self-assessment of high-quality academic enrichment practices

by Jenell Holstead and Mindy Hightower King

Since its inception, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program has been one of the fastest-growing federal programs. In 2008, its budget of over $1 billion funded 9,930 centers (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The program provides grants to schools and community organizations to expand education services beyond the regular school hours. The tutorial services and academic enrichment activities of 21st CCLC programs are thus often designed to help youth meet local and state academic standards in subjects such as reading and math.

Because there are so many 21st CCLC programs, accountability systems and impact studies have become an important focus. However, research findings have been mixed. While some studies find a positive association between afterschool participation and the development of academic and social skills (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001; Huang, Gribbons, Kim, Lee, & Baker, 2000; Klien & Bolus, 2002; Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Welsh et al., 2002), other research has found no effects or has found negative associations between achievement and afterschool participation (Bissell, Dugan, Ford-Johnson, &

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Jones, 2002; James-Burdumy, Dynarski, & Deke, 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2004; Pettit, Laird, Bates, & Dodge, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The discrepancies may be due to sample characteristics, most notably socioeconomic status (Marshall et al., 1997; Posner & Vandell, 1994), and to lack of methodologic rigor in many evaluations of afterschool programs (Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002).

Recently the focus of research on afterschool programs has shifted to better understanding which programs are successful in effecting academic gains in students and why (Beckett et al., 2009). This research has suggested a number of program practices that help students make academic gains. Assessment procedures can help afterschool programs increase the effective implementation of these practices and can inform ongoing improvement efforts.

External assessments, often conducted by third-party organizations specifically trained in evaluation, can provide program staff with an outside perspective on program quality. These assessments generally require significant financial resources and tend to focus on outcomes such as grades, test scores, and survey data. They often place less emphasis on the practices that influence the afterschool environment and the program activities youth experience—the "point of service" aspects of afterschool quality.

Self-assessment is an often-overlooked alternative to external assessment. Program staff can use self-assessment processes to systematically review the quality of their afterschool programming and to facilitate discussions on ways to enhance it. Self-assessment of point-of-service activities, which can provide a wealth of valuable information regarding program quality (Akiva & Smith, 2007), should be used regularly to enable ongoing program improvement.

Despite the fact that researchers have reached some consensus regarding point-of-service elements that support student academic gains, most self-assessment tools for afterschool programs still do not consistently include these elements. Because a major goal of 21st CCLC programs is to improve participants' academic performance, this gap in self-assessment tools can leave programs without essential information on program quality, even when they use such tools frequently. This article reviews program elements shown to effect academic growth and examines the extent to which available self-assessment tools measure these practices. None of the available self-assessment tools measures the extent to which programs include all of the point-of-service elements that support academic enrichment. Therefore, standardized self-assessment tools for afterschool programs should be enhanced or developed to include evidence-based practices known to be effective in improving academic achievement.

Features of High-Quality Programs That Contribute to Academic Outcomes

Self-assessment instruments to be used by programs seeking to improve academic achievement should measure the program practices and characteristics that have been linked to students' academic success. In the past 10 years, a number of studies have attempted to discover what these practices are (Farber, 2007; Fashola, 2005, Hartry, Fitzgerald, & Porter, 2008; Lauer et al., 2006; Miller & Hall, 2007; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998; Shumow, 2001). The studies have identified a number of structural components and capacity elements that are associated with increased academic achievement, including supportive and educated staff, environments in which children can learn new skills and exercise choice, adequate resources, and good relationships with school personnel. Point-of-service practices observed in programs that were successful in helping students make academic gains included offering homework help, providing one-on-one tutoring, and linking afterschool activities to the school day.

