



# how is the afterschool field defining program quality?

A Review of Effective Program Practices and Definitions of Program Quality

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Quality has become a primary focus in the afterschool field—and with good reason. Not only does the focus on quality convey a broad commitment to doing good work in our afterschool programming, but it also requires the afterschool field to make informed choices about *what actually occurs* in afterschool programs.

While research on program effectiveness offers ample evidence that afterschool programs can benefit young people in a variety of ways, this same body of research demonstrates that not all programs are equally effective (Granger, 2008). Some programs show positive results in many or all major outcome categories. Other programs are associated with positive results for some but not all outcomes; still others show no positive outcomes at all. This variability in effectiveness highlights the need for a better understanding of *how* successful afterschool programs actually work, while keeping in mind the ever-present question of how to define success.

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The focus on quality comes at a pivotal time for the afterschool field, as prominent voices debate the usefulness of allowing particular outcomes to guide programming. Robert Halpern (2006) has called attention to the problems associated with programming that is solely outcome-driven. He argues that the afterschool field has tended to focus on a narrow set of outcomes, usually academic, without fully exploring the range and complexity of relevant developmental tasks. Halpern goes on to suggest that we reformulate our expectations of afterschool programs to take into account the range of purposes they serve.

Focusing on afterschool program quality provides the opportunity for just such a reformulation. This article will show how the vibrant discussions of afterschool program quality, which encompass both theory and empirical research, increasingly offer policymakers, funders, evaluators, and program providers a sound basis for making decisions about afterschool programming.

The efforts of the afterschool field to define program quality are generating an increasingly robust literature that highlights the value of broadening our focus beyond outcome-driven approaches to include quality-driven approaches. Quality-driven approaches focus on day-to-day program processes as they relate both to holistic program goals and to individual outcomes. Because program quality formulations are increasingly informed by both theory and empirical evidence from evaluation research, a quality-driven approach remains empirically based but is liberated from an exclusive focus on outcomes. As a point of convergence between theory and results-based or outcome-only approaches, the field's emerging focus on program quality offers a new and compelling guide for efforts to manage and improve afterschool programming.

This review article examines formulations of afterschool program quality emerging from outcome research, expert and professional consensus, and "process" research on how successful afterschool programs operate. After briefly summarizing current literature on the effectiveness of afterschool programs, we review empirical evidence regarding the characteristics of effective programs, that is, what effective afterschool programs do to produce positive outcomes. Next, we

provide an overview of how program quality has been conceptualized by afterschool researchers. We conclude by discussing the field's emerging consensus regarding quality afterschool programming, highlighting key considerations as the afterschool field undertakes efforts to achieve both program quality and positive outcomes for youth.

### **Program Effectiveness: Do Afterschool Programs Make a Difference?**

Not surprisingly, research on afterschool program effectiveness has traditionally focused on outcomes. Studies of afterschool program effectiveness document a variety of benefits associated with program participation.

Results of the many evaluations of afterschool programs have been summarized in several recently published qualitative reviews (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008). The field has also seen the publication of several quantitative reviews (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Lauer et al., 2006; Zief & Lauer, 2006) that use the technique of meta-analysis to identify trends in the results of afterschool program evaluations.

Considered collectively, the qualitative and quantitative reviews of effectiveness research provide a

sense of the outcomes afterschool programs are generally expected to achieve. These reviews also document significant variability in programs' ability to achieve these outcomes. Not all afterschool programs are equally effective in producing positive youth outcomes. Thus, one way to define program quality is to look at the factors identified in the evaluation research as characterizing effective programs, defining these as programs that produced positive youth outcomes. To the extent that reviews of effectiveness research capture variability in program practices related to positive youth outcomes, these reviews collectively contribute to the field's efforts to define program quality.

