Putting It All Together:

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS SERVING PRETEENS

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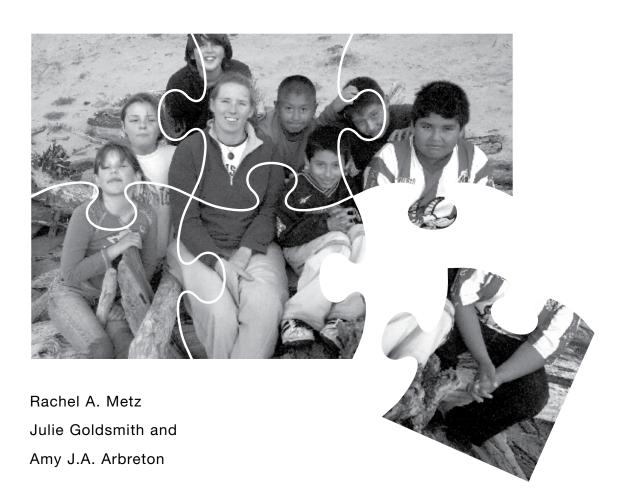Julie Goldsmith and

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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices. www.ppv.org

The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health is devoted exclusively to promoting, protecting, and sustaining the health of children. The foundation raises funds for Lucile Packard Children's Hospital and pediatric programs at the Stanford University School of Medicine; makes grants to community partners in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties in California; and supports public information and education programs to raise awareness about the state of children's health and encourage positive change in attitudes, behavior, and policy. www.lpfch.org

Photos in this report, by L.A. Cicero, were taken at the following after-school programs in California: Friends for Youth, St. Paul's United Methodist Church, Girls Club of the Mid-Peninsula, and South Coast Children's Services Wildcats Program.

Introduction

What are the most important characteristics of quality after-school programs for preteens, based on the latest research? The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health (the Foundation) set out to answer that question by commissioning Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to examine the literature and develop a set of guiding principles for after-school programs serving preteens. This report builds on a set of benchmarks that P/PV created for the Foundation in 2003.[1]

Broadly speaking, a quality after-school program will use youth development[2] strategies to provide academic, recreational and/or enrichment activities. Research has shown that quality programs can lead to positive developmental outcomes for youth, including improved academic achievement and emotional and behavioral health.[3] This report explores the specific elements of quality that have shown such results. Primarily intended as a resource for after-school providers and their funders, this report may also be useful to policymakers interested in promoting quality after-school opportunities. While programs serve youth with a variety of needs and thus have different goals and strategies, the principles included here are general and can be applied to any after-school program serving preteens.

Background

Preteen Development

Children go through intense physical, emotional and cognitive changes as they begin the transition from child to adult. They also gain independence, associated with an increase in unsupervised time and a decrease in parental involvement. During the preteen years, children transition from elementary to middle school, increase the number of activities outside of school and home, and begin to form a coherent identity.[4]

Successfully navigating the preteen years depends, in large part, on the availability of safe and engaging activities and supportive relationships with adults. This is a critical age for parental involvement and support, but parents may struggle to deal with their preteen children effectively. Many preteens have limited access to positive opportunities, such as after-school programs, and are challenged by changing relationships with the adults in their lives, resulting in too much discretionary time, more unhealthful behaviors, more life stress and more difficulty forming healthy connections

to other people. Researchers believe that in early adolescence young people begin to adopt behavior patterns that can have lifelong consequences; therefore, programs that provide positive supports and opportunities at this age could shape the development of enduring healthy behaviors.[5]

The Importance of After-School Programs

Research has shown that 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. are the peak hours for youth to commit or be victims of crimes and to smoke, drink or do drugs.[6] After-school programs can keep youth out of trouble, improve school attitudes and behavior, strengthen social networks, teach new skills and improve self-confidence by offering safety, structure, supportive adults and exposure to new and different experiences.[7] Conversely, youth without adult supervision after school are at risk for academic and behavior problems. However, the demand for after-school programs exceeds the supply, and access to quality out-of-school-time activities is especially limited in low-income communities.[8]

After-school programs geared toward preteens are particularly important because youth at this age need environments that help them develop long-term healthy behaviors. Yet preteens have the ability to "vote with their feet," so programs must be engaging enough to attract and retain them.

Guiding Principles for Quality Preteen Programming

To achieve positive developmental outcomes such as good health habits, good decision-making skills, successful educational experiences and healthy connections to families and friends, preteens need a variety of supports and opportunities, including quality programs. The research on quality programming in the after-school hours is dynamic, and there are many different lists of standards, benchmarks, exemplary practices and guiding principles, all describing important aspects of quality programming and how to achieve them.[9] Although to date there is no one set of agreed upon standards, consistent themes emerge in the research.

In recommending a set of guiding principles, P/PV focused on identifying principles for after-school programs that are most closely aligned with the literature on preteens and their social and emotional health, the area of interest of the Foundation. The guiding principles that were selected: 1) have documented associations with positive emotional and behavioral health outcomes for participants; and 2) can be implemented at a program level. In most cases, the identified elements of quality were based on studies of after-school programs that served both elementary- and middle-school children; therefore, the standards for quality are generally applicable to both age groups. However, areas that are particularly relevant for preteens are noted in the descriptions of the guiding principles.

Research suggests that after-school programs that strive to implement the following guiding principles are more likely to see positive outcomes in the emotional and behavioral health of their participants:

1 Focused and Intentional Strategy:
Programs have a clear set of goals, target specific skills and deliberately plan all aspects of the program with a youth development framework in mind.

