

# Academic Programming Practices

Most of the afterschool programs in this study specifically targeted students who were struggling academically. Nearly all of the staff we interviewed described the merits of an afterschool program that combined academic skill development with opportunities to explore and encourage students' social development.

All of the programs used evidence-based practices to encourage and facilitate student learning. Three common components for quality academic programming emerged from the study:

- goal-oriented programs
- standards-based learning activities
- research-based curriculum and instructional practices

In this section, we describe what we learned in each area and provide tools to help you reflect on your practices and determine what actions you can take to improve your program.



# Goal-Oriented Programs

## What We Learned

**Programs set specific goals for students' academic achievement.** Most of the programs we studied focused on helping students meet academic expectations by using different instructional approaches than those used during the school day. To do so, programs intentionally set specific, well-articulated instructional goals based on students' academic data. In most of the programs we observed, these goals were written and shared with all staff so that everyone understood what they were trying to accomplish academically with students.

**Programs design learning activities to address specific learning goals in content areas.** The programs we studied connected their academic goals to the school district's instructional goals for specific content areas. Goals emphasized specific learning expectations that linked to the standards and strongly concentrated on improving basic skills. Program leaders encouraged instructional staff to use project-based learning models that integrated content across areas. Sites and programs that emphasized the arts generally had goals to encourage student creativity and expression by extending exposure to a variety of arts experiences. The science programs had goals to awaken or strengthen student curiosity about science and the world while addressing academic improvement and achievement in specific science areas. Programs that focused on the arts or science also usually incorporated learning goals and activities tied to multiple content areas, like literacy and math. The technology programs had goals to provide students with hands-on experience with the mechanics of a broad range of technology skills that could enhance learning in other academic content areas. Homework and tutoring goals focused on



using well-trained staff to help students understand their assignments and be more motivated to complete them.

**Program leaders and staff regularly communicate with school-day staff.** Afterschool staff developed, adapted, or selected tools and methods to maintain contact at regular intervals with school-day staff. The intent of the contact was to keep an integrated focus on academic achievement goals. Interviews, surveys, and observations indicated that programs and sites with full-time leaders were most successful in developing and maintaining ongoing communication with school-day staff.

## How is your program doing?

The next two pages provide tools to help you implement quality practices in your afterschool program.



## Quality-O-Meter Goal-Oriented Programs

Reflect on and rate how well you think your program or site is doing on each item.

All program and site staff have access to a printed or electronic copy of the program's student learning goals and academic expectations.



Afterschool staff meet regularly with school-day staff to coordinate and cooperate on meeting the program's goals for students' academic achievement.



Afterschool activities addressing academic goals and expectations do not directly extend the same instructional approaches used during the school day.



The program's academic goals for students connect to the school day or district's instructional goals for specific content areas.



Program leaders and site coordinators work with the instructional staff to construct and use project-based learning models and strategies tied to multiple content areas.



Program staff utilize self-developed or purchased tools to enhance regular communication with the school-day staff.



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## Planning for Action Goal-Oriented Programs

**Use this tool with your answers on the Quality-O-Meter to help you prioritize your practices and plan your program improvement.**

List the practices in this area that you would like to strengthen or adopt in your program.

List specific steps you can take to strengthen or adopt these practices in your program.

What individuals and groups need to be involved?

What information and other resources will be needed to implement the step(s)?

Describe how you envision your plan of action being implemented, including specific actions, responsibilities, and timelines.

To build understanding and support for the steps you plan to take, what do you need to do, to whom do you need to talk, and what points will you need to stress? (What is in it for them?)

How will implementing the steps to strengthen these practices benefit your program? (What is in it for the program and for you?)

How will you determine if the step(s) have been implemented as planned and are achieving the expected results?

Other ideas for better orienting your program around academic goals:

# Standards-Based Learning Activities

## What We Learned

**Program leaders are knowledgeable about standards and purposeful in ensuring that standards-based learning activities are being provided.**

All of the programs we studied had incorporated state or national standards into their curriculum to some degree. However, staff in school-based programs were more familiar with standards and better able to develop specific activities to address them than staff in community-based programs. Some programs, usually those in which instructors had a limited background in formal learning techniques, had staff with classroom experience develop and/or monitor the standards-based academic activities being offered.

**Instructors describe attributes of learning activities that tie to the standards.**

Afterschool program staff appeared knowledgeable about linking the curriculum to standards and were purposeful in the delivery of the standards-based curriculum. In many sites we visited, certified teachers were hired and they modeled quality instructional practices connecting activities to standards. In a number of programs, again more often those in which instructors had little or no formal educational training, survey data indicated that staff had little direct knowledge of the state standards. But when asked questions that included a standard, virtually all staff members described in detail how they tied activities to that standard. At the same time, in our observations, staff knowledge of content-area standards varied by content area.

