of current family engagement practices in the system. The family engagement standards and indicators themselves can be used as a guiding tool for an initial assessment of current practices as well as for ongoing assessment of activities. The PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships Assessment Guide provides an example of a standards-based performance rubric – it can be found at: https://www.pta.org/files/National_Standards_Assessment_Guide.pdf.) Note that the rubric defines what good practice "looks like" at different levels of development – emerging (limited level of development and implementation), progressing (functioning level of

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development and implementation), and excelling (highly functioning level of development and implementation).

The findings from a preliminary assessment should help the intermediary and working group define the system's initial family engagement goals ("where do we want to go?"), determine the specific activities the system will implement ("how are we going to get there?"), and develop performance measures to track and document progress ("how will we know if we made it?") The U.S. Department of Education's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships – which is designed to act as a scaffold for the development of family engagement strategies, policies, and programs – can be a useful tool for answering these questions. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework can help the working group further define family engagement policy and program goals, determine the process and organizational conditions that are required to ensure the success of family engagement initiatives, and identify the capacity challenges that need to be addressed to support effective partnerships with families. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework can be found at http://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf.

A logic model is another useful tool to aid in this type of strategic planning, ensuring that all activities and supports are tied to the overall goals and desired outcomes for the family engagement initiative. A practical step-by-step guide for this process is the Harvard Family Research Project's guide *How to Develop a Logic Model for Districtwide Family Engagement Strategies*. The guide helps to outline the steps for: defining the goals that will shape family engagement strategies, identifying the necessary inputs (that is, the financial, intellectual, political, community, and organizational assets available) to ensure that the specific activities undertaken have an impact on desired outcomes, deciding which specific activities will be implemented, defining the desired outcomes of the activities, and selecting performance measures to track progress. The guide also includes a sample logic model based on promising practices for how school districts promote family engagement, as well as lessons learned from research and evaluation studies. It can be found at *http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/how-to-develop-a-logic-model-for-districtwide-family-engagement-strategies*.

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The next step in assessing is to document progress in order to determine what worked well and what were the challenges faced by programs (and the system as a whole) in implementing specific family engagement initiatives. The role of the intermediary is to serve as the hub for this data – collecting information and data in a standardized and sustainable way, as well as analyzing the data to determine what additional supports are needed or what changes need to be made, if any. One way to collect this information is to require participating programs to report on their family engagement work at regular intervals (annually, quarterly, etc.) Intermediaries should use a standardized questionnaire or survey to collect this information. The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) of Johns Hopkins University publishes an annual compendium of stories from the field which detail successful partnership programs and practices. NNPS's form for submitting promising practices can serve as an example of the types of questions intermediaries could use to ask programs to report on their family engagement activities, results, and future plans. The Promising Partnership Practice submission form for organizations can be downloaded at http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/ppp/submit.htm.

Finally, intermediaries may want to engage in additional, more rigorous evaluation to inform their family engagement practice and policy, as well as to collect research-based evidence to make the case to others in support of their family engagement work. Some intermediaries may have the capacity to conduct this kind of an evaluation, while others may want to find university or private partners who can do this work. The Harvard Family Research Project's *Data Collection Instruments for Evaluating Family Involvement* identifies commonly-used, standardized instruments for collecting data on family involvement practices. It is intended to help stakeholders learn about and choose rigorous family involvement tools that assess impact and ensure quality, as well as guide stakeholder in adapting and developing their own assessment tools. This resource can be found at: *http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/data-collection-instruments-for-evaluating-family-involvement.*

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Support

Building family, staff, and program capacity for implementing meaningful family engagement strategies is an important and demanding role for intermediaries. Building capacity begins with gaining buy-in from families, staff, programs, and the community. Intermediaries need to effectively make the case why family engagement in OST is critical for child, family, program, and community outcomes. In addition, intermediaries endorse a culture of family engagement that is embedded in the work of programs by providing the resources and infrastructure to ensure that this work is sustained over time. This can include having a dedicated staff member to oversee family engagement initiatives, building strong relationships with other community organizations and systems that engage with families, and, most importantly, making sure that programs have sufficient funding and training to support the work.

