

Environment Matters! **Promoting Positive Program Environments**

Quality out-of-school time (OST) programs have been shown to improve outcomes for children and youth. Recent studies have improved our understanding of the key elements of successful programs and have highlighted for stakeholders what inputs may help support positive child and youth development in an OST setting. While a range of initiatives and approaches targeting specific elements have been tested, results remain uneven in a field that struggles with high staff turnover and lack of professional development support systems. BOSTnet's experience running our Promoting Positive Behavior, Engaging Families, and Lead to Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities initiatives has taught us that basic strategies aimed at key staff and program competencies can improve program quality. But achieving a truly transformative effect on OST programs requires a more holistic approach that addresses the improvement of OST *environments* by building on the unique assets of the field.

BOSTnet is fortunate to work with many great youth programs and the potential impact of these programs on children's lives was highlighted at a recent site visit to a program that has been a part of our Promoting Positive Behavior initiative for the past year. The program, located in the city of Boston, serves about 65 children ages 5 to 12. It operates out of a school building and is part of a larger multi-site agency. Like many programs, the staff deals with children of varied temperaments and personalities who have already been through a long school day. One child who was new to the program presented particular challenges. He is a young boy with unclassified behavioral issues who attends a special needs kindergarten class at the school. When he joined the afterschool program, he did not interact with other kids and avoided staff, spending much of his time alone staring at the ceiling. He was, according to one staff member, "in his own world." Over time, however, the staff began to see changes in the child's behavior. He started to follow groups of other children during activities and became increasingly accepted by more socially competent children who engaged him in their games. As his engagement increased, so did his confidence. Even his school-day teacher noticed the change, observing, "Did you see how he strutted over to the window to report the weather? Quite the little weatherman!" "He is so confident now."

While the scenario of a disengaged child with special needs is fairly common to OST programs, the outcome could have been very different. Field staff often allow their frustrations, biases, and/or failure to engage a child to influence their behavior in ways that may not be best for a child. **So, what did this particular program do right?**

- They have a high level of verbal communication that allows staff to share observations and reflect upon individual children and situations that arise. Consequently, there is a strong awareness in staff of the contextual elements of the program that affect behavior and their individual roles in working with children.
- The program is organized around intentional and well-structured activities that foster positive engagement between children.
- The program is flexible in their approach, allowing children to integrate at their own pace while providing increasing levels of support that build trust and comfort with staff and peers.

In effect, this child was introduced to a positive environment. It is an example of how a quality program can support children and youth who may struggle in other developmental settings. As one staff member noted, "He now only talks about after-school to his dad. Really, it's like he's in school all day and these few hours here is all he wants to talk about."

When OST programs develop their capacity to foster positive environments they provide inherent supports that build critical developmental assets in children and youth, including social and emotional competence, positive self-identity, and engagement. Research is clear that youth who have opportunity to develop these assets have a higher level of resiliency as they grow into adulthood. Yet, there is no single prescriptive model that OST programs can implement to intentionally create such an environment. OST is a field with many diverse programs and how children and youth interact with those settings is often very individualized. The impact of those interactions, moreover, is cumulative over time and has an objective value that cannot be readily measured through point-in-time assessments. Creating a positive environment for youth is about building upon assets, such as the field's diversity and ability to support youth with varied developmental needs that exist within programs and can lead to sustained improvement. It is about developing an intentional approach to areas such as relationships, program structure, community and family engagement and inclusion that begins with staff self-awareness and understanding of how a program's mission and goals are implemented.

Improving Program Quality

Developing effective interventions that have a positive impact on improving program quality is widely considered to be the key issue facing the OST field. Many local and national intermediaries are involved in such improvement efforts, but there is little data around their effectiveness. In Boston and across Massachusetts, local organizations and state agencies are pushing a variety of approaches, including accreditation, licensing, credential systems, quality rating improvement systems (QRIS), workshops and roundtables, mentoring, coaching, and a variety of trainings on topics ranging from curriculum development to positive behavior supports. All of these offerings have value in providing programs and OST staff a framework for improving quality and developing professional skills. Yet, these efforts are often geared toward systems and do not provide the needed support for the most important resource a program has—its people.

Building upon a workforce that is young and transient with minimal experience has some advantages, such as high energy, diversity and low cost, but it also creates barriers to maintaining improvements over the long term that challenge the best program leaders. Staffs are often on six month to a year turnover cycles that regularly deplete programs of much needed continuity. To be effective, interventions need a mix of trainings and one-on-one coaching, and must find ways to imbed a culture of continuous improvement that involves program leaders, line-staff, youth and their parents, and the broader community in which a program exists. Programs must be able to assess what they do well and understand why, along with understanding where they need to improve their efforts. Being intentional is the key. An ecological approach that starts with staff self-awareness and builds out progressively to encompass contextual elements of the environment affecting quality and continuous improvement provides a viable method for addressing these issues.

