



A SERIES OF FOCUS BRIEFS

## The State of Afterschool Quality



# Promoting Professionalism

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*The role afterschool plays in communities across the country has changed over the past decade. Years ago, first aid qualification and an interest in working with kids was considered adequate professional preparation for staff at drop-in homework help and enrichment programs. The quality standards and assessment tools adopted by 30 states demand a workforce with different knowledge, skills and experience. Afterschool practitioners must be able to form supportive relationships with young people, plan and manage project-based learning, report and analyze student progress data and be knowledgeable of community supports available to the families they serve. The afterschool field has made great progress identifying what constitutes program quality. Now the field must take steps to ensure the afterschool workforce is able to deliver on these quality standards.*

## 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 diverse 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 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 is the afterschool workforce?

When describing the workforce, afterschool researchers and advocates often say it is part-time, young, underpaid and temporary. They paint a picture of staff not much older than the program participants working in afterschool as a way to gain experience for future careers in education, social work, counseling or other youth serving fields. We now know this is not the case. In 2013, NAA conducted a survey of its members to test these assumptions about the pay, experience level and education level of those involved in the afterschool industry. The survey shattered their conclusions—demonstrating the afterschool workforce has higher levels of education, more longevity in the field and are better compensated than previously reported.

Survey findings include:

**34% have a Masters or Doctorate degree and 11% have completed some post-graduate work,**

**39% have been with their current employer for more than 10 years,**

**47% have been in the afterschool field for more than 10 years,**

**70% are salaried employees, and**

**45% are required to obtain at least 16 hours of continuing education/professional development each year to maintain continued employment.<sup>1</sup>**

The data from NAA's initial survey of its members establishes a baseline to work from. The responses show the field is further along a path towards professionalism than initially thought. At the same time, another survey, this one of afterschool grantmakers, demonstrates interest in learning more about the skills, knowledge base and professional goals of the existing workforce while

simultaneously focusing on the development of certifications, credentials and core competencies that could help raise the professionalism of the afterschool workforce.<sup>2</sup> A 2014 survey of NAA affiliates and other afterschool networks and systems reveals a number of local and statewide efforts to provide pathways to increasing the professionalism of afterschool practitioners.

## How do we build a quality afterschool workforce?

Afterschool quality standards provide expectations regarding the skills and abilities program staff should have. Quality standards are an important first step, but without the existence of professional development systems and supports to encourage practitioner's goals of increasing their skills and knowledge, standards are unable to demonstrate their end goal—improvement of student outcomes.

Several barriers make increasing workforce quality and practitioner professionalism challenging. In some states and communities, licensing and regulations are a barrier to increasing workforce quality. Researchers and educators continue to learn the developmental differences between young and school-age children. Current research is further fine-tuning our knowledge, indicating that pre-school, grades K-3 and grades 4-7 represent three very different stages of intellectual, physical and social development—and teachers and parents need to recognize and honor this through curricular and structural reforms in elementary and middle school classrooms. However, childcare licensing often delineates regulations only between infants and toddlers and children ages 4 and up. In these states, professional development is equally blunt and does not offer adequate professional development that meets the needs of afterschool providers. Some states have made progress in

1. NAA Workforce Survey 2013

2. Grantmakers and Thought Leaders on Out-of-School Time: Survey and Interview Report, Summer 2014, pp 16-17.

designing coursework that meets the different skills and knowledge needed by afterschool practitioners, but lack trainers with the knowledge and experience to teach these courses. Finally, public funding for professional development is often limited and diffuse—presenting an additional barrier to increasing workforce quality. States are required to set aside a percentage of CCDF state funds for quality improvement efforts. There is a set minimum percentage of funding that must be set aside to fund professional development for infant and toddler providers. Unfortunately, there is no federal minimum set aside for afterschool professional development. In fact, funds that are earmarked to support afterschool professional development can also be used to support consumer education efforts through the state's resource and referral provider network. States are required to provide professional development to 21st CCLC grantees that run afterschool programs, however because that funding is minimal, the training it funds is typically restricted to staff of 21st CCLC programs only.

**Pre-service requirements**, such as the successful completion of coursework, demonstrating competency in a skill or passing a pre-employment text or exam are common in education and across other career fields. **Core Knowledge and Competency documents (CKC)** provide another approach to describing what an afterschool practitioner must know and be able to do before starting a job. Core Knowledge and Competencies take an additional step towards professionalism by providing a written ladder or lattice of the afterschool practitioner positions in a system. CKCs detail the various levels of responsibility different levels of afterschool program staff and leaders take for ensuring the program meets local or state afterschool standards. NAA adopted a set of Core Knowledge and Competencies in 2011.