More recently, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences (IES) developed a practice guide, *Structuring Out-of-School Time to Promote Academic Achievement* (Beckett et al., 2009), which includes a set of recommendations for afterschool programs to help students benefit academically. The guide, developed by a panel of experts in out-of-school time programs who examined high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental studies to identify program practices associated with positive academic outcomes, includes only those practices that were supported by adequate levels of empirical evidence to warrant broad-based recommendations. The guide's five recommendations inform our examination of self-assessment tools. They are:

- Aligning the out-of-school time program academically with the school day
- Maximizing student participation and attendance
- Adapting instruction to individual and small-group needs
- Providing engaging learning experiences
- Assessing program performance and using the results to improve program quality (Beckett et al., 2009)

Of the practice guide's recommendations, we examine only elements that occur at the point of service, when youth are participating in activities at the program site

(Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007), as these are the elements that can be evaluated through observation and self-assessment. In addition, point-of-service practices are particularly important because they directly affect youths' decisions to attend the program and the benefits participants gain. The last recommendation of the practice guide, regarding using data to improve the program, is not an observable point-of-service element, but it could be addressed by the self-assessment process itself.

Align the Out-of-School Time Program Academically with the School Day

Typically, effective afterschool programs directly and purposefully connect academic program components to the school day (Policy Studies Associates, 1995). In fact, the IES practice guide suggests that aligning the afterschool program with the school day is a necessary component of academic improvement (Beckett et al., 2009). Academic alignment can often be directly observed at the point of service delivery.

Coordinating curriculum is one example of this alignment. To achieve coordination, afterschool staff may do one or more of the following: use school curricula directly, provide homework assistance and activities that promote basic skills, or develop activities consistent with district and state learning standards. Afterschool programs can reinforce critical skills and knowledge by offering activities that complement, but are different from, school activities.

Another way to achieve alignment is frequent and ongoing communication between school and afterschool staff. Teachers' information about school day instruction or individual student needs can help afterschool staff plan programming (Beckett et al., 2009). The communication can occur both informally, such as in hallway conversations, and formally in regularly scheduled meetings and ongoing updates on students' progress.

Maximize Student Participation and Attendance

Many studies have demonstrated that students who participate in afterschool programs frequently and for longer periods of time are more likely to demonstrate social and academic benefits than those who do not (Department of Education, University of California at Irvine, 2001; Huang et al., 2000; Johnson & Jenkins, 2000; Welsh et al., 2002). For example, the evaluation of LA's BEST program, conducted over a ten-year period, found that regular attendance of at least 150 days per year for more than one year was necessary for positive impact on academic performance. The highest gains in standardized math, reading, and language arts scores were found in students with four years of regular participation (Department of Education, University of California at Irvine, 2001). The evaluation also found that regular attendance over multiple years was related to better school attendance, increased engagement in school, and higher aspirations to finish school and go to college (Huang et al., 2000).

To maximize student participation and attendance, Beckett and colleagues (2009) suggest examining important factors including location, program offerings, transportation, timing, length, and frequency of services. Programs should be easily accessible and convenient for youth; program offerings should be engaging and interesting. In addition, addressing the changing developmental needs of older youth helps to keep them engaged in afterschool programming (Deschenes, Little, Grossman, & Arbreton, 2010). Program staff should assess the extent to which students attend the program and the level of engagement students exhibit at the point of service delivery.

Adapt Instruction to Individual and Small-Group Needs

Individualized instruction is an important feature in improving student performance (Lauer et al., 2004). Because afterschool program time is significantly shorter than the school day, instruction must be focused and targeted (Beckett et al., 2009). Afterschool instruction and activities must therefore be adapted to meet the needs of individual participants. Instruction that is aligned and paced to individual student needs results in improved academic performance (Slavin, 2006). To provide individualized instruction, program staff must be aware of each child's strengths and weaknesses (Beckett et al., 2009). An activity that is not cognitively stimulating for some students could be too difficult for others. Program staff should therefore use formal and informal assessment data to learn what adaptations are necessary (Beckett et al., 2009).

A number of studies have reported that afterschool programs that affect academic performance provide opportunities for students to interact in small groups (Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996) or offer one-on-one tutoring support (Baker, Gersten, & Keating, 2000; Beckett et al., 2009). Lauer and colleagues (2004) reported that one-on-one tutoring improved the reading levels of at-risk students. In addition, Zuman and Miller's (2005) evaluation of afterschool programs in Massachusetts found that program quality was closely linked with small group sizes and low student-to-staff ratios. Taken together, these studies suggest that afterschool programs should use one-on-one or small-group tutoring to provide targeted as-

sistance to students who need help beyond what they receive during the school day (Beckett et al., 2009).

Provide Engaging Learning Experiences

Studies indicate that programs that improve student performance provide highly engaging activities that incorporate academic content (August, Realmuto, Hektner, & Bloomquist, 2001; Borman, Goetz, & Dowling, 2008; Karcher, Davis, & Powell, 2002). Afterschool programs typcially offer a diverse blend of academic pursuits, fine arts and crafts, and physical or recreational activities. Although offering such variety is considered to be best practice (Fashola, 1998; Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996; Vandell et al., 2004) and appears to be important in capturing youth interest and maintaining involvement, research demonstrates that games, recreation, and field trips are ineffective in improving academic performance when they are independent of the academic component of the program (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). In order to ensure gains in student achievement, the engaging activities that interest and motivate students must be explicitly connected to academic learning activities (Beckett et al., 2009).

Another essential ingredient of improved academic outcomes is active learning (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Specifically, programs must actively engage children by generating opportunities to practice new skills through hands-on experiences, practical examples, cooperative learning experiences, and real-world activities; instruction must be connected to student interests (Beckett et al., 2009). In fact, Noam (2003) concludes that in order to avoid "having the children and staff experience [afterschool] projects just as more school," afterschool programs should strive to serve "as a creative extension of learning that is more hands on, more participatory, and more community-focused" (p. 136). Afterschool program activities should involve fewer large-group lecture activities and more opportunities for youth to engage in hands-on learning activities.

Review of Standardized Self-Assessment Tools

The many available standardized self-assessment tools for afterschool programs offer a number of benefits. *Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools* (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Fischer, & Shinn, 2009) compares a number of different tools. Its authors point out that standardized self-assessment tools can be user-friendly and require little training. When training is needed, it can often be provided through in-person or Internet sessions with the tool's developers. Using a standardized tool means that afterschool staff do not need to have the expertise necessary to score and interpret the assessment. In addition, many standardized tools are free or low cost (Yohalem et al., 2009).

Although they were developed by many different researchers and practitioners, the various standardized self-assessment tools for afterschool programs share a common core of effective practices (Yohalem et al., 2009). They generally are based in youth development principles, emphasizing interactions among youth and staff. They tend to assess safety, skill-building opportunities, social norms, and program routine or structure (Granger et al., 2007)—factors that are important to students' overall development but may not build academic skills. Few self-assessment tools include domains representing the elements that have been found to improve academic achievement, as identified in the IES practice guide (Beckett et al., 2009).

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In spring 2010 we conducted a review of nine standardized self-assessment instruments identified by Yohalem and colleagues (2009) to determine which tools assess the four recommended practices. The nine tools we examined are:

1. Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (2007)
2. Out-of-School Time Observation Tool by Policy Studies Associates (Pechman, 2008)
3. Program Observation Tool by the National Afterschool Association (2010)
4. Program Quality Observation Scale by Vandell and Pierce (2006)
5. Program Quality Self-Assessment Tool by the New York State Afterschool Network (2005)
6. Promising Practices Rating Scale by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research and Policy Studies Associates (2005)
7. Quality Assurance System by Foundations, Inc. (2010)
8. School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and Concordia University, Montreal (2010)

9. Youth Program Quality Assessment by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (Smith & Hohmann, 2005)

The review involved analyzing each self-assessment tool individually, using a matrix that aligned the domains assessed by each instrument tool with the point-of-service practices recommended in the IES practice guide (Beckett et al., 2009). The review used the following criteria:

- **Alignment with the school day.** The tool assesses whether afterschool programs used school curricula or academic standards and whether the programs involved school personnel involved directly or indirectly.
- **Student participation and attendance.** The tool includes items on the number of students participating, attendance trends, or whether activities are based on student interest.
- **Adapting instruction to individual or small-group needs.** The tool asks questions on individual or small-group tutoring or on adapting instruction to individual student needs.
- **Engaging learning experiences.** The tool not only measures the extent to which youth are engaged but also assesses academic content. A number of the tools measure "activities" or "engagement," but we coded a tool as assessing engaging learning experiences only if activities were grounded in academic goals.