**Site coordinators are the most familiar with content standards in programs where mathematics is the focus.** Staff that helped students with mathematics reported using activities that incorporated standards for using basic numerical functions (e.g., addition and subtraction of whole numbers, pattern recognition). In addition, half of the staff providing mathematics assistance reported using activities that incorporated higher-level standards (e.g., problem solving; using equations and understanding or applying mean, range, and median), particularly when working with students who had stronger basic mathematics skills.

**Program science instructors intentionally use a standards-based curriculum for their activities and can provide reasoning for the focus on specific standards.** Most science instructors in the programs we studied reported using specific state and national science standards for particular age groups as the basis of their instruction. For example, a number of science program staff reported using standards for basic scientific understanding and technology use to help students conduct various projects.

**Literacy program staff incorporate standards into their programming.** In the programs we studied, almost all of the literacy program staff reported using standards related to vocabulary and fluency development in read-aloud or silent-reading activities. In addition, some upper-grade-level staff said they used self-correcting strategies to help students decode text and understand literary techniques.

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**Technology activities include national standards.** Although technology staff described their knowledge of standards as weak to moderate, the majority used activities or methodology that clearly reflected national or state standards or both. Observations and interviews also indicated that most programs used technology activities and materials for the following, all of which tie directly into the national technology learning standards:

- productions and creative projects and exercises
- communication of information and ideas
- student research
- solving real-world problems

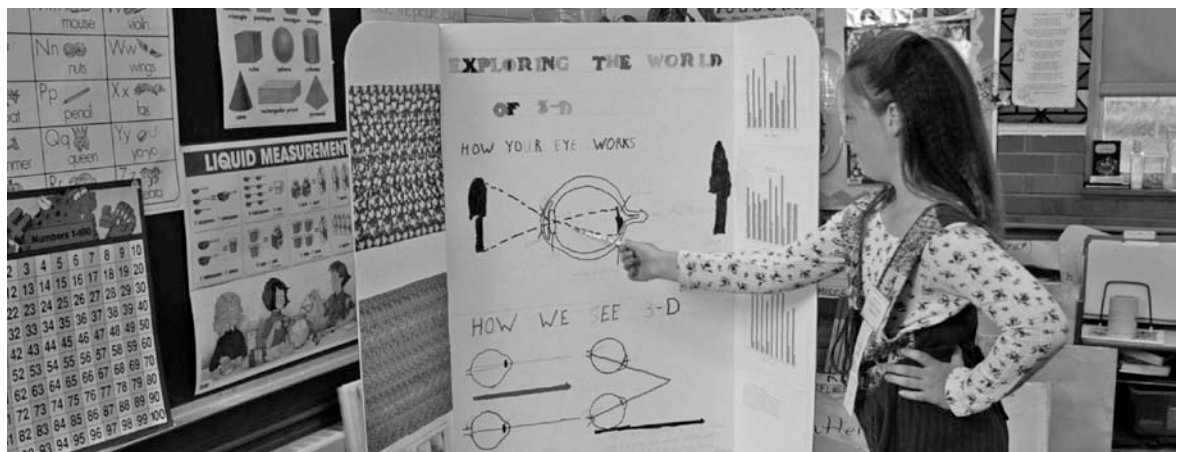
Additionally, most technology staff said that they provided students with opportunities to practice responsible behavior in the use of technology, and almost half of the staff reported applying a national standard in which students research and evaluate the accuracy and bias of digital information.

**Arts program staff incorporate national standards.** In the programs we studied, virtually all of the arts staff reported that they incorporated national standards for applied art techniques and processes into literacy, math, and science activities. In addition, about one third of the arts staff indicated that they used technology activities that incorporated the standard to use technology as a creative tool.

**Program staff are more knowledgeable about and attentive to academic standards over time.** The study involved site visits conducted over a period of 3-and-a-half years. During the first 18 months, the data we collected suggested that a number of program staff in the literacy and mathematics sites we visited had a limited knowledge or understanding of academic standards. During the final 2 years of visits to arts, science, technology, and homework help sites, program staff were able to describe the academic standards and explain how activities were designed to meet specific standards. Program leaders in these sites reported that an increased emphasis on academic standards in federal program regulations and professional development that targeted strategies for improving students' academic achievement contributed to staffs' ability to articulate knowledge about content standards. During the final year of the study, most of the technology and arts sites we visited had developed and implemented projects that included integrated learning activities that clearly addressed specific standards in multiple content areas.

### How is your program doing?

The next two pages provide tools to help you implement quality practices in your afterschool program.





## Standards-Based Learning Activities

Reflect on and rate how well you think your program or site is doing on each item.

Program and site leaders are knowledgeable about state and national learning standards.