### **Qualitative Reviews**

Little and colleagues (2008), of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), reviewed afterschool evaluation literature and found evidence that programs can have beneficial effects on academic performance and social and emotional development, as well as preventing

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problem behaviors and promoting health and wellness. Despite this list of potential benefits associated with participation in afterschool programs, Little and colleagues concluded that the available research indicated that not all programs produce these outcomes. They associate programs' varying levels of success with differences in participants' access to and sustained participation in programs and with the degree to which programs partner with families, schools, and other community contacts. They also associate the variability in outcome with specific program factors they consider to be issues of program quality. Such factors include the level of supervision and structure the program provides, the quality of staff training, and the degree to which program activities are carefully matched with the program's specific goals and objectives.

Bodilly and Beckett (2005) found that effective afterschool programs achieved positive outcomes in four categories: provision of school-age childcare, academic attitudes and achievement, social and health behaviors, and social interactions. Bodilly and Beckett focused their review on only the most methodologically rigorous evaluations. Using these stringent criteria, they found that afterschool programs were associated with only modest benefits. Bodilly and Beckett make a compelling case for the importance of taking into account factors such as who participates in the afterschool program (age and other personal characteristics), length of time in the program, frequency of attendance, program content (specific activities, teaching strategies), and level of methodological rigor in the evaluation plan. Once again, these dimensions of variability are precisely the sort of factors that constitute program quality.



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### Quantitative Reviews

To date, there are three published meta-analyses of afterschool program evaluations (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Lauer et al., 2006; Zief & Lauver, 2006). Meta-analysis is a quantitative analysis strategy that enables researchers to pool the results of many different studies by establishing a common metric. Consistent with the qualitative reviews discussed above, the meta-analytic reviews indicated mixed results when it comes to afterschool program effectiveness.

The meta-analysis performed by Zief and Lauver (2006) yielded no evidence that afterschool programs were effective. Among the categories of outcomes they examined were youth behavioral changes, social and emotional development, and academic performance. Zief and Lauver used very strict inclusion criteria, looking only at studies that included the strongest research designs. They therefore included just five studies in their meta-analysis. Including so few evaluation studies may have limited the reliability of their findings. Despite finding that afterschool programs did not significantly affect outcomes, Zief and Lauver emphasize the importance of maintaining stringent inclusion standards in future meta-analyses, so that future reviews are based on the most rigorous studies and so that future evaluations use more rigorous experimental

designs. When it comes to program quality, Zief and Lauver's findings attest to the importance of including evaluation design as a dimension of quality.

The meta-analysis by Lauer and colleagues (2006) focused on the effects of out-of-school youth programs that were specifically designed to affect academic outcomes. The findings indicate that, for the most part, programs focused on academics can produce significant benefits in reading and math achievement among the

youth they serve. Lauer and colleagues also examined a number of factors that might account for variability in the degree to which programs produce positive outcomes. These factors included students' grade level, program focus, program duration, grouping structure (such as individual versus group tutoring), and methodological quality of the evaluation study. The meta-analytic findings indicated that several of these characteristics were significantly related to variability in both reading and math outcomes. However, the effects of these factors were not consistent across outcomes. That is, a program characteristic that was associated with positive reading outcomes was not necessarily related to positive math outcomes. For this reason, this meta-analysis indicates that afterschool programs can yield benefits in reading and math, but it provides little insight into the specific factors associated with broad program effectiveness. These findings attest to the complexity involved in determining which programs work under which circumstances for which students.

The widely referenced meta-analysis by Durlak and Weissberg (2007) focused on afterschool programming that was designed to improve social skills. Their analyses indicate that such afterschool programs can improve young people's academic performance as well as their personal adjustment and social skills. Much as Lauer and colleagues (2006) did, Durlak and Weissberg (2007) considered what factors might be associated with positive outcomes. They examined parents' level of involvement in their children's education; students' grade level; and whether programs included an academic component that specifically targeted improvement in grades, achievement test scores, school attendance, or homework completion. In general, their meta-analytic findings indicated that none of these factors was consistently associated with positive outcomes. The presence of an academic component did emerge as a significant predictor, but only on a single outcome—achievement test scores. That is, programs that included academic programming were more likely to affect achievement scores but not other academic outcomes.