2 Exposure (duration, intensity and breadth):
Programs are designed to:

a) provide preteens with a sufficient number of hours per week over an extended period of time to achieve program outcome goals; and

b) allow preteens to attend a variety of activities.

3 Supportive Relationships:
Programs emphasize positive adult–youth relationships regardless of the curriculum.

4 Family Engagement:
Programs strive to include families through various strategies, such as clear communication and a welcoming environment.

5 Cultural Competence:
Programs have diverse staff whose backgrounds are reflective of participants and who create practices and policies that:

a) make services available to (and inclusive of) a variety of populations; and

b) help participants understand and value a broad range of cultures.

6 Continuous Program Improvement:
Programs strengthen quality through an ongoing and integrated process of targeted staff training, coaching and monitoring, and data collection and analysis.

The first principle, a "focused and intentional strategy," is the foundation for a high-quality after-school program. Good programs will have clear goals and plan all activities to achieve those goals, while keeping a youth development framework in mind. The next four guiding principles are key ingredients that should all be designed to support the goals of the program. The final principle, "continuous program improvement," is the process that helps to ensure that all the other guiding principles are put into practice. *The six guiding principles are all interrelated, and, to be successful, programs should consider all of them in their program design, implementation and improvement.*

1 Focused and Intentional Strategy (target specific skills, well planned)

Establishing clear goals and choosing the right activities to achieve those goals is the foundation for a high-quality program. Programs with a focused and intentional strategy target specific skills and deliberately plan all aspects of the program with a youth development framework in mind. Some programs try to achieve too many goals and, as a result, do not achieve any of them. It is more effective to allocate limited resources in a specific and strategic way.[10] Successful programs generally demonstrate a high level of organization by using activity plans or a set curriculum. In a well-planned program, all aspects are designed to intentionally build relationships and create developmentally appropriate learning experiences.[11]

Implementing a focused and intentional strategy has been clearly linked to improved developmental outcomes. For example, a 2007 meta-analysis of 73 evaluations of after-school programs by Durlak and Weissberg found that when it comes to enhancing personal and social skills of youth, effective programs are "SAFE": sequenced, active, focused and explicit. It takes time and effort to develop new behaviors or skills, so a coordinated sequence of activities is required.[12] Durlak and Weissberg noted that these sequenced activities were typically laid out in lesson plans or program manuals; they also suggested that programs should explicitly identify what skills youth are expected to learn.

Other evaluations that emphasized academic outcomes also have supported a focused strategy. For example, Lauer et al (2003) found that it is important to have a well-implemented curriculum related to a specific outcome of interest (e.g., reading or math achievement) for students to demonstrate academic gains.[13] An evaluation conducted by The After-School Corporation (TASC) found that the requirement that after-school staff submit activity plans for advance review by the site coordinator was linked with student gains in both mathematics and reading/English language arts.[14] In a review of after-school programs designed to foster literacy, which the author defines as a central developmental task, Halpern (2006) found that a characteristic of effective programs is that

staff at multiple levels are able to articulate the program's goals and guiding philosophy.

To successfully implement a focused and intentional strategy:

- Programs should have a limited set of clear goals;

- All staff should be able to articulate the program goals;

- Staff should be familiar with the developmentally appropriate set of tasks that will help preteens reach the goal; and

- All activities should have a clear curriculum, written in activity plans that outline explicit connections between activities and the skills participants are meant to learn from them.

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2 Exposure (duration, intensity, breadth)

Youth benefit from participation in high-quality after-school programs; however, youth only receive these benefits when they attend programs regularly and over an extended period of time.[15] Duration, intensity and breadth are all indicators of exposure that have an impact on results. Duration refers to the length of participation over time, usually measured in number of years. Intensity is the amount of time youth attend a program during a given period (e.g., hours per day or days per week). Breadth of attendance refers to the variety of activities that youth attend within and across programs.

No prescription exists for exactly how many hours per day or how many months or years a program must be: It depends on the goal of the program. However, duration, intensity and breadth have each been found to have an impact in studies that examine the relationship between attendance and outcomes. Duration, intensity and breadth are particularly important for preteens, as they have greater discretion about whether they will attend an after-school program. As a result, programs must offer a variety of well-planned and organized activities for youth to choose from to keep them engaged.
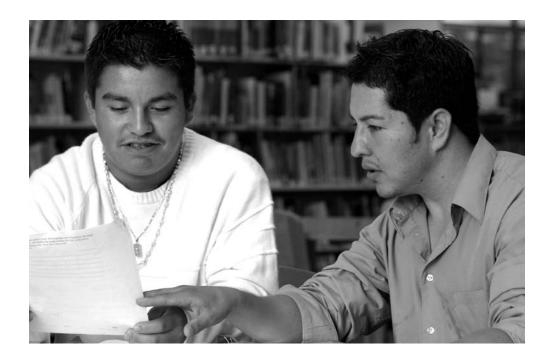
Duration[16]

Preteens need to attend programs over a period of time to establish supportive relationships, develop healthy behaviors and gain the full benefits that the program may provide.[17] Studies on mentoring have found that relationships need to develop through meetings over extended periods (a year or more) before they have a lasting impact on the lives of youth.[18] More than just attending, ideally youth should be engaged, focused and excited about the activities in which they are participating. When this is the case and youth stay engaged in programming for an extended period, the chance of demonstrating improved developmental outcomes increases.[19]