Program and site leaders are able to facilitate curriculum planning linked to state or national standards as well as to school and district goals.



Academic activities offered at program sites intentionally address specific content learning standards that are linked to the school day.



Structured professional development on ways to integrate academic content standards into learning activities is provided for site coordinators and instructors.



Program learning activities address student learning goals based on student data.



Program leaders and staff communicate regularly with school-day staff about student achievement goals.



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## Planning for Action Standards-Based Learning Activities

**Use this tool with your answers on the Quality-O-Meter to help you prioritize your practices and plan your program improvement.**

List the practices in this area that you would like to strengthen or adopt in your program.

List specific steps you can take to strengthen or adopt these practices in your program.

What individuals and groups need to be involved?

What information and other resources will be needed to implement the step(s)?

Describe how you envision your plan of action being implemented, including specific actions, responsibilities, and timelines.

To build understanding and support for the steps you plan to take, what do you need to do, to whom do you need to talk, and what points will you need to stress? (What is in it for them?)

How will implementing the steps to strengthen these practices benefit your program? (What is in it for the program and for you?)

How will you determine if the step(s) have been implemented as planned and are achieving the expected results?

Other ideas for improving your program's offering of standards-based learning activities:



# Research-Based Curriculum and Instructional Practices

## What We Learned

**Programs of different sizes, physical locations, and structure intentionally use research-based academic activities to enrich learning.** All of the programs we visited, regardless of their size, location, rural or urban setting, or community and program demographics, intentionally incorporated academics by using research-based strategies and practices to enhance student academic achievement.

Programs that emphasized any of the six content areas—literacy, mathematics, science, the arts, technology, and homework/tutoring—used research-based learning activities. Regardless of size or location, staff could find resources to support research-based practices. We frequently saw instructors using direct instruction, various exploration activities, and models where students constructed meaning through a variety of engaging hands-on activities. Some specific examples of research-based practices we observed include the following:

- Programs focused on enhancing literacy skills incorporated practices such as read alouds and literacy circles/groups to improve specific reading skills, including language fluency, vocabulary development, comprehension, and interpretation.
- Mathematics programs used math centers, research-supported math activities, and math encountered in everyday activities to strengthen students' ability to use mathematical tools, understand basic numerical functions, analyze word problems, and interpret instructions for problem solving.
- Science programs used research-supported activities such as describing and conducting scientific procedures, using tools to gather and analyze data, designing and conducting investigations, and conducting experiments and using evidence to predict and explain.
- Technology programs used the most content-integrated curriculum and reported frequently using research-supported practices such as building skills and understanding, gathering, and sharing information.
- Programs in the arts used research-based practices such as building arts skills, expressing yourself through the arts, and developing arts skills like interpretation. All the arts activities involved students creating products that were then shared and critiqued, either by the students themselves or their peers.
- The programs visited during the later portion of the study were developing and using project-based learning models. Evidence, cited by the programs and supported in the literature, indicates that integrating learning goals across content areas with an expected product can positively affect academic achievement and youth development goals. Interviews in the programs with project-based activities indicated that the participating students had improved academic performance and school-day attendance, and fewer behavior issues than prior to the use of projects as a learning focus.

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**Programs use homework and tutoring assistance to develop increased academic knowledge and skills as well as youth development skills.** Programs and sites where homework and/or tutoring activities were observed used practices consistent with current research evidence defining quality academic assistance. These programs and sites relied on staff with strong content knowledge and interpersonal skills to provide direct academic assistance to meet the needs of students, either individually or in cooperative, collaborative groups. A number of the sites paid particular attention and time to strengthening students' study skills, work habits, and organizing practices. Additionally, these programs addressed issues such as time management, locating and using source material, note taking, and test preparation.

Staff in almost every program that focused on homework or one of the content areas indicated concern about the amount and type of homework assigned by school-day staff. Afterschool staff said the homework assigned to students often was not reflective of quality practices described in the current research literature on homework. For this reason, staff reported incorporating additional learning activities into their homework assistance or tutoring.

### How is your program doing?

The next two pages provide tools to help you implement quality practices in your afterschool program.



## Research-Based Curriculum and Instructional Practices

Reflect on and rate how well you think your program or site is doing on each item.

Program staff use a range of research-based learning practices to support increased academic improvement.



The program or site uses a research-based curriculum with an emphasis on hands-on instructional practices.



Program staff locate and utilize resources that support research-based practices.



Learning activities include project-based strategies that focus on multiple content areas and extend beyond a single lesson.



Program staff use research-based knowledge and skills to provide homework and tutoring assistance that appropriately supports students' academic needs.



Homework and tutoring assistance reflects current research on the best use of time, space, and materials.



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## Planning for Action Research-Based Curriculum and Instructional Practices

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Other ideas for improving the use of research-based curriculum and instructional practices in your program: