

Chasing Standards: Afterschool and Out-of-School Time Accreditation

Out-of-School time providers often assess the value of their programs by the reactions of parents or guardians. Whether through informal conversations at pick-up time or formal parent surveys, positive reinforcement may offer the most powerful validation for a program—happy families and youth lead to returning families and families that refer others to their program. However, different people often have widely different perceptions of what constitutes a quality program. One family’s need for academic support or language enrichment is as valid as another family’s desire for programming that provides arts, sports or community service. This is where recognized standards have a role. Common understanding about suitable program management, necessary staff competencies, and what developmental assets children and youth should gain from out-of-school time programs has value for providers, parents, policymakers and funders. The ability of standards to communicate the quality and impact of out-of-school time programs is as powerful as—and sometimes helps to bring about—the happy parent at pick up time.

As programs know, there are many different systems of quality measurement and these can add a significant administrative burden on programs. Increasingly, programs are feeling the tension of being asked to provide more “academic” supports for children to help them achieve basic literacy and math skills necessary for school success. In the current climate of education reform and results-based funding, providers are being evaluated on a broad range of measured outcomes. These changes in the field increase the relevancy of aligning program quality to some set of agreed-upon standards. Accreditation provides one way for providers to assess and improve the quality of their programs against a set of national standards. But the questions about standards and accreditation remain—what outcomes are we trying to achieve? What are the incentives for programs to become accredited? Is the process too cumbersome for most programs? Do the benefits justify the cost? Are the current national standards relevant to local needs and conditions? Can standards effectively address the heterogeneous nature of out-of-school time?

What is Accreditation?

Whereas licensing is a legal requirement for certain types of childcare, accreditation is driven by the interest of providers. Accreditation signifies that a program meets certain professional standards for education and care that are recognized regionally or nationally and administered by a third-party organization. Early childcare providers can achieve accreditation through a number of bodies, including the National Association for Family Child Care and the National Association for Child Care Centers. Eligible programs must engage in an indepth review of their programs that takes into account licensing, program evaluations, fiscal management, professional development opportunities for staff, outside observations and parental engagement and review. Policy makers in some states are currently promoting accreditation for early childcare through higher subsidy reimbursement rates and quality rating systems (QRS), to improve opportunities for children and develop a framework of provider accountability for quality care. Currently, there is no such system of incentives for school-age providers. The one notable exception is programs on military bases that are required to attain accreditation.

The National Afterschool Association (NAA), formerly the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA), administers accreditation for school-age childcare. Accreditation is built upon quality standards for school-age care developed collaboratively by NSACA and the National Institute for Out-of-

School Time (NIOST). The standards were initially developed in 1995 and field tested in 75 programs in 13 states across the country. Significantly, the quality standards upon which school age accreditation are based recognize that school-age care is different from early childhood education and must reflect the specific needs of children ages 5-14 and the special nature of the programs that serve those kids. These differences include the unique developmental needs of children and staff, the high level of community engagement, particularly with schools, and the more limited control over space, much of which is shared.

Accreditation Through the National Afterschool Association

First written in 1998, The NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care provide the basis for a national system of program improvement and accreditation. The standards encourage a reflective approach to program assessment that links self-study with continuous quality improvement and the professional development of staff. They are written to create a culture of internal dialogue and awareness that leads to higher program quality. The standards revolve around 36 Keys to Quality within 6 core areas:

- Human Relationships—Program policies and culture promote positive behavior and engaging relationships between staff, staff and children, and between children.
- Indoor Environment—Safe environment that provides for the needs of children.
- Outdoor Environment—Age appropriate play equipment and space suitable for children’s need for physical activity.
- Activities—Flexible schedule of engaging activities appropriate for the developmental stage of the children and youth. Activities must align with the mission of the program and allow for youth to choose from a variety of opportunities.
- Safety, Health and Nutrition—The safety and supervision of children and youth at all areas of a program. Children are provided a healthy assortment of food and drink and clean, well-maintained facilities.
- Administration—Acceptable staff/child ratios are maintained and staff encourages the involvement of parents and the sharing of information. Policies are in place to ensure that the physical, emotional, social and educational needs of children and youth are met; and, staffs are provided opportunities to engage in professional development.

While accreditation is a path that some programs will take, it is not necessarily the end goal. The NAA framework is built around an approach to “accreditation and quality improvement” that guides programs through the 7-Step Advancing & Recognizing Quality (ARQ) process to build a culture of continuous improvement. The critical driver of the process is the ASQ Team (Assessing School-Age Quality), comprised of program staff and parents who assess the program based on a set of “guiding questions” and make recommendations for change based on the NAA standards. The beginning stage of self-study and improvement is followed by the submission of a Letter of Intent and application. If a program is successful with its application a NAA-trained Endorser will make the final determination of eligibility through a formal evaluation. Accreditation is granted for a term of 4 years with annual fees and reporting documents that track a provider’s efforts to continually improve the quality of their programs. Currently, there are over 600 NAA-accredited programs worldwide, only 10 of which are located in Massachusetts (There are currently over 70 accredited programs on military bases overseas).