The framework addresses the skills and knowledge afterschool professionals must have in the following content areas:

- Child/youth growth and development
- Learning environments and curriculum
- Child/youth observation and assessment
- Interactions with children and youth
- Youth engagement
- Cultural competency and responsiveness
- Family, school and community relationships
- Safety and wellness
- Program planning and development
- Professional development and leadership

In their entirety, these domains define what professionals need to know and be able to do in order to provide quality child and youth programming. Additionally, the CKCs serve as the foundation for decisions and practices carried out by professionals in all settings and programs.<sup>3</sup>

In its survey of members, NAA learned that 45% of respondents must complete at least 16 hours of continuing education/professional development each year as a condition of continued employment. In our conversations with practitioners in the field, we learned that it can be difficult to find suitable professional development coursework for an afterschool practitioner to meet this requirement. When designed well, a quality improvement system offers a **clear framework of professional development and training** aligned to each domain of its quality standards. Courses are crosswalked to standards and it is clear to a practitioner which course or courses he should take to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to move his practice to the next level of proficiency. Far too often this is not the case. Afterschool professionals across the country decry the lack of professional development

3. Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals. NAA, 2011.

focused on the particular developmental needs of school-age children and programs. It is imperative that a professional development system offers a robust selection of coursework and technical assistance opportunities.

A provider **registry** provides an important role in helping practitioners manage their individual learning portfolio of training and experiences. Almost 40 states have child care provider or trainer registries that include resources for afterschool professionals. Registries benefit program leaders and staff as well as program funders and administrators. They are designed to be electronic resumes and portfolios that capture an afterschool professional's education level, professional development activities, work history, certifications and endorsements. Registries also support the development of an individualized professional development plan aligned to career goals and interests.

“We expect the OST workforce to excel at the most difficult forms of teaching—such as project-based learning and inquiry-based approaches without anywhere near the resources or training available to K-12 teachers.”

### **Palm Beach County Partnership: Prime Time Palm Beach County, Palm Beach County Children's Services and Palm Beach State College**

Strong partnerships among agencies in Palm Beach County, Florida have created a linked afterschool quality improvement and school-age professional development system. There are three critical organizations in this partnership:

**The Palm Beach County Children's Services Bureau** was created by voters in Palm Beach County to administer funds raised by a special taxing district. This agency provides leadership, funding and research on behalf of children in the county.

**Prime Time Palm Beach County** is the county's afterschool intermediary, dedicated to improving the quality of afterschool programs in the county through professional development, a quality improvement system, dissemination of research and community engagement.

**The Institute of Early Care and Afterschool Programs at Palm Beach State College** provides professional development coursework for afterschool professionals in Palm Beach.

Working together, these partners have developed leveled Core Competencies, a Quality Improvement System and professional development that provides progressive supports and opportunities to individuals interested in a career in afterschool. Courses at Palm Beach State College are offered on a continuum and provide a clear career ladder. Afterschool professionals can access pre-service education and a School-Age Professional Certificate (SAPC). If they choose, they may leverage the SAPC to enter a degree pathway, earning either an Associates' or Bachelor of Applied Science degree.

Pre-service education requirements, core knowledge and competencies, professional development coursework and a professional development registry should all align to **certification** or a **staff credential** that is transferable from program to program, and ideally, state to state. Certifications are gaining popularity among employees and employers in many industries as a strategy for transparent sharing of skills, knowledge and abilities that helps match employees to employers and jobs. Certificates are awarded by industry associations and recognize proficiency in a set of specialized skills and knowledge. Certificates are more flexible than a 2- or 4-year college degree and are well suited to

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the afterschool workforce. As learned through the 2013 workforce survey, a majority of afterschool practitioners have at least an undergraduate degree, with many having some graduate credits or a master's degree. The ability to augment an existing degree with certifications aligned to the needs of a program or community is a very attractive option. Additionally, the coursework to earn industry certificates require less commitment of time and resources and can sometimes be completed wholly online in an asynchronous environment.

A professional development system is more than a list or calendar of courses that are offered throughout the year. To enable professional growth as well as program quality improvement, there must exist a scaffold of tools and resources that identify personal professional development needs, provide a variety of opportunities to meet those needs, a tool to track accomplishment and a strategy for

## Illinois: Credential

Gateways to Opportunity, Illinois' Professional Development System, offers School-Age and Youth Development (SYAD) credentials. The credentials are designed to certify that an individual has demonstrated on-the-job proficiency in nine content areas. Training for SYAD professionals also includes content in working with children with special needs, culture and diversity and group guidance in addition to advocacy and policy as well as program and agency guidance.