Some studies have found that attendance of any duration is related to increasingly large benefits for youth.[20] In most cases, youth who attended programs for more than a year had better outcomes than others, but youth who participated for less than a year still benefited more than those who had not participated at all. However, other research has shown a minimum threshold for duration; that is, participants must attend for a certain amount of time to benefit.[21] For example:[22]

- An evaluation of the San Francisco Beacon Initiative indicated that participation over two to three sessions (with each session lasting approxi-

mately one semester) was a critical amount of exposure for middle-school youth in order to achieve the developmental outcomes examined.[23]

- Vandell et al (2006) found that though there may be some long-term benefit to involvement in after-school programs for as little as one year, benefits appear to intensify as children and adolescents continue their involvement over a succession of years.[24]

- According to one study of 10 extended-service school programs, in a typical after-school program, participation of at least two days a week over 12 to 18 months appears to be sufficient to achieve positive behavioral outcomes and improve young people's attitudes about school.[25] In contrast, far more intensive participation may be necessary for sustained academic gains.[26]

- A TASC analysis of academic performance and school attendance found that participation in TASC activities was linked to improvements in both areas, especially for participants who attended TASC projects regularly and for more than a year.[27, 28]

- An evaluation of L.A.'s Better Educated Students for Tomorrow (BEST) initiative linked long-term involvement (at least four years) to positive achievement on standardized tests.[29]

While long-term programs have important benefits, well-implemented short-term interventions have been found to effect short-term gains. For example, a P/PV evaluation of a six-week summer career exploration program found that youth who participated were more likely to get jobs for the summer than a comparison group was;[30] however, outcomes assessed a year later showed no differences between the groups of youth. Similarly, an evaluation of the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) found significant differences in the short term (at the end of the summer program) but not at follow-up, one year later.[31] Although these examples are from employment-focused programs, they demonstrate that duration is important to achieve lasting results.

The results across these studies provide evidence that the length of time necessary to achieve an outcome is highly dependent on the goal of the program. However, researchers have begun to ask questions about whether youth must be involved in the same program over time, or if involvement in a series of quality programs throughout the course of their development can be as effective for an individual participant. That said, from a program perspective, youth are more likely to achieve intended outcomes if they remain in the program for a year or longer.

Intensity

Research generally shows that youth who attend after-school programs with high levels of intensity (multiple days per week and hours per day) have more positive academic, social and behavioral outcomes than youth who attend with low intensity.[32] The research on attendance intensity suggests that there may be improvements in outcomes at moderate or high attendance, but it is not clear whether a certain minimum threshold is needed or if more is simply better.[33, 34] While youth appear to be better off attending programs at least two or three days a week, it is still debatable whether this should be required. Mandated attendance is controversial because it risks retaining only the most committed youth while the youth most in need of services, and unable to sustain regular attendance, may not stay in the program.[35] Although there is evidence that more "dosage" will lead to greater outcomes, it is difficult to mandate a specific duration or intensity.

Breadth

Of the three elements that constitute exposure, breadth has received the least attention in the literature and is also the most complex. While research suggests that attending multiple activities leads to better outcomes, some youth achieve this goal by attending several single-focus programs during

the week, while others participate in one program that includes a combination of activities. Fiester et al (2005) found that breadth may be necessary to achieve intensity and duration—in other words, a variety of activities may be necessary to retain participants' interest and attendance. A program with variety might have a combination of: 1) recreational activities, such as basketball, soccer or dance; 2) enrichment activities, like painting, photography, drama or music; and 3) academic activities, such as homework help, creative writing or math.

Beckett et al (2001) reviewed major studies and reports on after-school care and found that "providing a sufficient variety of activities" is one of the three strongest predictors of later outcomes (compared with 17 others that show moderate or limited support). Joy Dryfoos (1998) also describes diverse services as a common factor in programs that attract and affect young people. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation Committee on Afterschool Research and Practice (2005) found that the most successful out-of-school-time programs for children offer breadth of programming by combining academic enrichment with cultural and recreational activities to guide learning and engage young people. According to other studies of youth development agencies, youth benefit most from participation when they engage in a variety of activities.[36] Studies have found that program variety and multicomponent strategies are important for recruiting, engaging and retaining youth, but it also is critical that the components are well implemented.[37]

The Vandell et al (2005) study reported that among elementary- and middle-school students who spend time in structured after-school activities, few are devoted exclusively or even primarily to a single program. Instead, they construct an after-school schedule that involves sets of experiences. Further, the Vandell et al (2006) study found that for middle-school students there is a slight advantage in long-term outcomes (work habits and behavior) when program attendance is combined with participation in other activities.[38]

The research has shown that there are advantages for youth who are involved in a variety of services and that in some cases the variety itself is what draws and retains them. Middle-school youth can receive that

variety from multiple sources. As Vandell et al (2006) noted, those who design and manage programs should respond to a youth's desire to attend multiple programs by allowing for irregular attendance and creating close collaborations with other programs within the youth's school or community.

Providing Adequate Exposure

Research tells us that frequent and ongoing attendance in after-school programs is important to achieve desired outcomes. While a program cannot be held solely responsible for youth attendance (youth may move, have other scheduled activities or be developmentally ready to move to another type of program), programs can ensure that they are designed to allow for the maximum level of exposure.

Comprehensive programs should be offered for at least three days a week during the school year and provide a variety of interesting and developmentally appropriate activities. In this way, they are more likely to engage a broader range of youth over a longer period of time.

