



A SERIES OF FOCUS BRIEFS

## The State of Afterschool Quality



# Why Afterschool Quality Matters



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*School-age children, especially those between the ages of four and twelve, want engaging places to spend their time out-of-school. Parents want to know their children are learning and safe afterschool. With over 70% of parents in the workforce, afterschool is not a luxury, but a necessity.*

## Who is NAA and why do we care about quality?

The National AfterSchool Association (NAA) works to ensure that families who want and need expanded learning opportunities and care during out-of-school hours are able to access high quality programs. NAA is the membership organization for professionals who work with children and youth in school and community-based settings to provide a wide variety of learning experiences during the school year and the summer. The organization works actively to disseminate the best-practice thinking of the afterschool and youth development profession in a variety of modalities, including its website, annual conference, professional development opportunities and online and print resources. NAA has developed the nationally regarded *Standards for Quality School-Age Care* and the *Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals*. The Quality Standards, adopted in 1998 and the Competencies, adopted in 2011, are used in many states and communities and have served as a starting point for the development of community specific standards in others.

Both documents were an important step in improving the overall quality of afterschool, school-age care, expanded learning and summer programs. However, the time has come to gain a better understanding of the full landscape of quality across program types. NAA undertook an initial study of the status of quality improvement efforts nationwide in the summer of 2014. This survey informed a series of white papers that discuss the elements of an afterschool quality improvement system, how these systems work across the country and make recommendations regarding next steps.

## Who uses and benefits from afterschool?

Over 10 million children (18 percent of all school-age children) across the United States participate in some sort of afterschool program—up from 8.4 million in 2009. Nineteen million (41 percent) more children would enroll in an afterschool program if one were available to them—up from 18.5 million in 2009<sup>1</sup>. With well over two-thirds of parents with children under 18 participating in the workforce, there is a considerable need for safe and engaging places for children to spend their out-of-school time.

1. America After 3PM. Afterschool Alliance, 2014.



Quality afterschool benefits everyone in a community:

***Working parents are assured their children are safe afterschool and miss less work so employers benefit from a more productive workforce with less absenteeism.***

***Communities are safer and have lower youth crime rates when children are engaged in quality afterschool programs.***

***Children who participate regularly in quality afterschool programs have better grades and attendance in school than their peers who do not.***

Afterschool programs further benefit children and families by providing a supportive and often lasting relationship with caring adults. For many children and families, the relationship with an afterschool program or provider endures from preschool through elementary to middle school and beyond. An afterschool program leader is often able to bridge school and community relationships to create a patchwork of care and enrichment options to support a child's evolving interests and abilities over time.

## What is an afterschool program? What isn't an afterschool program?

Afterschool is a blanket term that refers to an organized program, led by an adult or team of adults, that meets on a regular basis. Typically these programs meet weekdays in the hours immediately after the school day ends. While some definitions of afterschool include extracurricular activities that are school-sponsored, they often exclude school or community sports teams and drop-in programs.

Many afterschool stakeholders point to a meta-analysis conducted by Joseph Durlak and Roger Weissburg in 2010 where the authors coined the acronym SAFE to distinguish afterschool programs associated with positive youth outcomes from a broader universe of programs that happen in the hours between 3 pm and 6 pm.<sup>2</sup> A SAFE program

uses a sequenced step-by-step training approach (S), emphasized active forms of learning by having youth practice new skills (A), focused specific time and attention on skill development (F) and were explicit in defining the skills they were attempting to promote (E).

## Who provides and who funds afterschool?

Many families participate in tuition- or fee-based afterschool programs. Parents pay tuition and/or registration fees, transportation or special activity fees to enroll their children in care and enrichment activities. In some cases these fees cover the entire cost of the program while in others it augments public funding or other support received by the program. Afterschool and summer programs are also offered by community-based and faith-based philanthropic organizations such as YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Police Athletic Leagues and 4-H. In many communities, parents are able to choose from a number of afterschool program options offered by a mix of for-profit and non-profit organizations.