Durlak and Weissberg (2007) identified four characteristics of quality social skills programming that were consistently associated with positive outcomes in all three outcome domains: personal adjustment, social skills, and academic performance. These four criteria were:

- Sequenced set of activities to achieve skill objectives
- Active forms of learning
- Focus of at least one program component on developing personal or social skills
- Explicit targeting of specific academic, personal, or social skills

These four “SAFE” dimensions were used to sort programs into two groups. One group consisted of afterschool programs in which all four SAFE criteria were present. The other group consisted of programs in which only some or none of the SAFE criteria were present. Durlak and Weissberg then tested their hypothesis by comparing the effectiveness of the group of SAFE programs to that of the group of non-SAFE programs. Their results indicated that SAFE programs that met all four criteria showed significant positive effects in seven of the

eight total outcome domains: child self-perceptions, school bonding, positive social behaviors, problem behaviors, drug use, achievement tests, and school grades. Programs in the non-SAFE group did not show positive results in any outcome domain.

These qualitative and quantitative reviews of afterschool program effectiveness research indicate that programs can benefit young people in terms of their social and emotional functioning, academics, health behaviors, and basic safety. As the body of program evaluation research grows, what emerges as the most striking (and yet commonsensical) finding is that program effectiveness varies considerably, depending on both the context of the program and on what actually occurs in the program. When we focus on understanding the dimensions of variability, rather than on making sweeping generalizations about all afterschool programs, this effectiveness research makes an important contribution to the empirical foundation of the program quality movement.

### **How or Why Afterschool Programs Work: Defining Program Quality**

Early program evaluation research provided a snapshot of the kinds of factors that contribute to program variability. However, these evaluation studies were generally limited in their ability to answer the question, “Why do programs work?” That is, “Which program practices are most important in yielding good outcomes?” Until

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recently, opinions about what constitutes a high-quality afterschool program had outpaced available research. However, afterschool researchers and evaluators are now paying considerable attention to identifying the critical elements of successful afterschool programs.

### **Varying Perspectives**

Formulations of what constitutes quality in afterschool programs have relied on a variety of different sources of information, generally including a combination of expert opinion and existing empirical research. Expert opinion encompasses professionals' firsthand experiences in planning and administering afterschool programs, expertise in service delivery, and knowledge of adolescent and positive youth development and the broader field of community youth development. Frequently, research from related fields—such as school-age childcare, youth development, and in-school educational practice—has been applied to definitions of quality in afterschool programs (Little, 2007). This was due in part to the limited amount of research that had focused specifically on defining and measuring afterschool program quality.

Afterschool researchers have repeatedly noted that the field needs more and better empirical evidence related to program quality (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007; Little, 2007; Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbreton, 2008; Shernoff & Vandell, 2008). The empirical evidence that is available consists mostly of descriptive data from correlational studies. Correlational studies help to document the co-occurrence of certain program characteristics with desirable outcomes, but these studies cannot explain causal links. That is, they cannot determine what program practices caused improvements in participants' academic performance or social and emotional development.

Process measures are another important element of more rigorous investigations of program quality. A focus on process data, as opposed to an exclusive focus on outcome data, provides further insight into the determinants of program quality. Process evaluations generally address questions such as, "Who is being served?" and "What actually happened in the program?" (Sabatelli, Anderson, & LaMotte, 2005). Bodilly and Beckett (2005) use the term "implementation analysis" to refer to this sort of process evaluation. In afterschool research,

the process domain encompasses characteristics of participants, the broader program context, and what actually takes place in the program. When combined with outcome measures, process data allow researchers to document which students, in which programs, under which circumstances, have the best outcomes. When process-outcome studies include a control condition, they provide researchers with information about causal relationships between program participation and outcome. Such information is crucial for determining what constitutes a high-quality program. As the field accumulates more empirical data of this sort, it will be able to further refine its definition of program quality.

At this stage of the field's development, however, most formulations of afterschool program quality are based on a combination of expert opinion, research from adjacent areas of inquiry, correlational studies, and, occasionally, a few more rigorous studies.

The result has been a number of different definitions of program quality that vary in their level of specificity (Granger et al., 2007). Many of these definitions take the form of conceptual models based on afterschool researchers' efforts to integrate results from a variety of outcome studies into a coherent account of optimal program functioning. Other definitions of program quality emerge "from the field," that is, from the work of practitioners and evalu-

ators who are using observational measures to document and evaluate what occurs in afterschool programs. The next two sections review definitions of program quality in each of these categories.