Intermediaries support staff quality by coordinating or providing professional development opportunities around family engagement. Staff need explicit training to learn how to build trusting relationships with families, how to make a space for families in their work, and how to engage with cultural competence and proficiency with the families in the communities they serve. OST programs need to learn how to access the human capital that is available in the communities in which they work – that is, recognizing that families are not only consumers of the programs' services, but can also share skills and knowledge valuable to the programs. Programs also need to be knowledgeable about other resources in the community that serve and can support families – intermediaries can help programs access these resources by building partnerships with other systems that engage directly with families and serving as a warehouse of information for OST programs.

Intermediaries support families by coordinating or providing opportunities for families to learn how to access the resources they need to thrive (such as parenting skills, job skills, housing and other assistance, etc.) and empowering them to be advocates for their children's education. Having cultivated relationships and built partnerships with other systems that engage directly with families, intermediaries enable programs to link families to essential resources provided by community partners. Intermediaries can also help broker relationships between schools and OST programs, providing families with greater access to knowledge about the workings of the school system and how to engage more effectively with their children's education.

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Intermediaries can also support families by helping programs host or connect to workshops and seminars on topics that are important to them, such as child development, ESOL, and citizenship.

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Safeguarding Quality

A CQIS defines, assesses, and supports quality. While there are many ways to strengthen these components, there are additional factors that can safeguard a well-built CQIS. Funding sources, partnerships, efforts to embed quality, and communication and advocacy strategies are important contextual elements that further protect a CQIS during inevitable changes in leadership and funding.

Diverse and Secure Funding

Though sustainability is not synonymous with funding, funding is undeniably a large piece of the puzzle. The ASB cities have explored creative funding strategies, and found a variety of sources for future funding of quality efforts.

Incentivizing professional development

Jacksonville's Children's Commission is exploring a relationship with their state's T.E.A.C.H. to incentivize professional development. The Florida Children's Forum and Prime Time Palm Beach have had success expanding the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarship program (a model that provides financial support for early childhood practitioners) to school-age practitioners, a process piloted in 2009. The T.E.A.C.H. program – which aims to improve quality by reducing staff turnover, increasing compensation, and enhancing staff professional development – is typically funded through Child Care and Development Block Grants (CCDBG), which come with age restrictions (children birth through 13 years old). However, many licensed programs serve children aged 6-13, so it was logical to offer the program to school-age practitioners.

Palm Beach County has also coupled T.E.A.C.H. with the WAGE$ program – another early childhood model which provides education-based salary supplements – by securing an alternative local funding source (the Children's Success Council) that did not come with age group restrictions. As a result, the WAGE$ program now offers salary supplements for licensed and licensed exempt programs in Palm Beach County serving grades K-12, a big expansion beyond school-age child care.

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Any state with a T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood program can reach out, advocating that youth-serving organizations with clear guidelines for quality (similar to those of a licensed child care program) should also be included in the scholarship and salary supplement programs. In Florida, they have seen increases in salaries, advances in position, and reductions in turnover for participants. Their ultimate goal is to find legislated state funds or private funding, without age restrictions, for both the T.E.A.C.H. and WAGE$ programs. For states with T.E.A.C.H. programs already in place, it is simply a matter of marketing to school-age providers who already qualify.

Beyond the current grant

Finding diverse sources of funding is an obvious goal, but one that is not so easy to achieve. ASB cities have found funding for quality initiatives from such sources as:

- *School districts:* St. Paul received a small support from the school district to help cover a gap; this initially small support will hopefully lead to a new partnership.
- *Municipal funding:* Fort Worth has received funding from the half-cent sales tax through its Crime Control and Prevention District; St. Paul has some funding embedded in the Parks Department; Denver receives funding from the city General Fund as well as from marijuana tax revenue.
- *Local foundations:* Grand Rapids and Denver have received funding from small, local foundations.
- *State and federal sources:* CCDBG and 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) are the biggest sources of dedicated federal funding for school-age child care and afterschool. The 21st CCLC language in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) gives additional flexibility to state education agencies to dedicate more resources to training, professional development, and quality improvement for programs and program staff, and also allows states to work with external organizations to provide training and support to grantees.