Noncomprehensive programs also are valuable, as youth may be able to combine attendance at multiple programs (either sequentially or simultaneously) to create a set of experiences that fulfill their needs; however, duration and intensity remain important in this scenario as well. Programs should still be offered for an extended period of time and work collaboratively with other programs in the community so that youth can put together a comprehensive set of experiences that can be sustained over time.

In addition, all programs should:

- Track attendance and respond when a student has missed the program;

- Analyze why youth leave and see if there are potential program improvements that would keep them involved; and

- Have an attendance policy that staff and parents are aware of and that is enforced by staff.

3 Supportive Relationships

Establishing supportive relationships between youth and adults may be the most critical component of an after-school program. Supportive relationships include qualities of emotional support (e.g., being caring and responsive) and instrumental support (e.g., providing guidance that is useful to young people).[39] The relationships youth form with both adults and peers provide the emotional support and guidance that give young people the capacity to feel connected to others, navigate day-to-day life and engage in productive activities.[40]

Research has shown that youth who have at least one highly supportive relationship with an adult will do better than youth who lack this crucial support.[41] As noted above, studies on mentoring have found that relationships need to develop over extended periods of time (a year or more) before they have a lasting impact.[42] And, in fact, relationships that end prematurely can have a deleterious effect on youth.[43] While having more than one supportive relationship may hold some additional benefits, the greatest difference in later success for youth is having at least one such relationship. Establishing or maintaining supportive relationships is particularly important for preteens, who are at a stage when they are moving toward greater independence and autonomy in relation to their families.

There is strong evidence for the positive role supportive relationships can play in the lives of youth.[44] Adult relationships were found to help with resilience and youth development outcomes (e.g., learning to be productive, to connect with others) in young adulthood.[45] Joy Dryfoos' research (1998) suggests that what young people need on a daily basis are "safe places, challenging experiences and caring people."

Not only are supportive relationships themselves correlated with better outcomes for youth, their existence in programs is key to attracting and retaining youth, thus influencing exposure, which, as discussed above, is also vital to better outcomes. Arbreton et al (2005) reviewed more than 20 evaluations of Boys & Girls Clubs of America and found that caring relationships between youth

and staff were identified by youth, parents, Club staff and partner-agency staff as the reason why youth came and stayed in the program. Walker and Arbreton (2004) found that adult support was the most significant predictor of continued participation over time for middle-school youth in the San Francisco Beacon after-school program. An evaluation of the Philadelphia Beacon Centers also found that among middle- and high-school youth, positive adult support increased their desire to attend an activity. Among middle-school youth (but not elementary- or high-school youth), adult support was a particularly important factor in the reported level of enjoyment in after-school activities.[46]

Staff turnover is a critical threat to sustaining supportive relationships. In the youth development field, program operators struggle with retaining staff at every level. Staff turnover has been identified as problematic in studies of mentoring, after-

school programs and youth development agencies.[47] The problems associated with staff turnover include maintaining continuity and coherence of program goals,[48] and building and sustaining relationships with youth and collaborating agencies.[49] This issue can be particularly problematic for programs that strive to establish a mentor-type relationship between staff and youth: If staff are filling this role, staff retention becomes even more vital. To create long-term supportive relationships, organizations should focus on retaining staff (and volunteers, if used) or have strategies in place to ameliorate what happens when staff (or volunteers) leave.

Building Supportive Relationships

Several strategies can facilitate the development of long-term supportive relationships in programs, including:

- Maintaining a low child-to-staff ratio;

- Emphasizing positive adult–youth relationships regardless of the curriculum; and

- Allowing time for working one-on-one with youth.[50, 51]

A review of Boys & Girls Clubs of America programs identified strategies to hire and retain high-quality staff, which is critical for developing supportive relationships:

- Recruit staff skilled for specific programs;

- Promote personnel from within the agency;

- Ensure the buy-in of staff to any new programming; and

- Provide sufficient staff training.[52]

In addition, programs should:

- Teach youth the skills to build healthy relationships, including active listening, conflict resolution and cooperation;

- Ensure that staff listen to youth and respond to them in a warm manner; and

- Provide a diverse staff with whom youth can identify in terms of gender, race, culture, sexual orientation and language.

4 Family Engagement

Years of research have shown that family involvement benefits children's learning.[53] More recent research has indicated that family engagement in after-school programs is also important. However, the meaning of family engagement can range from providing program information to parents or speaking with parents during drop-off or pickup to involving parents in program planning, providing support services to families or requiring parents to participate in activities. The strategies for promoting family engagement in after-school programs can be divided into three main categories: 1) informing families about the program and the participant's progress; 2) providing opportunities for (or in some instances requiring) families to volunteer or participate in the program, including opportunities for parent leadership; and 3) offering support services for families, such as counseling or parent education classes. In addition to engaging families in the after-school hours, some after-school programs have a goal of getting families more involved in what is happening during the school day.

To date there has not been a comprehensive and systematic study regarding effective practices that promote family participation in after-school programs.[54] Although further research is needed to determine the most critical components of family engagement,[55] it is included here as a guiding principle because many researchers and program providers believe it is a key ingredient for any successful youth-serving program. Based on a review of 10 studies, Hollister (2003) concluded that parent involvement and training have sometimes been effective components for achieving out-of-school program outcomes. Most after-school leaders also believe that engaging families can add value to their programming.[56] In particular, relationships with families are critical for the preteen age-group, as they are interested in independence but still reliant on their families. According to school counselors in San Mateo County, family-related problems and stress and anxiety are the most pressing emotional and behavioral health issues among preteens— another indication that engaging families is

important at this stage.[57] Engaging families may be particularly important for programs serving cultures that place a high premium on family relationships and obligations.

The limited research linking family engagement to outcomes for after-school programs suggests that, at a minimum, the first type of involvement—clear communication and a welcoming environment— is important.[58] The Massachusetts After-School Research Study (MARS, 2005) found that relations with adults—one of the key youth outcomes— was positively associated with the quality of family relations observed at pickup time. Staff from the Extended-Service Schools Initiative (ESS) found that maintaining contact with parents helps promote student engagement, positive behavior and stronger academic performance.[59] The ESS programs have implemented different strategies to engage parents. Some sites sent home newsletters, called parents with updates and concerns or chatted with parents who came to pick up their children. A few programs regularly invited parents to the school for coffee and snacks, and some held family celebrations or parties once or twice a year.[60]

Promoting Family Engagement

While it is still unclear which components of family engagement are most important and effective, the following strategies are grounded in the limited data that exist:

• Programs should create a welcoming atmosphere for family members by hiring staff who are skilled in working with both youth and families, who speak the language spoken by participants' families and who are experienced in (or are receiving training about) the cultures of the participating families.

• Programs should take steps to cultivate diversity in their staff that reflects the population served by the program.

• Families should receive regular communication in their own language through multiple methods—including in-person, flyers, email, telephone—about the program and their child's needs and progress.

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5 Cultural Competence[61]

Cultural competence is highlighted here as a separate guiding principle to emphasize its importance; however, it must be embedded in all aspects of an agency's operations for it to have maximum impact. Preadolescence is a time when youth struggle to develop a positive sense of identity, and although the research has not made a direct link, some evidence indicates that culturally competent programs can help promote this goal.[62]

The youth-services field has adopted a broad definition of cultural competence as "an ongoing process and practice that builds the capacity of organizations and individuals to understand, accept, value and honor the unique contributions of all people, including but not limited to people's: ability, age, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, geographic region, health, language, mental health, race, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and spirituality."[63] For organizations, cultural competence means creating practices and policies that will make services more accessible to diverse populations and that provide for appropriate and effective services in cross-cultural situations.[64]

Programs can help build participants' cultural competence by helping preteens understand and value their own and other cultures, languages and communities. The preteen years are instrumental in developing personal identity, including self-concept (the set of beliefs one has about oneself) and self-esteem (how one feels about one's self-concept).[65] Because youth of color are operating in at least two distinct cultures (the dominant white culture and the culture of their own racial or ethnic group), they confront additional challenges to developing a personal identity.[66] Research has shown that developing a clear and positive identity has a role in healthy psychological functioning and is closely linked with the development of ethnic identity;[67] having a strong ethnic identity helps youth of color develop self-esteem.[68] And, youth who are encouraged to appreciate their own ethnic identities are also more likely to have positive attitudes toward individuals in other groups.[69]

In addition, a program that commits itself to cultural competence can create a safer place, both physically and psychologically, for all youth. This is especially relevant for preteens, because during the school day they may encounter more cliques and be exposed to more frequent social rejection than in elementary school. An after-school program that is dedicated to ensuring inclusion may help to alleviate the emotional stress that preteens encounter during the school day.

An emphasis on cultural competence helps draw both youth and their families to the program. The Girl Scouts have used culturally appropriate family-centered outreach initiatives to recruit Latino and Asian participants because they recognize that without honoring the important role of families in many traditions and cultures, Girl Scouts would be unsuccessful in recruiting girls from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.[70]

Cultural Competence

A program dedicated to cultural competence will:

- Cultivate a diverse staff that youth can identify with in terms of race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, language and special needs;

- Collect data on the demographics of the youth served and the youth in the community to determine whether any groups need further outreach, appropriate languages for program materials and what kind of cultural staff training is needed;

- Be physically accessible and culturally and linguistically inclusive;

- Lead activities that encourage youth to affirm their cultural and ethnic heritage; and

- Provide youth with opportunities to interact with and learn from youth with different cultural identities.

Note: Because cultural competence should be incorporated into everything an agency does, it has been included in text boxes that appear with various guiding principles throughout this report.

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6 Continuous Program Improvement (targeted staff training, monitoring and coaching, data collection and analysis)

"Continuous program improvement" is the glue that holds all of the other guiding principles together. Programs that are continually striving to strengthen quality need to engage in three key practices: 1) continuous and targeted staff training; 2) monitoring and coaching to support implementation on the ground; and 3) data collection and analysis of program strengths and weaknesses. Doing these three things in an ongoing cycle will help staff stay focused on an intentional strategy, keep youth in the program, develop supportive relationships, engage families and ensure access, inclusion and equity. Having a clear, consistent and continuous program improvement process helps keep a program and its staff focused on its goals, and youth and families engaged.

Staff Training

The quality of adult leadership is an important contributor to program effectiveness. Therefore, investments in careful recruitment, orientation, training and ongoing support for program staff are key elements for a quality program.[71] Conducting effective and ongoing staff training has been linked to high-quality program implementation and an increased likelihood that a program will achieve its desired outcomes.[72] In work by P/PV and others on mentoring, staff training has been found to be a contributing factor to strong program infrastructure, which in turn is related to positive outcomes for youth.[73] Staff training can also alleviate some of the problems associated with staff retention in two ways: 1) continual training about the program's goals will help new staff implement quality programming more quickly; and 2) providing support will keep staff engaged, thus reducing turnover.

