



Guide to After-School Quality Standards

Quality standards are a guide to help providers, parents, and youth understand what quality looks like in after-school programs



In Rhode Island and across the nation, high quality after-school programs are being recognized by their communities for the valuable contributions they can make to young people's growth. Children and youth who spend their out-of-school hours in safe and nurturing learning environments are at significantly less risk for truancy, emotional stress, poor grades, substance use, sexual activity, and crime.

Participating in after-school activities on a consistent basis, with easy access to a variety of enriching activities and the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with peers and adults, is known to benefit young people socially, emotionally, and academically.

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PROVIDENCE

Guide to After-School Quality Standards

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AFTER-SCHOOL IN RHODE ISLAND: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

There is an exciting opportunity for change in Rhode Island. After-school providers in this state are dedicated to improving the lives of young people, and many good programs already exist. Our charge as a community is to expand those opportunities and sustain them for the long term. In recent years, local after-school providers have expressed the need to learn more about high-quality programming and how they can improve their programs and reach more youth.

With limited resources to draw upon, Rhode Island after-school providers have struggled to deliver high quality programs to the large number of young people who need them. For example, of the approximately 26,000 school age youth in Providence¹, less than 10 percent² are participating in after-school programming regularly — in other words, three or more days a week. Community surveys and other research show that young people who do not participate in after-school programs have specific reasons for choosing not to do so. Safety concerns, lack of transportation, and too few challenging and engaging activities are three of the main barriers to participation in after-school programming in the city. At the same time, lack of adequate funding and resources make it hard for after-school providers to offer programs that meet the needs and interests of youth.

With major grants from The Wallace Foundation and Bank of America, and the vision of Mayor David N. Cicilline, the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) was created in 2004 to address the systemic barriers that after-school providers face, to increase their visibility and leverage greater support for their important work. In addition, city sectors and non-profit organizations have joined PASA's efforts to increase and expand after-school opportunities for the children and youth of Providence. One of PASA's key three strategies is Quality Improvement for after-school. Through community dialogue and extensive research, it became clear that PASA should lead the discussion and development of Quality Standards for after-school, so that providers, parents, youth and funders were all 'on the same page' so to speak, about what quality means, and looks like, in after-school programs.

¹ Statistic from the Providence Public School Department, www.providenceschools.org

² Market Street Research Group, February 2004

RHODE ISLAND AFTER-SCHOOL QUALITY STANDARDS ARE:

- A set of clear expectations that many people have agreed on
- A guide to help after-school program providers assess what they are doing well and where they need to make improvements
- A way for parents and young people to know what to expect from an after-school program
- A set of guidelines that, when adopted, can act as an assurance to funders and sponsors that the programs they support will deliver high-quality services
- A commitment by the entire community to give children and young people access to a wide range of enriching out-of-school experiences

Quality standards are guidelines that help after-school providers communicate their values and hold themselves accountable for the programs they provide. Youth and families can use standards as a reference when observing a program for the first time or to help understand what to expect from a program as time goes on. Quality standards also help educate the community as a whole about what high-quality programming looks like and how it can be achieved.

Standards alone cannot change the quality of programs or the skills of program staff and volunteers. Even for programs that have adopted standards, this process and practice takes time and must happen in stages. After-school programs do not have the capacity or resources to tackle all standards at once. The idea is to set realistic and achievable goals so that over time, programs can meet standards in all areas, but in the short term, there are objectives to work toward. Eventually, with the right types of resources and support, quality standards can help a community increase the number and variety of after-school programs and encourage programs to involve young people in meaningful ways.



DEVELOPING STANDARDS FOR RHODE ISLAND

In conversations about after-school opportunities, after school providers across the city of Providence and the state of Rhode Island expressed the need for a common language to use for setting goals and measuring progress. Three major pieces of research and discussion confirmed that quality standards would be helpful:

- **Stepping Up: Out of School Time and Youth Development in Providence: A School-Community Analysis.** This research, prepared by Community Matters and commissioned by the United Way of Rhode Island and the Providence Public School Department in 2002, examined the state of after-school programming in the city and explored opportunities to improve and expand to better meet the needs of Providence children and youth.
- **Learning in Communities/Providence.** Led by Rhode Island Kids Count and funded by The Wallace Foundation, this 2003 citywide convening, research, and planning process mapped opportunities to increase the participation of children and youth in high-quality out-of-school time programming.
- **Market Street Research.** The Market Street Research firm brought together groups of students and parents to explore participation in

after-school programs by middle school youth, including barriers to participation and program interests and preferences.