Accreditation is not cheap. It will cost a program about \$2125, including \$100 yearly renewal fees, to attain accreditation and maintain the designation through the 4-year period. The introductory and self-study materials can be acquired for less than \$200. In practice, the demands on staff and administrative time are high, while the benefits are hard to quantify. As we have learned with the Boston After School Quality Initiative (BASQ), the challenges around accreditation currently outweigh the very strong desire of programs to improve their quality.

The BASQ Initiative

The BASQ Initiative was launched in 2003 through a partnership between NAA and the Massachusetts School Age Coalition (MSAC). The initiative was driven by the premise that urban programs have special challenges in relation to meeting the standards of accreditation than suburban, rural or military programs. Programs in racially and economically diverse neighborhoods often face a higher percentage of children with special needs, limitations of both indoor and outdoor space, a greater demand for academic supports, particularly for English language learners, and a higher dependence on state and private foundation revenue. Yet, these challenges are also balanced with real strengths. Urban programs often have very deep community connections to provide “whole child” services for families that lack basic health and social support networks. They also reflect the rich cultural environment in which they are located and can play an important role in community development and civic life.

Under the BASQ Initiative 13 programs across the city were provided consultation, training and technical assistance, and coaching around the 36 Keys to Quality and the NAA Observational Tool. Without any history of accreditation in the city, these one-on-one supports were instrumental in getting program directors and staff to take a critical view of their programs. Executive directors and site coordinators gained valuable leadership skills creating and managing their ASQ Teams and taking concrete steps to improve the quality of their programs. Mock endorser visits, moreover, became an important process in assessing the readiness of these programs for accreditation. The BASQ Initiative was moved to *BOSTnet* in January 2007 with the restructuring of MSAC. Over the last year, *BOSTnet* has continued to provide assessments and one-on-one technical assistance to move the programs toward the ultimate goal of accreditation. Faced with staff turnover, limited resources and other issues, only seven programs remain actively engaged in the process. Currently, no program that began BASQ is in a position to submit a Letter of Intent and it is unlikely any will attain accreditation in the next year.

Experience with BASQ has elevated many of the barriers to accreditation that are well-known to the OST field. Programs are consistently under-resourced and face high staff turnover rates and space limitations; for a process so demanding of staff time, the benefits are limited; interest among senior staff members often does not filter down to direct staff; the cost is seen as too high; and, perhaps most important, parents and guardians of children and youth are not demanding that afterschool programs be accredited. Staff turnover is a particularly challenging issue for programs working toward accreditation. The dynamic continually sets programs back in the process as new staff are educated on the standards and engaged in accreditation. With each loss of a site coordinator, director or direct staff, efforts can be substantially slowed or stopped entirely. After 4 years of the initiative the findings are clear:

- All participants in the process felt that their involvement helped them reach their goals and meet the program outcomes desired by their funders.
- Despite the limited success, the process has created a strong sense of value in working toward accreditation through self-assessment and improvement.
- Programs that face high staff turnover and other challenging program conditions need to be able to build capacity around each step of accreditation. There is value in recognizing milestones along the way rather than the “all or nothing” nature of accreditation.
- One of the key strengths of OST is that it is dynamic and responsive to the needs of its customers. Quality initiatives will have a better chance of gaining traction if they allow for diverse frameworks for assessing quality.
- The lack of system supports for programs seeking accreditation is a key barrier. There are few opportunities for professional development and fewer incentives to motivate programs to engage in the process.

Future Directions

Accreditation is one choice in many that OST programs have to address and improve their overall quality and the future of the system is unclear. Accredited programs are very proud of their accomplishments and

find the process extremely rewarding. There is a general recognition in the field of the value in engaging in a total quality enhancement effort, but the system supports, incentives, resources and demand for accreditation are lacking. Without clear requirements or demand for accredited programs, providers must use staff time to address competing priorities that are required through state licensing regulations or evaluations and reporting to funders. This may change if the current efforts to create quality rating systems for early care providers in some states filters into school-age care or if the field's increasing alignment with the formal education system continues to shape the way we view and assess outcomes. After 10 years of commitment to accreditation, the NAA certainly feels the tension of trying to manage as both an accrediting body and a professional membership association for OST providers.

We need to continue to hold afterschool and out-of-school time programs to high standards. The research continues to tell us that the developmental assets children and youth gain from engaging in consistently good OST programming is having a direct impact on their social, emotional and academic achievement. More importantly, youth have told us over and over again the positive influence a quality program can have on their lives. Yet, it is often the intangible connection between individuals, environments, or activities that makes all the difference. There is a need for accreditation, or other quality systems, that address standards of quality within a framework of assessment and recognition that takes into consideration local conditions and need. The ARQ process and the ASQ teams are powerful drivers of deliberate change and can move programs toward quality goals. But programs need to be recognized for achievements along the way. A goal with many places to fail and few to achieve does not serve the field. The challenges of the current system of school-age accreditation seem insurmountable, but if we reduce the barriers and improve the incentives through both system changes and resource investments more programs will benefit from the process. Ultimately, better quality programs mean better outcomes for children and youth.

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