As shown in Table 1, none of the self-assessment tools incorporates all four of the point-of-service practices recommended by IES. Indeed, three of the nine instruments we examined do not assess any of the IES point-of-service practices. Two tools, SACERS and YPQA, address one of the four practices, while two other instruments, OST and PPR, address two of the four.

Two of the nine self-assessment tools we examined address three of the four IES elements. The Afterschool Program Practices Tool (APT) from the National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the Massachusetts Department of Education (2007) incorporates a review of the quality of learning activities including homework time and targeted academic skill building activities, in which youth practice reading, writing, mathematics, sci-

Table 1. Summary of Self-Assessment Tools and IES Practice Guide Recommendations

	ALIGN THE OST PROGRAM ACADEMICALLY WITH THE SCHOOL DAY	MAXIMIZE STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE	ADAPT INSTRUCTION TO INDIVIDUAL AND SMALL-GROUP NEEDS	PROVIDE ENGAGING LEARNING EXPERIENCES
APT: Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool	-	X	X	X
OST: Out-of-School Time Observation Tool	-	X	X	-
POT: Program Observation Tool	-	-	-	-
PQO: Program Quality Observation Scale	-	-	-	-
QSA: Program Quality Self-Assessment Tool	X	X	-	X
PPRS: Promising Practices Rating Scale	-	X	-	X
QAS: Quality Assurance System	-	-	-	-
SACERS: School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale	-	-	-	X
YPQA: Youth Program Quality Assessment	-	X	-	-

ence, and social studies skills, as well as youth participation and engagement and individualized support. The Program Quality Self-Assessment (QSA) Tool by the New York State Afterschool Network (2005) focuses on three of the recommended elements. It examines the quality of learning activities by assessing the extent to which activities provide academic support including tutoring or homework help, are age-appropriate, and are experiential. It also assesses youth participation and alignment with the school day, including links to state and local performance benchmarks, connections with the school curriculum, and communication between school staff and afterschool staff.

The next generation of standardized self-assessment tools for afterschool programs should include evidence-based practices found to be effective in improving academic achievement.

Making Self-Assessment Work

Self-assessment, especially assessment of point-of-service program practices, can be a powerful tool to provide valuable information regarding program quality (Akiva & Smith, 2007). Presently, however, none of the available self-assessment tools assess the extent to which programs implement all of the point-of-service practices geared towards improving academic achievement recommended by the IES practice guide (Beckett et al., 2009). The next generation of standardized self-assessment tools for afterschool programs should include evidence-based practices found to be effective in improving academic achievement.

Until enhanced standardized tools are available, afterschool programs may want to supplement available tools with customized scales that address important practices shown to increase academic achievement. For guidance in developing customized tools, programs may refer to the Program Quality Self-Assessment Tool and the Afterschool Program Practices Tool. These tools measure a number of the point-of-service program practices recommended in the IES practice guide (Beckett et al., 2009). They may also help program staff understand how to develop relevant items for their customized assessments.

Homegrown self-assessment tools have their weaknesses. They do not have the reliability and validity needed to ensure accurate results, even when based on best-practice literature. Although customized self-assessment tools may help staff to critically examine their program's strengths and weaknesses, such tools may not accurately measure program quality. Caution should be used when interpreting results collected with customized self-assessment tools, and results should not be used to compare one program with another. In addition, users and developers of customized instruments should use practices that help maximize reliability, such as thoroughly training self-assessors and providing scoring rubrics with clear standards.

Self-assessment can be a valuable tool to enhance program quality and facilitate discussions among staff about program strengths and challenges. Encouraging program staff to be observant of and reflective about key areas of practice at the point of service will help ensure that programs provide the best possible services to participants. This process can generate meaningful formative feedback on program implementation even if program staff customize formalized self-assessment tools. The process of self-assessment can promote continual reflection and increase the program's ability to help students achieve positive academic outcomes.

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