The SYAD credentials are a service of the INCCRRA, the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. INCCRRA supports a number of initiatives designed to support the quality of child care and afterschool programs.

INCCRRA works very closely with NAA's state affiliate, the Illinois AfterSchool Network. In collaboration, the two organizations provide an array of workshops, leadership seminars and an annual conference for afterschool practitioners.

recognizing professional growth and development. In short, a professional development system must include these building blocks:

- Core Knowledge and Competencies,
- A series of coursework to provide necessary pre-service experience and knowledge,
- A strategy for assessing staff training needs,
- A clear framework of professional development coursework and coaching aligned to Core Knowledge and Competencies,
- A registry or electronic portfolio that tracks staff qualifications and training, and
- A credential or certificate that transparently communicates afterschool staff knowledge, skills and abilities to employers and parents.

## How can we sustain workforce and program quality?

Improving program and workforce quality is a chicken and egg proposition. It is impossible to run a quality afterschool program without competent staff. To increase and sustain program quality, the quality improvement system must be equally developed and robust along two parallel tracks:

- There must be foundational documents including quality standards, a quality assessment tool and core knowledge and competencies, AND
- There must be an aligned professional development system that provides supportive coursework, a registry to track professional accomplishments and a system of professional recognition such as an afterschool professional credential or a series of certifications.

Finally, there must be an infrastructure uniting these two parallel tracks that has adequate funding and knowledgeable staff to coordinate multiple funding streams to support the quality improvement system and lead efforts to communicate the benefits of the system to afterschool practitioners and consumers.

Building and sustaining this system is cost- and labor-intensive. It takes time, energy, political capital and a great deal of collaboration. States that have been successful in building systems point to specific strategies that have helped sustain and buoy their work over time. Once a system is built, licensing and regulation change can provide a powerful incentive for programs and practitioners participation. Other states have implemented tiered reimbursement policies—providing higher CCDF subsidy payments to afterschool programs that demonstrate particular levels of staff and program quality. Some programs in turn reinvest the subsidy increase back into the staff by offering training scholarships or tuition reimbursement for training or certificate programs. As noted earlier, staff registries can provide compelling motivation to take professional development coursework by providing a transparent electronic portfolio of personal development and achievement.

## Vermont: Afterschool Professional Development Model

Vermont offers multiple professional development opportunities for afterschool professionals at various points in their careers. Several statewide organizations and public agencies work in partnership to sustain an afterschool professional development and quality improvement system that includes Core Competencies and a Career Advising Guide, two afterschool credentials and on-the-job training.

Working in partnership, the VT Child Development Division, Department for Children and Families, Vermont Afterschool, Inc. and the Northern Lights Career Development Center have created a set of Core Competencies for Afterschool Professionals and aligned professional development opportunities. To bolster the professionalism of the field, the state offers both a Foundations of Afterschool Certificate for new professionals as well as an Afterschool Professional certificate. There are multiple pathways to access the professional development system—through the state child care agency, the Community College of Vermont and Vermont Afterschool, Inc.

Finally, in recognition of the need for continuing professional development and learning for afterschool professionals, Vermont Afterschool has developed ISS-AP, the Individualized System of Support for Afterschool Programs. This program is an intensive, co-hort based coaching model for afterschool leaders. Small groups of leaders commit to four in-person study meetings and follow-up coaching sessions during a one-year period. ISS-AP curriculum is designed to allow afterschool program managers to “go deep” in an area of interest or need. Recent course topics have included: Afterschool Essentials, Building Confidence and Competence in Kids, Family Engagement, STEM in Afterschool, State Policy and Research. Visit the [Vermont Afterschool, Inc. website](#) for more information.

## A Call to Action

Expectations for afterschool programs are high. Increasingly education reformers point to the potential of afterschool and summer programs to close achievement gaps, increase third grade reading proficiency and improve community outcomes. It turns out these expectations are realistic—each month it seems more evidence and research is produced that confirms the power of afterschool programs. The industry will not, however, be able to sustain these outcomes without quality programs staffed by highly qualified professionals.

NAA advocates collaborative action to build and sustain an afterschool quality improvement system that transcends state borders. We want to leverage the existence of exemplary quality system elements across sectors across the country to provide national access to professional development and training opportunities to afterschool professionals of all experience levels. Once we are able to provide equitable access to high quality professional development and learning, will we be able to harness the true potential of afterschool.

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