### **Frameworks from Outcome Research**

The afterschool literature reflects a growing number of quality frameworks, generally based on a youth development perspective, that derive from existing outcome research. All of these frameworks offer recommendations regarding what domains of afterschool programming are most important for achieving positive youth outcomes. Some quality frameworks also propose a particular interrelationship among program domains, resulting in a sort of causal theory about how program quality affects youth outcomes. The six outcome-research-based quality formulations reviewed next have clear common themes, as well as a few differences, related to afterschool program quality.

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Metz, Goldsmith, and Arbreton (2008) synthesize evidence related to afterschool program outcomes, giving special attention to the developmental needs of pre-teens. Based on afterschool outcome research, Metz and colleagues define program quality in terms of six dimensions, some with more research support than others:

- Focused and intentional strategy
- Exposure (duration, intensity, and breadth)
- Supportive relationships
- Family engagement
- Cultural competence
- Continuous program improvement

Unlike most of the other definitions of quality reviewed below, Metz and colleagues not only present these six dimensions but also propose a particular relationship among them, suggesting that focused, intentional programming and continuous program improvement are essential for the achievement of quality in the other four areas.

Metz and colleagues' (2008) formulation also is unique in its inclusion of cultural competence as a dimension of afterschool program quality. They argue that programs that promote cultural competence are more likely to have youth who feel psychologically safe, actively engaged, and committed to fostering community partnerships. Other afterschool professionals have called for offering programming that enhances youth's cultural competence, given the diversity of children and youth being served in afterschool programs and the developmental importance of culture as a dimension of identity (The Colorado Trust Afterschool Initiative, 2002; Kennedy, Bronte-Tinkew, & Matthew, 2007; Oakland Afterschool Coordinating Team, 2002; Olsen, Bhattacharya, & Scharf, 2006). Metz and colleagues suggest that cultural competence is a key dimension of program quality that should be infused into all aspects of program functioning.

Researchers at the Forum for Youth Investment (Pittman, Smith, & Finn, 2008; Smith & Van Egeren, 2008) have developed a framework for afterschool program quality that emphasizes measuring quality at the point of service—where programs come into contact with youth and affect what participants actually experience. This framework is based on program evaluation research and developmental theories of motivation and learning. These researchers propose that a high-quality program is comprised of four hierarchically related domains: a safe environment, a supportive environment, social interaction, and engagement. According to this

perspective, providing a safe, supportive environment establishes a foundation that fosters effective staff-youth-peer interactions. These interactions, in turn, promote youth engagement—an element of programming that has been shown to correlate with positive youth outcomes (Smith & Van Egeren, 2008).

Like the two groups of researchers discussed above, Little and colleagues (2008) conclude that the most effective programs are those that ensure access to and sustained participation in the afterschool program. This conclusion is consistent with many studies indicating that positive outcomes are more likely when youth participate in a program more frequently and over a longer period of time (Shernoff & Vandell, 2008). Little and colleagues also conclude that effective programs have well-established connections with families, schools, and other key contexts for youth. Considerable research has supported the idea that the greater the number of supportive environments available to youth and the greater the consistency across settings in reinforcing positive attitudes and behavior, the greater the likelihood that youth will show gains in academic achievement, social skills, and emotional development (Benson, 2002; Chaskin & Baker, 2006; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; HFRP, 2004; Shernoff & Vandell, 2008).

Little and colleagues (2008) also assert that high-quality programs also offer appropriate supervision and structure for participants, a well-prepared staff, and intentional programming. They cite research that relates negative youth outcomes to lack of supervision after school. The need for a well-prepared staff is supported by research that has consistently linked the quality of youth-staff relationships both to outcomes and to the level of youth engagement in the program. Finally, the study refers to the work of Durlak and Weissberg (2007) as support for the importance of intentional programming, defined as having clear programmatic goals and strong preparation of staff to execute goals.