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Partnerships

Partnerships at the local or state level can further safeguard quality efforts and may even lead to new funding streams.

Linking to statewide systems

The ASB cities are connecting with state efforts and policies in varying degrees. St. Paul has found the statewide network to be a positive partner with whom to share training and data work. Grand Rapids has supported state efforts locally by providing active participation on state working groups and steering committees.

Spotlight on Philadelphia

Philadelphia has been working closely with state efforts related to QIS. Pennsylvania's statewide Quality Improvement and Rating System (QRIS), Keystone STARS, includes children up to age 12. However, key partners in Philadelphia (initially led by the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey) wanted to extend this system to older youth. Now a project of the Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool Youth Development Network (PSAYDN), this initiative has expanded statewide, with key partners recognizing the important impact it would have on youth outcomes.

When working in partnership, it is necessary to find common ground. Pennsylvania and Philadelphia did so by using the PSAYDN Statement of Quality in Afterschool (http://www.psaydn.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=25&Itemid=226) as a frame for their work. The Statement, which highlight four areas of quality, is broad and accessible rather than regulatory. Less specific than Philadelphia's quality standards, the Statement appealed to a wider range of constituents.

Pennsylvania and Philadelphia also agreed on measuring shared outcomes. The selected shared outcomes – youth relationships with adults and youth relationships with

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peers – were chosen because they are research-based, realistic, and tied to quality. Philadelphia piloted a program using the APT and SAYO tools to measure program quality and shared outcomes, initially with 20 OST programs participating in Phase 1 and later expanding to 30 programs in Phase II. Participating programs included a representative mix both of age groups served as well as funding sources (city- and non-city-funded). The pilot taught Philadelphia valuable lessons: communication is the key to keeping everyone on the same page; a coordinator who has dedicated time to oversee the process is optimal to its success; and partnerships with city government and the state allows the leveraging of resources to support the work.

Partnering with early childhood

A major task of afterschool system builders is to work with city officials on policies and programming. Public officials are largely interested in coordination and accountability – no one wants to choose between competing interests. Therefore, services should be coordinated, not duplicated. Currently, the momentum in public investment is in early childhood, with a majority of funds coming from the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). However, one third of children served by these programs are school-age (6-13 years old) (CLASP, 2015), while only 4% of the funds are specifically allocated for quality activities Afterschool needs to be at the table with early childhood to advocate for funding. According to Susan O'Connor, consultant to NIOST, a key sustainability strategy is to braid CCDF money with 21st CCLC funds, along with other youth development money from city governments and private foundations.

CQIS builders can also partner creatively with early childhood to strengthen the components of a professional development system by:

1. **Aligning core knowledge and competencies** with national standards for both early childhood and afterschool;
2. **Creating comprehensive career pathways/lattices** that include both afterschool and early childhood;

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3. **Building program capacity** by creating aligned technical assistance systems, embedding technical assistance in programs, and taking advantage of online learning;

4. **Increasing access to professional development** by linking providers to opportunities such as career advising and other personal and professional supports (like the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood example above); and

5. **Advocating for investments in compensation, benefits, and workforce conditions** at the state level.

The Wyoming Afterschool Alliance and the Wyoming Department of Family Services Early Childhood Program partnership is another example of an early childhood/afterschool collaboration that was presented to the ASB cities. They have worked together to develop quality program standards, provide professional development trainings and conferences, and begin conversations about expanding the existing early childhood training registry to include afterschool. Their partnership is particularly valuable in a geographically large yet largely rural state.

ASB cities are seeing the benefits of partnering with early childhood. Baltimore's Family League uses a community schools model, which by its nature focuses attention on the full continuum of ages. The Jacksonville Children's Commission is connecting afterschool and early childhood quality efforts more and more; they intentionally created a position for Director of Quality Administration that encompasses both afterschool and early childhood in order to better align services. Funding from a community foundation supports both early learning and afterschool initiatives, and several projects span the continuum of ages, like a grade-level reading campaign that includes school readiness.