Other communities and families, however, have fewer choices. To ensure children living in less advantaged communities have comparable access to quality programs, some government agencies fund afterschool programs through grants. The best-known public funding sources supporting afterschool are the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) program administered by the US Department of Education and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) program administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services. Both of these programs are designed to provide free or subsidized afterschool programs for low-income children. In 2013, the federal government allocated \$1.09 billion to states to fund 21st CCLC grants and services and over \$5 billion through CCDF.

2. Durlak, Joseph A., and Roger P. Weissburg. "Afterschool Programs That Follow Evidence-Based Practices to Promote Social and Emotional Development Are Effective." In *Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success*, 194-198. Washington, DC: Collaborative Communications, 2013.

Other local, state and federal agencies also support afterschool programs. Many public libraries, for instance, offer homework help and literacy programs during the school year and reading programs during the summer. Forty-three states and an increasing number of cities support a comprehensive system of afterschool and summer supports for children, particularly those from low-income families, through collaborative networks.

## What constitutes quality in afterschool? Why does quality matter?

No parent wants to select a bad or ineffective afterschool program for his or her child, just as no afterschool program leader wants to offer a low quality program. A decade and a half of research and review of program evaluations have identified quality afterschool programs as those that:

- Foster positive relationships between program participants and staff,
- Build positive relationships among program participants,
- Offer a blend of academic and developmental skill-building activities,
- Promote high levels of student engagement,
- Maintain an orientation toward mastery of knowledge and skills and,
- Provide appropriate levels of structure as well as opportunities for autonomy and choice.<sup>3</sup>

Evaluations show that students who participate in afterschool do better in school, have better relationships with peers and adults and that these positive outcomes persist into adulthood. We now know what inputs result in the best outcomes.

We know that a mix of positive relationships, active learning and student choice and voice, among other factors lead to the best child outcomes. In short, we have defined what constitutes quality and know what it looks like in an afterschool program.

3. Eccles, Jacquelynne, and Jennifer Appleton Gootman. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002.

“We know what quality is, how to measure it and how to help programs and practitioners achieve it.”

We have learned much about how children learn and develop over the past ten years. Four big findings are particularly relevant to programs and practitioners who work with school-age (ages five to eighteen) children:

***The achievement gap can be traced to an opportunity gap. Children, particularly those living in low-income homes that do not participate in early learning programs have significantly lower vocabularies upon entering kindergarten.***

***The developmental period commonly referred to as early childhood encompasses children age three to age eight—commonly preschool through third grade. Emerging research points to the importance of designing a continuum of learning that aligns to developmental stages during this period of substantial development.***

***Children, behind grade level and on grade level, benefit academically from afterschool programs. Afterschool provides time and space for children to work at their own pace in a hands-on way to expand their understanding of new skills and concepts. Research shows this exploratory approach to learning helps build children's confidence in themselves as learners.***

***High quality early learning and afterschool programs can help close the achievement gap and show significant promise for improving long-term outcomes such as high school graduation and post-secondary enrollment rates as well as college and career readiness.***

## A Call to Action

We know what quality afterschool is, how to measure it and how to help programs and practitioners achieve it. In a series of focus briefs, NAA will dive more deeply into the elements of afterschool quality. Through the papers we will equip parents, program providers, afterschool professionals, school staff and leaders, and community leaders and funders with the knowledge they need to ensure the afterschool programs serving their community are quality. The focus briefs will provide a landscape scan highlighting what states are doing to support afterschool quality—and what more they could be doing. NAA will offer our recommendations for increasing the professionalism of the afterschool workforce, recognizing the important role they play in ensuring youth in a community are ready for college, work and life. Finally, we will provide strategies for funding and sustaining a system of tools, resources and supports that ensures afterschool quality over the long term. Read the other papers in this series to learn more about afterschool quality across the country.

“New research shows afterschool is a real solution to close the achievement gap.”