Training topics should include, at a minimum, program goals, youth development, behavior management and cultural competency.
- Walker and Arbreton (2004), in their evaluation of the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, found evidence that the site with the greatest proportion of youth who derived developmental benefits from programming had staff with training in the

content area of interpersonal relationships and an executive director and staff who had experience and training in youth development.

- An evaluation of the Philadelphia Beacon Centers found that providing after-school instructors with guidance on how to effectively manage behavior was essential to achieving high-quality after-school programming. The evaluation found that effective staff training included guidance on how to manage behavior effectively: reasonable ground rules, ongoing positive reinforcement, consistency and fairness in reinforcing expectations and "holding the line."[74]

- The MARS report (2005) found that staff made a difference in program quality, and staff who had a strong educational background and appropriate training also were key to program quality.

In addition to the benefits of the more general trainings described above, training must include targeted components related to the intentional strategies and focus of the individual program. For example, an evaluation of the James Irvine Foundation's CORAL after-school initiative, which incorporated literacy activities into its programs, found that greater improvement in program quality occurred when training specific to the literacy strategies was provided.[75] Improved quality of the literacy programming, in turn, was related to larger reading gains for participants.

Training must be an ongoing process that is built into an organization's culture. While many organizations offer introductory training to new staff or "refresher training" at the beginning of the pro-

gram, providing training throughout the program cycle allows staff to build upon their prior knowledge and develop further competencies. Thus, while formal staff training can occur at the beginning of a program, it is important to have both formal and informal training integrated throughout its duration. In a review of after-school programs fostering literacy, Halpern (2006) found that shared characteristics of successful programs included: making an effort to give new staff a shared understanding of the work; having a structured time for staff to meet, plan and discuss their daily work together; and using that time for program directors to reiterate core principles and practices.

Monitoring and Coaching

Training is not effective unless there is some form of monitoring in place to gauge if it is being implemented effectively. Monitoring and coaching fill a gap that sometimes exists between training and program improvement. Monitoring includes conducting program observations of staff "in action" and documenting the findings in a way that allows the information to be shared quickly with staff for "real time" program improvement. Effective program monitoring can help identify strengths and weaknesses of individual staff members as well as program implementation in a broader sense. Linking coaching to program observations can provide staff with one-on-one assistance with weaknesses that will then strengthen the program as a whole.[76]

Coaching can be achieved through a formal mentorship or more informally. Novice staff members may be invited to observe high-quality staff in action and work collaboratively with their more senior

colleagues to design activities.[77] At the same time, the information from ongoing monitoring and coaching will provide information about broader system issues that are most appropriately addressed through general staff training. The information gleaned from observing a program repeatedly will also yield common themes, and this information is essential for improvement of the program as a whole. Program monitoring is a crucial step to ensure the content of staff training is being well implemented in the program; it also provides information about what future staff trainings should focus on, thereby supporting a program's ongoing training agenda. Beyond informing staff training, the act of observing programs can increase the quality of the activities.[78]

Data Collection and Analysis

Evaluations that examine the quality of program implementation often find that outcomes are poorer in programs that do not have any way of internally assessing their progress or noting whether they are reaching implementation benchmarks.[79] Not all programs need to undergo extensive external evaluation; ongoing internal assessment of benchmarks and program goals will improve the likelihood that the program will have an effect on participants. Often the act of evaluation, or documenting observed activities, is the most important step.[80]

Program directors and staff must review data from program observations, attendance records, surveys or other sources for trends in program strengths and weaknesses. When used well, data collection can increase the effectiveness of direct-service programs. It is important to focus on data (program observations, attendance records, etc.) that matter to the organization and can help staff at all levels develop an understanding of the importance of data collection.[81] After collecting the data, programs must take the next steps of analyzing it and using it to make program improvements, such as changes in training, outreach efforts or activities.

As a second phase of data collection and analysis, programs can begin to collect and analyze outcome measures that can help staff think about the program in terms of the benefits of participation to the clients instead of program activities. This helps an agency understand which practices are more

effective than others. It is most appropriate to do so after the program has been in operation long enough to expect significant outcomes to occur.[82] If outcome measures are collected, it is best to collect a small number that are most relevant to the desired goals of the program.

Ongoing Program Improvement

A program that seeks continuous improvement not only will provide staff training, monitor and coach staff, or collect and analyze data but also will make sure that what is learned from each of these informs how the other two are conducted.

A staff training schedule must be put in place, including an initial training followed by targeted workshops. Staff training should:

- Be based on program goals, lessons learned through coaching and monitoring, and data analysis;

- Include learning forums that will deepen staff understanding about the race, ethnicity or culture of the youth served;

- Be both formal and informal; and

- Include times for staff to bring up dilemmas or concerns related to cultural dynamics.

Program activities should be observed with the goal of providing "real-time" feedback to staff, and coaching should be designed to strengthen activity implementation. Program strengths and weaknesses should be identified and inform one-on-one coaching as well as group staff trainings.

Agencies should collect program implementation and outcome measurement data. The data should:

- Relate specifically to the goals of the program;

- Be analyzed to see the strengths and weaknesses of the program;

- Inform the staff training; and

- Inform program managers about potential areas of improvement.