Grand Rapids' ELO has also been working to integrate afterschool and early childhood. The Early Childhood Investment Corporation, with funding from the Michigan Department of Education Office of Great Start, led the project *Expanding Great Start to Quality School Age Design* in 2015. The project, similar to others across the nation, aimed to engage the OST field in determining how best to include programs and

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providers that serve school-age children in the Great Start to Quality, Michigan's early childhood tiered QRIS. Recommendations to expand Michigan's QRIS to include licensed and registered programs and providers who serve school age children and their families have been submitted for review to the Michigan Department of Education-Office of Great Start. This inclusion of OST providers and programs in Great Start to Quality will expand quality improvement supports available to OST care and education programs such as trainings, materials, one-on-one specialized consultation and other resources.

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Embedding quality

Engaging providers as leaders

Beyond offering providers support through peer networks to improve their practice, intermediaries serve an important role of engaging providers as leaders to build program capacity and strengthen the CQIS. An intermediary can foster leadership skills by:

- *Changing the message:* In St. Paul, the messaging is that Sprockets is not only its four-person staff, but is made up of all of the providers in the network;

- *Acting with intentionality:* St. Paul has identified leaders who can be ambassadors for Sprockets and finds opportunities for them to lead in quality efforts (for example, as trainers or coaches);

- *Taking time:* Getting organizations to buy in to quality work is all about relationships. It involves face-to-face meetings at sites with coordinators and selling "what's in it for them" (e.g., providing access to a tool that will help with grant-writing); and

- *Providing training:* Training specifically on leadership skills, such as that developed by Grand Rapids' ELO or NIOST's Leading for Quality training can build staff skills.

Spotlight on Denver

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

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

Requiring quality

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

In addition to requiring participating in quality efforts, an intermediary must budget for all areas of quality. Many already routinely budget for assessments. Louisville has added funders to their sustainability planning committee, which is working on determining the cost of sustaining; the committee is currently drawing up budgets for quality efforts

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including infrastructure support, data collection, analysis and reporting, and outreach and advocacy.

Building a culture of quality in programs

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

Sometimes even simple strategies can shift the culture of an organization. For example, in early 2015, Camp Fire West Michigan 4C, a local Grand Rapids OST provider and ELO network member, sought and received funding from two local foundations to continue the work supported by the Wallace Foundation to coach programs to intentionally embrace and integrate a quality framework within their organizations at every level. Three-ring binders are created for each organization with sections for each of the areas of the QIS (Define Quality, Assess Quality and Support Quality with subsections under each for the organization, program, staff, youth, and family levels). The binders are an important reference for the programs, documenting quality efforts so that essential institutional knowledge is not lost with transitions in staff.

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Communication and Advocacy

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

For example, the Denver Afterschool Alliance has made quality a consistent theme in conversations with the funding community. As funders are brought together twice annually, they are informed about the QIS and given specific guidance on how they can consider QIS participation in their funding efforts. Current conversations are underway in Denver to consider a system for more publicly tracking how providers are engaging with the QIS – not their level of quality necessarily, but their participation in the system – to facilitate easier communication about quality between funders and providers.

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

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Summary and Conclusion

The collective work of the ASB Quality Working Group – deeply exploring the nuances and strategizing solutions to challenges of a CQIS – has taken previous thinking on quality improvement systems to the next level. We are grateful to the commitment of the ASB quality leads both for their work independently in each of their cities as well as together as a peer learning community.

Together, we have learned that a CQIS defines, assesses, and supports in order to impact staff, program, and youth outcomes. A strong CQIS attends to the complexities in each area. A sustainable CQIS further safeguards the system through funding, partnerships, embedded quality, and communication and advocacy. The system itself is dynamic and requires constant care and maintenance by those tasked with quality efforts.

The ultimate success is to build a culture of quality, one where quality is seen by providers, afterschool leaders, and the community at large as essential to all aspects of an afterschool system and is recognized as critical to promoting positive youth outcomes. The lessons learned and shared by the ASB group will help others in similar roles on the path to quality.

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