Beckett, Hawken, and Jacknowitz (2001) conducted a systematic review of afterschool research, using meta-analytic techniques to develop a list of program practices associated with positive outcomes. The researchers paid careful attention to both the quality and quantity of the available evidence supporting each practice. To be included in their list, a program practice had to be mentioned in at least three publications. Each practice was given a score indicating the level of research support for that practice. The researchers produced a list of 18 practices that comprised their formulation of program quality.

**Staff characteristics:**

- Training
- Education
- Compensation

**Community contacts:**

- Involvement of families
- Use of volunteers
- Partnerships with community-based organizations

**Program characteristics:**

- Variety of activities\*
- Flexibility of programming\*
- Emotional climate\*
- Child-to-staff ratio
- Total enrollment
- Mixing of age groups
- Age-appropriate activities
- Space availability
- Continuity and complementarity with day school programs
- Clear goals and evaluation of program
- Materials
- Attention to health and safety

Three program characteristics, marked with an asterisk above, were scored as having strong empirical support: variety of activities, flexibility of programming, and emotional climate. Most of the other practices were found to have moderate support.

More recently, Bodilly and Beckett (2005) reviewed available research and theory related to afterschool program quality. They examined literature on youth development, school-age care, and quality in educational settings to develop a list of nine afterschool program quality domains:

- A clear mission
- High expectations and positive social norms
- Safe and healthy environment
- Supportive emotional climate
- Small total enrollment
- Stable and well-trained staff
- Appropriate content and pedagogy (relative to children’s needs and to program’s mission) that provides a variety of activities and opportunities for engagement

- Integrated family and community partnerships
- Frequent assessment

Each of the nine quality domains were endorsed by at least two of the three literature bases the researchers examined. Bodilly and Beckett describe their list as a set of program components that are “likely, although not proven, to produce effective OST [out-of-school time] programming” (p. 73–74).

Durlak and Weissberg’s (2007) meta-analysis is frequently cited in the reviews discussed above. As mentioned previously, Durlak and Weissberg’s four SAFE criteria are:

- Sequenced set of activities to achieve skill objectives
- Active forms of learning
- Focus of at least one program component on developing personal or social skills
- Explicit targeting of specific academic, personal, or social skills

Durlak and Weissberg’s findings not only highlight the potential importance of these four program characteristics, but also suggest that program quality may be holistic. For example, academic benefits may be best achieved when a program offers a variety of high-quality components, rather than focusing solely on

strong academic programming. Durlak and Weissberg’s findings support the conclusion that high-quality afterschool programming affects a variety of desirable outcomes, including academic achievement and social development.

These six quality frameworks, based on outcome research and youth development theory, begin to explain variability in program effectiveness and move the afterschool field closer to a comprehensive definition of program quality. Although the field has yet to accumulate a substantial

body of empirical evidence concerning the linkages between program processes and positive outcomes, these recent efforts are an important step forward.

**Observations from Process Measures**

Definitions of program quality are also emerging “from the field,” where practitioners and evaluators are formulating quality standards as they use process measures to document what is occurring in afterschool programs. These observational measures are initially derived from

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the researchers' values and assumptions as to what constitutes quality programming. The instruments are used by observers, who visit the afterschool programs under study and record the extent to which each quality indicator is present in the program. Several groups of afterschool researchers (e.g., HFRP, 2006; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2009) have examined the commonalities among these observational instruments and distilled a list of core features assessed in these measures.

In their compendium, Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom (2009) selected instruments that were "research-based," that is, "informed by relevant child/youth development literature" (p. 8). In their review of nine instruments, they found that six dimensions of quality were present in all nine observational measures:

- Focus on staff-student relationships
- Safe and supportive program environment
- Active, sustained engagement of youth in program activities
- Encouragement of pro-social behaviors and norms
- Opportunities for youth to develop specific, targeted skills
- Predictable program structure and routine

Other domains present in many but not all measures included linkages between the program and the community, quality staffing, and a focus on youth leadership.

In 2006, researchers at the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) conducted a similar scan of afterschool program quality assessment tools. However, they also included local, state, and national statements of quality standards. Their search resulted in 42 separate articulations of program quality, which they then distilled into a list of 15 recurring areas of assessment:

- Programming, activities, and opportunities
- Human relationships
- Positive youth development
- Family, school, and community involvement
- Staffing
- Physical space and environment
- Program administration and management
- Safety, health, and nutrition
- Program planning and structure
- Assessment, evaluation, and accountability
- Organizational capacity

- Supervision and behavior management
- Sustainability
- Equal access
- Fiscal management

This list of fifteen areas of assessment overlaps substantially with the domains reflected in Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom's (2009) compendium, as well as with the six frameworks based on reviews of evaluation research. Considered collectively, these eight formulations of afterschool program quality indicate that the field is indeed converging on a common vision of the essential characteristics of high-quality afterschool programs. These definitions of program quality direct our attention to the domains

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of program functioning that appear to be most important for effecting positive outcomes. They also highlight the program practices and characteristics, within particular domains, that are key factors in the success of high-quality programs. Finally, several of these definitions of program quality contribute to a theory of how various dimensions of afterschool program quality are causally linked to positive youth outcomes.

### ***Developing a Unified Picture of Program Quality***

The eight quality frameworks reviewed above share clear commonalities in the domains of program functioning considered essential to program quality. All of them address the paramount importance of programs' providing youth with *safe, supportive relationships and a positive emotional climate*. Under this broad heading, nearly all of the quality frameworks highlight staff contributions to establishing a positive emotional climate. Some frameworks cite structural factors—such as staff being well trained, having small staff-to-participant ratios, and having adequate staff compensation—as supporting staff in establishing strong relationships with young people. Some quality frameworks also define *positive emotional climate* in terms of the types of processes or human interactions that occur in the program.

The various quality frameworks also emphasize the importance of afterschool programs' offering focused, intentional programming. Some frameworks emphasize program management that is focused and intentional, while others stress the importance of focused and inten-

tional activities. Such activities might be chosen to meet particular programmatic goals: targeting a specific set of social skills, building on previously established gains, meeting age-specific developmental needs, maximizing youth engagement, or providing participants with variety.

A third domain addressed across the afterschool program quality frameworks is strong partnerships with families, schools, and other community organizations. These partnerships are considered important for several reasons. Partnerships with families can facilitate youth engagement in the program. Partnerships with schools enable afterschool programs to coordinate the content of their services with school-based learning. Linkages to other community organizations can assist afterschool programs by making their services widely accessible to young people and by using the afterschool program to reinforce skills learned in other settings.

Another domain consistently cited in the various quality frameworks is the importance of young people's active participation and engagement in program activities. Several of the quality frameworks emphasize youth engagement, citing evidence that positive outcomes are more likely when youth participate in a program more frequently and over a longer period of time. However, it appears that the links between program engagement and positive youth outcomes are complex, multi-faceted, and holistic rather than direct. For instance, youth participation and engagement may be a predictor of positive youth outcomes, but they may also be an outcome of a quality program. Various formulations of program quality highlight programmatic factors such as availability of programming—how long the program is open, whether it is located where potential participants can access it—as important in affecting young people's levels of participation. Several quality frameworks suggest that offering a broad range of program activities is important in fostering youth engagement. Formulations of program quality consistently relate youth engagement to quality in the areas of supportive relationships, intentional programming, and outside partnerships.

A fifth common theme across the quality frameworks is the importance of a healthy, physically safe environment. Some of the quality frameworks reference

the availability of nutritious snacks and opportunities for physical activity as important dimensions of quality. Having adequate space, supervision, and physical security is consistently associated with program quality. In some cases, physical safety and psychological safety are considered to be interrelated aspects of quality. While the literature on program quality does not describe in detail the indicators of physical safety, definitions of program quality seem to take physical safety as an essential, foundational dimension of program quality.

A final point of convergence across the definitions of program quality is the domain of program management, particularly management practices that support program sustainability and continuous program improvement. Several of the quality frameworks associate quality with having evaluation practices in place, with engaging in frequent assessment of program practices, and with using assessment to improve the program. Additionally, several of the frameworks point to the importance of high-quality program management and self-evaluation in promoting staff development and program activities. This correlation suggests that continuous program improvement, as one dimension of program quality, supports quality in other key domains of program functioning.