Conclusion

While the recipe for a high-quality after-school program is not precise, the six guiding principles highlighted in this report will surely help build quality after-school programs for preteens.[83] The research in the after-school field is still evolving; however, these guiding principles represent some common themes that have emerged. The relative importance of each principle may be debated and the exact thresholds for implementation are still being determined (and in some cases may not exist). Nevertheless, a program that implements these principles will likely achieve positive outcomes for preteens.

As noted, this report emphasizes strategies for implementation that have been linked to outcomes in research-based studies of after-school programs. In many cases, though, research lags behind practice. For example, most practitioners agree that cultural competence and family engagement in after-school programs benefit youth, yet the research to date tying these two principles directly to youth's results has been limited. Future studies will shed light on specific thresholds and best practices; meanwhile, many service providers already have moved beyond the existing research. It will be important to continue to update and refine these guiding principles over time as more research is done.

Putting It All Together: Summary of Guiding Principles

Guiding Principles	Definition	Why It Is Important	Key Indicators
Focused and Intentional Strategy	Programs have a clear set of goals, target specific skills and deliberately plan all aspects of the program with a youth development framework in mind.	This is the foundation for a quality after-school program. Successful implementation of all of the other strategies rests on a well designed and implemented program.	• Programs should have a limited set of goals. • All staff should be able to articulate the program goals. • Staff should be familiar with the developmentally appropriate set of tasks that will help preteens reach the goal. • Programs should have a clear curriculum with activity plans that outline explicit connections between activities and the skills to be learned from them.
Exposure *(intensity, duration and breadth)*	Programs are designed to: a) provide preteens with a sufficient number of hours per week over an extended period of time to achieve program outcome goals; and b) allow preteens to attend a variety of activities.	It takes time to establish supportive relationships and develop healthy behaviors. A variety of activities leads to better outcomes and may also help attract and retain youth in programs.	• Provide long-term programming. • Track attendance and respond when a student has missed the program. • Analyze why youth leave and see if there are potential program improvements that would keep youth involved. • Have an attendance policy that staff and parents are aware of and that is enforced by staff.
Supportive Relationships	Programs emphasize positive adult-youth relationships regardless of the curriculum.	This may be the most critical component of an after-school program. Supportive relationships—youth who have at least one do better than youth with none—provide emotional support and guidance that enables them to feel connected to others, navigate day-to-day life and engage in productive activities.	• Ensure a low staff-to-child ratio. • The program schedule provides young people with opportunities for positive, informal social interactions with adults and peers. • Allow for one-on-one time with youth. • Teach youth the skills to build healthy relationships, including active listening, conflict resolution and cooperation.
Family Engagement	Programs strive to include families through various strategies, such as clear communication and a welcoming environment.	Family engagement may promote student involvement and positive behavior and also may help draw youth from cultures that place a premium on family relationships.	• Have regular communication with families, in their own language whenever possible, by email, telephone, flyers and in person. • Have staff skilled in working with youth and families and trained in the cultures of participating families.
Cultural Competence	Programs have diverse staff whose backgrounds are reflective of participants' backgrounds and who create practices and policies that: a) make services available to (and inclusive of) a variety of populations; and b) help participants understand and value a broad range of cultures.	A culturally competent organization will draw and retain youth from diverse backgrounds. Developing a strong cultural identity can help youth build self-esteem.	• Provide a diverse staff that youth can identify with in terms of race, gender, culture, sexual orientation and language. • Be physically accessible and culturally and linguistically inclusive. • Provide activities that encourage youth to affirm their cultural and ethnic heritage. • Provide youth with opportunities to interact and learn from others with different cultural identities. • Collect data on demographics and reach out to underserved youth.
Continuous Program Improvement	Programs strengthen quality through an ongoing and integrated process of targeted staff training, coaching and monitoring, and data collection and analysis.	Continuous program improvement is the glue that holds everything else together. Training is important to ensure the quality of the adult leadership and the program; coaching and monitoring make training effective; and data collection and analysis help programs know what's working and target what needs to be improved.	• Staff training is ongoing and based on program goals, lessons learned through coaching and monitoring, and data analysis. • Program activities are regularly observed to monitor program quality and to ensure that training is effectively implemented. • Data on youth outcomes are collected regularly and used to guide program improvements. • Data should be analyzed to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the program on an ongoing basis.

Endnotes

1 In 2003, P/PV conducted an evaluation of the Foundation's preteen-focused grantmaking program, which resulted in a set of benchmarks for successful programs. The report, "Promoting Emotional and Behavioral Health in Preteens: Benchmarks of Success and Challenges Among Programs in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties," is available at www.lpfch.org/grantmaking/ppvevalfull.pdf or www.ppv.org.

2 Youth development is the ongoing process in which young people are engaged in building the skills, attitudes, knowledge and experience that prepare them for life. It is an approach that builds on the strengths of young people rather than concentrating solely on the prevention or treatment of problems.

3 Behavioral health includes the choices preteens make about how they spend their time and the environmental factors that contribute to their behaviors. Emotional health includes mental health issues, coping skills, identity, ability to relate to others, social support and positive peer relationships.

4 Cooper et al, 2005; Halpern, 2005.

5 Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 2000; Eccles et al, 1993a and 1993b; Eccles and Midgley, 1989; Simmons et al, 1987; Walker and Arbreton, 2001; Eccles and Gootman, 2002.

