# Exploring Quality in After School Programs for Middle School-Age Youth

## *Quality Matters for Participation in After School Programs*

Regular attendance in high-quality programs is associated with academic performance, task persistence, improved work habits and study skills, and better social skills.[1] However, many programs struggle with understanding and improving the quality of their programs, especially for middle school youth, ages 10–14. Only 6.5 million K–12 children (11%) participate in after school programs, but polling data indicates that an additional 15.3 million would participate if a *quality* program were available in their community.[2] With quality a potential barrier to participation in programs and understanding the powerful influence that quality has on determining good outcomes for youth who do participate, the time is ripe to better understand the challenges of developing and implementing quality after school programs, especially for middle school age youth—too "old" to be told what to do after school, and too "young" to be home alone.

This brief describes some of the key issues and challenges in providing quality programs for middle school-age youth and discusses how program quality standards can be used to improve them.[3]

## *Seven Insights for Middle School After School Programs*

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

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

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

4. **Staff credibility and interactions are essential in recruiting and retaining middle school students in after school programs.**
   By middle school, youth play a more active role in choosing the activities and people that will be part of their lives. After school programs need to pay particular attention to hiring, training, orienting, supporting, and evaluating staff based on their relationships with youth, not just on their administrative or supervisory capacity. Popular school staff can "cross over" to after school to

lend programs credibility and school connections. Staff in middle school after school programs should model positive adult behavior and interactions both with each other and with youth.

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

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

7. **Family connections are even more important in middle school even though they are more difficult to cultivate.**
   Linking to families is more challenging for middle school students than for elementary school students because both family members and youth often feel that youth are ready to be autonomous. After school programs can overcome this challenge by reaching out to extended family members of middle schoolers, such as cousins, siblings, or grandparents. Programs also need to provide learning opportunities for both youth and families to strengthen their sometimes tenuous relationships. Staff need to think more creatively about outreach to families beyond orientations; any gathering of family members can be an opportunity to connect with them. After school staff who have strong relationships with family members and school staff can bridge the often compartmentalized life of middle school students.

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

- **Consider the local context of the program.**
  A variety of settings can be represented by well-crafted quality assessment standards. Many diverse after school contexts, such as rural or urban settings, school- or community-based programs, fee-based or free admission, and academic or enrichment focus, can be targeted at the indicator level in quality assessment tools. Policymakers, evaluators, and researchers creating new tools and standards for program quality will need to consider both developmental differences in how their instruments will be implemented for middle school programs as well as how local context can be incorporated in their usage.

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

- **Include middle school students in the discussion.**
  Middle school youth can offer valuable guidance in developing quality instruments for after school programs. Many quality standards recognize the importance of giving youth voice in the

development and running of the after school program. As after school programs serving middle schoolers begin to demand more developmentally appropriate quality assessment standards, the opportunity grows ripe for the inclusion of middle school students in this discussion. Middle school students can reveal their own priorities and values when choosing a quality after school program and deciding if they will remain committed to it. Some initiatives have begun to focus on qualitative research regarding how middle school students initiate and sustain involvement in after school programs. Engaging middle school youth in continuous discussions about after school program quality assessment is essential.

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

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

## *Authors & Acknowledgements*

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## *Related Resources*

On December 9, 2005, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF), Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), and the National Institute for Out-of-School Time (NIOST) cohosted a working summit with NMEF regional grantees to explore current quality standards and move the dialogue forward concerning the unique programming needs of middle-school students. The following documents prepared for and resulting from the summit will soon be available to the public:

### *Summit Overview*

- Provides orientation to quality assessment and need for middle school focus
- Outlines preconference survey results on quality assessment usage in the after school field
- Summarizes emerging consensus on quality assessment for after school programs serving middle school youth based on summit proceedings
- Documents suggested changes to standards in the categories of positive youth development; human relationships; family, school, and community linkages; staffing; and programming, activities, and opportunities
- Offers future directions for research, policy, and practice

### *After School Program Quality Assessment Breakdown*

- Categorizes 43+ quality assessment tools intended for usage by programs based on a number of elements, including age range, categories of standards, context, and format
- Includes Web links for quality assessment tools available online

***After School Program Quality Assessment Categories of Standards***

- Catalogs higher order categories common to quality assessment documents

***After School Program Quality Assessment Standards Inventories***

- Inventories of standards common in 15 quality assessment categories

These and other related resources will be posted on the HFRP web site in the coming months. To be notified of them, as well as other out-of-school time resources, please sign up for our free e-alerts at http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/subscribe.html.

## *About Harvard Family Research Project*

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education delivers research evidence and information to a national audience of researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Through the dissemination of research, HFRP has helped shape effective educational policies and practices for disadvantaged children and youth for over 20 years.

For more information about HFRP's out-of-school time learning and development initiative, please contact:

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

[2] Afterschool Alliance. (2004). America after 3 PM: A household survey on afterschool in America. Washington, DC: Author. Available athttp://www.afterschoolalliance.org/press_archives/america_3pm/Executive_Summary.pdf

[3] Information for this brief was compiled as a result of a Summit held at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on December 9, 2005, cohosted by HFRP and the National Institute for Out-of-School Time, through a grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. For a complete Summit report, visit http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/conference/