These six domains—supportive relationships, intentional programming, strong community partnerships, promotion of youth engagement, physical safety, and continuous quality improvement—represent clear points of convergence across the various definitions of program quality. The field is reaching a consensus regarding what aspects of program quality are important and how these dimensions of program quality fit into the overall picture of afterschool programming. See Figure 1 on page 10.

### **The Big Picture: Putting Quality Frameworks into Action**

Considered collectively, the literature reviewed in this article indicates that the afterschool field is reaching agreement on several key points related to program quality.

Afterschool programs can be effective in enhancing academic achievement and social and emotional development. Programs that have a positive effect in one of these domains tend to achieve positive benefits in the

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others as well. That is, successful programs appear to affect a range of outcomes, including academic performance and social and emotional development.

It also is clear that not all afterschool programs are equally effective. Experts and researchers have reached a general consensus that successful afterschool programs have a number of characteristics in common. The literature now offers several formulations of program quality that are rooted in the results of individual outcome studies, meta-analyses of outcome research, and a growing body of process research. At the same time, afterschool professionals have access to a variety of quality

- Assessing the degree to which a program is likely to produce positive youth outcomes
- Providing guidelines for implementing program improvements
- Developing guidelines for staff training
- Establishing a baseline for assessing changes in a program's quality over time

As the field gathers additional empirical data regarding what program practices define quality, it will also need to scientifically validate the measures it uses to assess quality, a process that has already begun

(Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2009).

Moreover, as the afterschool field moves forward with implementing quality standards, a number of issues must be kept in mind. For example, although the field is paying increasing attention—both theoretical and empirical—to afterschool program quality, there remains relatively little research on how to implement quality standards and whether doing so actually

**Figure 1: Unified Picture of Afterschool Program Quality**



assessment tools that reflect the various ways that professionals “in the field” are defining program quality. Across the literature, formulations of program quality converge on common ground regarding what constitutes afterschool program quality. Our review suggests that six domains—supportive relationships, intentional programming, strong community partnerships, promotion of youth engagement, physical safety, and continuous quality improvement—represent the field’s consensus on program quality.

Having established a relatively consistent set of quality indicators allows us to engage in activities that are useful to all stakeholders in afterschool programming, including:

**Focused and intentional programming, engaging activities, and supportive staff relationships may be necessary, but they are not sufficient to ensure program success.**

improves programs (Granger et al., 2007). Granger and colleagues have emphasized the importance of conducting research on how to best implement quality improvement processes.

Additionally, from a practical standpoint, quality improvement requires working effectively with limited resources and prioritizing the dimensions of quality to be targeted. The frameworks of Metz and colleagues (2008) and of Pittman and colleagues (2008) offer suggestions for prioritizing various dimensions of quality. Pittman and colleagues emphasize safety and supportive relationships as the foundation that must be established before other dimensions of quality can be achieved. Metz and colleagues suggest

that focused, intentional activities and continuous program improvement are the essential features for achieving overall program quality.

In addition to these practical considerations, the afterschool field faces the broader theoretical and empirical task of determining how high-quality program practices affect, and are affected by, other factors known to be essential to positive youth outcomes. Research suggests that a high-quality program does not operate in isolation (Vandell, Reisner, & Peirce, 2007). Focused and intentional programming, engaging activities, and supportive staff relationships may be necessary, but they are not sufficient to ensure program success. Rather, an effective program requires successful interactions with the community (Smith & Van Egeren, 2008) and continual efforts to recruit and retain actively engaged youth who then become committed to the program (Shernoff & Vandell, 2008). As the afterschool field continues to refine its definition of program quality, quality standards ought to encourage practices that not only are associated with positive outcomes but also make the most of these moderating factors.

The field is becoming increasingly focused on the broader context in which afterschool programs operate. By utilizing both outcome and process research in a quality-driven model, the afterschool field is poised to undertake important program improvement efforts that result in broad, holistic benefits for the young people we serve.

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