6 See www.afterschoolalliance.org.

7 Grossman et al, 2002; Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, 2005.

8 Miller, 2003; Pedersen and Seidman, 2005; Quinn, 1999.

9 The Harvard Family Research Project put together a list of varied standards derived from different assessment tools. See http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/after-school/conference/summit-2005-standards.pdf

10 Raley, Grossman, Walker, 2005.

11 Walker, 2006; Walker et al, 2004.

12 Durlak and Weissberg, 2007.

13 Lauer et al, 2003.

14 Reisner et al, 2004.

15 Fiester, Simpkins, Bouffard, 2005.

16 In the 2003 report for the Foundation (*Promoting Emotional and Behavioral Health in Preteens*), as noted in endnote 1, P/PV used a threshold of seven months, based on programs' responses to an organizational survey asking how long participants were expected to participate. This was a threshold developed out of P/PV's evaluation of the 44 grantees with disparate program structures (e.g., mentoring, parent education, after-school, in school). The threshold was developed for evaluation purposes only, based on an assumption that those programs included in the evaluation who provided programming for a minimum of seven months were more likely to have provided programming for one school year or longer and that this would be associated with a greater likelihood of promoting emotional and behavioral health outcomes than programs of shorter duration.

17 Kane, 2004; Walker and Arbreton, 2004; Lauer et al, 2003; Miller, 2003; Hangley and McClanahan, 2002; Arbreton and McClanahan, 2002; Eisen et al, 2000.

18 Grossman and Rhodes, 2002.

19 Walker et al, 2005.

20 Studies reviewed by Simpkins, Little and Weiss and referred to in Fiester et al, 2005.

21 Fiester et al, 2005.

22 The examples are from programs that looked at youth development outcomes, including emotional, behavioral and academic outcomes.

23 Walker and Arbreton, 2004

24 Vandell et al 2006 looked at intermediate and long-term outcomes such as improved grades, work habits, school attendance, social skills and interpersonal behavior, reduced misconduct and risky behavior, and enhanced self-efficacy.

25 Grossman et al, 2002.

26 Raley, Grossman, Walker, 2005.

27 Reisner et al, 2004.

28 The TASC evaluation also showed that participants made more positive one-year gains in TASC projects that offered high intensity in activities focusing on fitness, sports and recreation. Evaluators speculate that these activities influenced participants both by drawing them into the after-school program and promoting high attendance, and also by providing the physical exercise needed for subsequent mental acuity.

29 Huang et al, 2000.

30 McClanahan, Sipe, Smith, 2004.

31 Walker and Vilella-Valez, 1992.

32 Fiester et al, 2005.

33 Harvard Family Research Project, 2004.

34 The studies differ greatly in how they define the threshold for low, moderate and high attendance.

35 Raley, Grossman, Walker, 2005.

36 Herrera and Arbreton, 2003; Walker and Arbreton, 2004; Gambone and Arbreton, 1997; Eisen et al, 2000.

37 Walker and Arbreton, 2004; Eisen et al, 2000; Hangley and McClanahan, 2002.

38 Vandell et al 2005 compared outcomes for youth participating in a "promising after-school program" and other activities to youth involved only in a "promising after-school program" and to youth being supervised at home.

39 Eccles and Gootman, 2002.

40 Gambone, Klem, Connell, 2002.

41 Ibid.

42 Grossman and Rhodes, 2002.

43 Grossman and Johnson, 1999.

44 Vandell et al, 2005; Miller, 2003; DuBois et al, 2002; Tierney and Grossman, 1995.

45 Gambone, Klem, Connell, 2002.

46 Grossman, Campbell, Raley, 2007.

47 Herrera and Arbreton, 2003; Grossman et al, 2002; Arbreton and McClanahan, 2002; Gambone and Arbreton, 1997.

48 Walker and Arbreton, 2001.

49 Arbreton and McClanahan, 2002.

50 Research (MARS and Beacons) has shown clear links between low ratios and high-quality programs. One hypothesis is that the low child-to-staff ratios are related to developing supportive relationships.

51 Arbreton, Sheldon, Herrera, 2005.

52 Weiss, Caspe, Lopez, 2006.

53 Strickland, 2005.

54 Family here includes any caretaker of the youth.

55 Harris and Wimer, 2004.

56 Katz, 2005.

57 The other types of family engagement may also be beneficial, but studies documenting specific practices to outcomes in after-school programs were not found.

58 Grossman et al, 2002.

59 Ibid.

60 The Exemplary Practices developed by the Center for Collaborative Solutions and the Community Network for Youth Development for the California Department of Education refer to cultural competence as diversity, access, inclusion and equity.

61 Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002.

62 Ibid.

63 Olsen, Bhattacharya, Scharf, 2006.

64 Gentry and Campbell, 2002.

65 Camino, 1992.

66 Catalano et al, 1998.

67 Gentry and Campbell, 2002.

68 Camino, 1992.

69 Family Strengthening-Policy Center Policy Brief, 2005.

70 Quinn, 2005.

71 US Department of Education, 2003; Miller, 2003.

72 Herrera, 2004.

73 Grossman, Campbell, Raley, 2007.

74 Sheldon and Hopkins, 2008.

75 Sheldon and Hopkins, 2008.

76 Raley, Grossman, Walker, 2005.

77 Sheldon and Hopkins, 2008.

78 Fashola, 1998.

79 Sheldon and Hopkins, 2008.

80 Miles, 2006.

81 For a more detailed discussion about the appropriate time for a program to embark on outcome analysis, see "Philanthropy and Outcomes: Dilemmas in the Quest for Accountability" at http//www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/139_publication.pdf.

82 The guiding principles are applicable to both elementary- and middle-school children.

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