This research not only informed the need for the Rhode Island community to place an increased emphasis on quality in after-school programs, but also underscored the need for an intermediary organization to help organize and convene after-school programs to provide increased quality and access to after-school programs for youth in the city.

The Providence After School Alliance scanned the country for existing after-school standards and information about how well those standards worked. Quality standards from Washington D.C., Kansas City, Chicago, and Baltimore were gathered, along with those produced by the National Afterschool Association (formerly NSACA), as a starting point.

PASA then brought together a representative group of 25 after-school providers, the Quality Improvement Work Group, to begin to customize the standards to fit the needs and context of Providence and the state. As the standards emerged, they were brought to parent and youth leaders for response. After-school funders also discussed the standards and lent their continued support. To help after-school providers gain a national perspective on promising practices, Priscilla Little from the Harvard Family Research Project participated in several discussions and also helped to develop the Standards based on the work group's input.

In getting started, it was important to define who the Standards were intended for and how they should be used. The following criteria were identified by the Quality Improvement Work Group prior to creating the Standards language:

Rhode Island After-School Quality Standards will be:

- **Applicable to any age group and any type of after-school program**
- **Embraced by ALL- providers, parents, and participants**
- **Measurable through ongoing assessment, tracking, and meaningful observation**
- **Feasible and realistic; achievable**
- **Designed to act as a means against which programs can measure themselves and work toward continuous progress and improvement**

Overall, developing the standards was a highly inclusive process, with input welcome from anyone in the community who wanted to participate. More than 100 providers and youth-serving organizations, parents, youth, and funders scrutinized the standards themselves prior to publication. The Rhode Island After-School Quality Standards represent the high but realistic expectations of all those key groups. Their contributions put Providence in a strong position to build a full array of high-quality after-school programs to serve the children and young people of our community. Beyond Providence, PASA hopes these Quality Standards will be helpful in guiding after-school professionals, parents and youth throughout the state in their efforts to understand and improve quality in programs. On a national level, we invite other communities to reference and use these Standards to inform their own work in after-school, and welcome feedback.





HOW TO USE THE STANDARDS

Quality standards are intended to guide providers, parents and youth in understanding what quality looks like in after-school programming. In a general way, the standards outline what can reasonably be expected from a program that is truly dedicated to providing the best possible services to young people. They are not intended to determine which after-school providers receive funding and which do not. Rather, they are designed as guidelines for funders and providers to use together, both to plan programs and to improve quality. Most important, they give everyone a common language for discussing where we stand in terms of after-school programming – and where we need to go.

The following are suggestions on how **After-School Providers** can use these Standards³:

- Examine the strengths of your program and identify areas for improvement
- Think about the organizational needs or constraints that may impact a program's ability to adopt the Standards, in whole or in part
- Plan and develop strategies to adopt the Standards within a reasonable time period
- Discuss with your board, staff, and volunteers how they can contribute to help your program achieve the Standards

The following are suggestions on how **Youth and Families** can use these Standards:

- Gain a better understanding of the critical components of a high-quality after-school program
- Use the guide as a “checklist” and consider the types of activities and behaviors to be looking for when visiting a program for the first time
- Compare after-school programs with one another by using the Standards as a “shopper’s guide”
- If a program has adopted these Standards, feel assured that the program is continuously working to provide high quality after-school opportunities and hold programs accountable

³ Language adopted in part from DC Standards for Out of School Time

RHODE ISLAND AFTER-SCHOOL QUALITY STANDARDS

HEALTH, SAFETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The after-school environment has to do with how a program looks and feels: the physical space, its safety and security, the atmosphere it conveys, and aspects of health and nutrition. The environment helps an after-school “shopper” develop a first impression of the program and influences whether a youth and/or family member decides to participate. It also contributes to keeping young people “coming back for more.”

- The program’s indoor and outdoor facilities are welcoming and accessible to children, youth and their families.
- The indoor and outdoor space provides an atmosphere of comfort, ownership, and respect for children, youth and their families.
- Children and youth are physically safe in both indoor and outdoor space of the program.
- Program space and equipment fit the needs of participants, staff and the curriculum.
- The program protects and supports the mental and social/emotional health of all participants.
- Participants are carefully supervised during all program activities.
- When provided, snacks are well balanced and nutritious.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are the “glue” of an after-school program. In order for children and youth to feel engaged and excited about the program and activities, staff and volunteers must work together to foster strong, respectful relationships at every level - among staff, youth, families and the community.

- Participants interact with one another in positive ways, and feel they belong.
- Staff and volunteers collaborate to meet the needs of all children and youth.
- Staff and volunteers interact with families in positive ways.
- Staff and volunteers provide opportunities for meaningful engagement of participants’ family members.
- Staff and volunteers respond in positive ways to the individual needs of children and youth.
- Staff and volunteers provide appropriate mentoring and/or role-modeling to guide the behavior of children and youth in positive ways.
- Staff relationships with participants are positive, supportive, nurturing, and consistent.
- Staff and volunteers encourage participants to make choices and become more responsible.



PROGRAMMING AND ACTIVITIES

When surveyed, children and youth nationwide indicate that their number one criterion when selecting an after-school program is that it is FUN! Beyond being fun, after-school programs can contribute to positive learning and personal growth. Ongoing involvement in an after-school program is connected to the quality and variety of activities offered.

- There are a variety of engaging opportunities for age appropriate learning, physical activity, skill building and life skills development.
- The daily schedule offers activities that are engaging, varied, and flexible.
- Participants have opportunities to make choices based on interest.
- Activities are well supplied with materials, where needed.
- Participants are involved in program planning, development and implementation.
- Program activities enhance the positive development of children and youth.
- Program staff are thoughtful about influencing learning and increasing knowledge for participants.
- Participants experience and learn about diversity.
- The program builds upon community resources.

STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As in any profession, after-school staff and volunteers require ongoing resources, support and training in order to provide high-quality programming in order to have a meaningful impact on participants' lives. Methods of recruiting, hiring, training and technical assistance are important to consider. Staff who are involved in delivering high-quality programming tend to be more satisfied with their jobs and stay at them longer; professional development can therefore make a program more consistent and sustainable.

- All program staff receive relevant training and attend ongoing professional development activities that support their own growth and build more effective program practice.
- Program managers assess job performance and satisfaction among staff and volunteers and make improvements where necessary.
- Staff and volunteers are familiar with their job roles and responsibilities prior to working with participants and their families.
- Staff and volunteers of all levels are eligible and well prepared to work with participants and their families.
- Staff and volunteers are aware of cultural and individual differences in working with participants and their families.
- Staff and volunteers receive the necessary support to work effectively.

ADMINISTRATION

An after-school program must have appropriate organizational supports in place to run smoothly and effectively and serve youth in the best way possible. Administrative areas that deserve attention include management supports, policies and procedures, links to others and program assessment.

- Staff-to-participant ratios and group size enable the staff to meet the needs of participants.
- Program policies and procedures are responsive to the needs of children, youth and families in the community.
- The administration sets clear expectations for participant behavior and active, consistent participation.
- The administration provides sound leadership and management.
- The program engages families as partners in its success.
- Program policies and procedures exist to enhance the health and safety of all children and youth.
- The program solicits feedback from children, youth and their families about the program.
- The program has a system for using information for learning and program improvement as well as for measuring outcomes relevant to program activities.
- The program builds links to the community.
- The program has a clear vision and mission and a plan to support continuous growth.



NEXT STEPS

Where do we go from here? Quality standards are a necessary first step in describing the activities that support quality in after-school programs. By themselves, they articulate the overall benchmarks that Rhode Island after-school programs strive to achieve. Naturally, not every program will achieve the highest level of quality in every area right from the start. We know from extensive research that even the best programs are constantly striving to make their programs even better. Therefore, PASA, with community participation, has developed a set of quality indicators, which identify specific, observable activities and behaviors that characterize consistently excellent programs. The indicators are part of a self-assessment tool, the Rhode Island Program Quality Assessment Tool (RIPQA), that providers can use to evaluate their work, set goals and track improvements. The tool enables after-school providers to measure their performance and track their progress over time. The quality standards are more useful and practical with these accompanying pieces.