Why Focus on Program Environments?

In our experience, a focus on program environment, or developmental setting, has multiple benefits. There is evidence that the overall program environment may be a more suitable determinant of positive youth outcomes than content. Developmentally appropriate environments that provide positive social and emotional supports, autonomy and choice in an intentional way must shape the foundational elements for programs to operate successfully in a variety of content areas. It also highlights the central premise that environments matter and we need to think of OST as a unique developmental institution with its own expectations, rather than an extension of other developmental systems, such as schools or families. The characteristics that make OST a unique learning environment—diverse, informal, relationship-based, and flexible—are powerful drivers of program quality. Teaching programs to identify and develop those elements that make them unique as a developmental setting for children and youth is the foundation for quality programming. It is an approach that will improve a provider's ability to develop programming with a variety of enrichment and educational expectations that is delivered in a way that draws on the strengths of OST as an alternative learning field.

Being intentional about creating a positive program environment that supports the optimal development of children and youth requires a focus on four key program competencies:

- **Relational Development** (staff self-awareness/emotional development, knowledge of child/youth development, relational and team skills, and positive behavior strategies);
- **Program Structure** (leadership, space/environment, content, and organizational development);
- **Family & Community Engagement** (external relationships, community involvement and support of program, and connection to external resources); and
- **Inclusion** (strategies to include youth with disabilities, expert resources and tools to support access and inclusion, staff knowledge of physical and mental disabilities, and diversity awareness)

What is Promoting Positive Program Environments (PPE)?

PPE is a unique model that centers on creating sustainable change in staff skill and program interventions that positively affect all content areas in OST environments. When staff are asked to actively and intentionally participate in healthy program and youth development, their confidence, level of engagement and job satisfaction grows. The PPE model provides an overall introduction to methods of increasing staff self-awareness and skill in order to create positive social emotional environments for children. It is a comprehensive approach to continuous program improvement that integrates key findings from BOSTnet's core trainings and technical assistance to benefit all programs regardless of content, ages served, or setting (e.g. community-based, school-based).

Through a program self-assessment process, PPE identifies strengths and areas in need of improvement, and then empowers programs to customize quality improvement strategies around issues of relationships, behavior, family and community engagement, and inclusion that best suit their program environment.

PPE takes into account where programs are, both geographically and culturally, and fosters an intentional approach for staff to define their mission and role in the lives of their youth and to create appropriate learning environments for their needs. It is pathway to quality improvement that is more realistic for a field that is extraordinarily diverse and under-resourced. Like current approaches to youth development, PPE builds assets that already exist in programs while giving staff a common framework and language for understanding and codifying what they do well. Significantly, it targets those elements of quality programming that are recognized nationally as standards of program quality—positive relationships, staff self-awareness, safe and engaging spaces, intentional programming, community and family engagement, inclusive pro-social culture, and effective leadership. Without an overall goal that ties individual program competencies into a unified approach, quality improvement efforts can seem piecemeal and lacking of a coherent vision. For example, building behavioral supports in youth programs and creating environments that welcome children of all abilities requires a high level of family and community engagement. Programs will not become inclusive by providing them adaptive technologies or other resources to serve children with disabilities without first supporting changes in staff and the overall program culture.

BOSTnet's PPE is a multi-year initiative that will pilot a set of comprehensive supports to school age and youth-serving programs in Greater Boston in its first year. PPE will help programs take basic, preventative steps to create a positive environment for youth, assess program strengths and areas in need of improvement, provide targeted training and TA, and provide tools to maintain the quality improvements. Additionally, BOSTnet will share strategies for replication through conferences, forums, best practice tools, peer learning, and other supports to reach programs across Greater Boston. PPE is currently in a developmental phase and we expect that our support model, trainings and strategies will continue to evolve as we learn more effective ways of working with programs. With support from our

fundes and partners, BOSTnet will begin working directly with programs to address these issues in the fall of 2008.

Strengthening the OST Field's Assets

PPE strengthens the connections between two related areas—program quality and program identity. By fostering positive environmental change, programs will be in a stronger position to develop an alternative learning experience that is both educational and enriching within a framework that is relationship-based and focused on healthy youth development. Programs must be empowered to define their identity and their own expectations for youth outcomes, through what is unique about their approach and their environmental context. In doing so, they are better positioned to partner and collaborate with schools and other community organizations in a way that values what they do and preserves their mission and culture within a broader community-learning framework. Such an approach to partnerships provides a pathway to collaborative learning that truly respects the impact that OST has on the lives of children and youth. As Beth Miller, Sam Piha, Robert Halpren and others have argued, rather than limit the potential of OST by linking outcomes to academic success, build the capacity of the field to address the social, emotional and physical needs of youth to support a broad range of developmental assets. Promoting Positive Program Environments is an approach that targets that goal.

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