In partnership with the Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance (RIASPA) and the Rhode Island Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Center initiative, PASA has developed a menu of quality improvement opportunities and supports for after-school providers. Collectively, the three organizations provide professional development, technical assistance and training associated with these quality standards and the RIPQA. Dozens of after school providers and 21st Century Community Learning Centers have already begun using the RIPQA and are engaging in a quality improvement process. In addition, PASA offers a data collection and tracking tool (youthservices.net), which helps providers to measure the impact they are having on young people's lives. These supports are part of a comprehensive plan to provide more high quality after-school opportunities for Rhode Island children and youth. By supporting programs that are constantly striving to strengthen their own work, we can ensure that young people feel excited and engaged in after-school programs and have a desire to keep coming back.

To learn more about the Providence After School Alliance, including their quality improvement supports and efforts and their partnership with RIASPA and RIDE, visit www.mypasa.org or call 490-9599.

WHAT WE MEAN BY...

Here are our working definitions for some of the key terms found in this document:

Providence After School Alliance (PASA) – PASA aims to increase the number of high-quality after-school opportunities for school-age children in Providence. Initially funded by The Wallace Foundation and Bank of America, PASA is driven by the collective efforts of over 150 public and nonprofit after-school providers and spearheaded by Mayor David N. Cicilline.

After-school – The hours after-school, primarily the time between 2:00 and 8:00 p.m.

After-school providers – Any program or person providing activities for children and/or youth during the after-school hours.

Capacity building – Building or strengthening an organization’s ability to provide high-quality experiences for young people, usually through activities such as skill building, ongoing assessment, and coaching.

Professional development – Formal and informal methods of helping after-school professionals learn new skills, develop new insights into their own practice, and explore new or advanced understandings of content and resources. This includes ongoing support for staff as they encounter the challenges that come with serving children and youth in after-school settings.

Quality standards – A set of agreed-upon benchmarks that after-school programs identify as being important to their success. Where those benchmarks exist, they indicate high-quality programming. They also serve as guides to continuous improvement and accountability.

Quality indicators – A set of statements about activities and behavior that can be used to measure the extent to which after-school programs are providing high-quality opportunities for participants.

Quality improvement – Ongoing efforts to make after-school opportunities more engaging and enriching for young people.

Self-assessment tool – An applied tool (usually in paper form) used to assess certain aspects of an after-school activity or program. It can be used by after-school program staff as part of their ongoing quality improvement or by an outside observer. Participants may also use self-assessment tools to assess their own growth or progress.

Tracking tool – A computer-based data collection program that can be used to store data on program participants, track attendance and participation and generate reports.

Youth development – The process young people follow as they learn to deal with the challenges of adolescence and prepare for the independence and responsibilities of being parents, workers, and citizens. Youth development principles and practices are designed to help young people negotiate that process successfully through a coordinated series of activities and experiences that support their social, moral, emotional, physical and cognitive growth.

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The Rhode Island After-School Quality Standards Guide is the product of a community-wide engagement process involving Providence after-school provider staff, City Hall, youth and parent leaders, and other after-school funders and supporters.

The Providence After School Alliance would like to recognize the following individuals, organizations, and cities for lending their valuable time and expertise to inform the development of Quality Standards for Rhode Island:

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Kansas City Youthnet, Kansas City, MO	National Institute on Out of School Time
The After School Institute, Baltimore, MD	National Afterschool Alliance (formerly NSACA)
Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation, Washington, D.C.	Priscilla Little, Harvard Family Research Project
The After School Corporation, New York, NY	Anne Mackinnon, Editorial Consultant
	Martha Williams, PASA Consultant, Center for Resource Management

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Parent leaders from the West End	Providence Police Department
Community School and Voz Mujer	Providence Public Libraries
	Providence Public School Department
Members of the Quality Improvement Work Group, representing the following organizations:	Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance
Boys & Girls Club of Providence	Rhode Island Department of Education
Campus Compact & Providence College	Rhode Island Kids Count
Capital City Community Centers	SCOPE Central Falls
Childspan	The Institute for the Study & Practice of Nonviolence
CityArts for Youth	The Providence Children’s Museum
City of Providence, ProvStat	United Way of Rhode Island
Community Matters	VSA Arts
Community MusicWorks	West End Community Center
	YMCA of Greater Providence



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