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Identification of Key Indicators for Quality in Afterschool Programs

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Abstract: Researchers are increasingly interested in the issue of school accountability. Despite this, program standards for afterschool programs are not as fully developed as in other fields. This study bridges that gap and presents the results from a study to identify benchmarks and indicators for high quality afterschool programs. This research employed a multimethod approach including a synthesis of literature on afterschool programs, observations and survey data collection at 15 high quality afterschool program sites. Results of the study suggest that most of the issues emphasized in the afterschool literature can be considered core components of a quality afterschool program. This finding was consistent across the three broad categories of program organization, program environment, and instructional features. This study also revealed that some issues emphasized in the afterschool literature should be considered extra components that can increase quality, but are not necessary. As a result, this study argues for a checklist strategy in assessing programs to meet quality-based standards.

The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB 2002) has led to increased demand for school accountability in the United States. In particular, NCLB calls for school-based efforts to close the achievement gap and to ensure that all students, including those who are disadvantaged, gain academic proficiency. Under NCLB, schools must provide parents and the community with annual reports about their academic progress. Schools that lack progress may use afterschool programs as a supplemental service to help students learn more effectively. Although afterschool programs were initially created as safe havens for students, NCLB reinforces the important role that afterschool programs can have in increasing students' academic proficiency and school engagement.

In response, government emphasis on afterschool programs has increased. The U.S. Department of Education (2011) now allocates over one billion per year through its 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program. Furthermore, multiple states have passed legislation to provide new or increased funding (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). Within California alone, the budget for afterschool programs increased fourfold with the enactment of Proposition 49 in 2006 (California After-School Network, 2007).

Although legislation directed at increasing funding for afterschool programs is clearly an important priority, the ability to fund quality programs is an effort that requires immediate attention. As recent reviews have shown, not all programs are organized or implemented in ways that positively impact student outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg/Pachan, 2010; Lauer et al., 2006; Scott-Little/Hamann/Jurs, 2002). In or-

der to improve quality, there is a call for funding agencies and other policymakers to enact accountability systems (Wright, 2005). As was suggested in the Governor's Guide to Extra Learning Opportunities (Wright, 2005): (a) standardized expectations for afterschool programs should be set to ensure that they are run efficiently and effectively; and, (b) programs should be consistently evaluated to improve upon their structures and implementation.

The effort is complex. In order to follow Wright's (2005) suggestions, the research community needs to test indicators of quality and provide meaningful recommendations for how programs can be improved. Furthermore, researchers have to take into account that (a) not all programs serve children with similar characteristics (i.e., race, socioeconomic status, and age), (b) different programs have different goals and approaches, and (c) many differ in their desired program outcome (e.g., academic achievement, enrichment, or drug use prevention). It is for these reasons that researchers need to take into account the variability of existing afterschool programs while exploring key components of quality in afterschool programming.

With this growing interest in program quality, an increasing number of tools have been made available for the assessment of afterschool programs. In 2009, Yohalem/Wilson-Ahlstrom conducted a study to review current assessment tools and compare their purposes, structures, contents, and technical properties. Their *Guide to Assessment Tools* provides valuable information for researchers and evaluators. At the same time, there is a need for less-complex tools to be developed for use by afterschool programs that lack access to internal or external evaluators with backgrounds in afterschool program evaluation. They need an easy-to-use tool that focuses on benchmarking, so that programs can begin the process of continuous self-improvement.

Thus, the primary purpose of this paper is to inform the research community about ways in which afterschool programs can benefit students by implementing simple but effective strategies and components that promote program success and improvement. In this paper we (a) describe the review of literature that was conducted in order to develop a theoretical model, benchmarks and indicators, (b) results of the validation study, and (c) the establishment of the Quality Benchmark Rating System (QBRS) as a preliminary tool to assess afterschool quality.

1 Review of Literature

Benchmarking is a technique for assessing quality and managing change. Widespread use of this technique in business settings began in the 1980s with the company-wide adoption of benchmarking by Xerox in order to improve their products and processes (Shetty, 1993). In more recent years, the use of this technique has spread to higher education institutions looking to improve their management and instruction (Chaffee/Sherr, 1992; Clark, 1993).

Researchers in business and education settings often separate benchmarking into internal and external forms (Barber, 2004). Internal benchmarking is conducted within an organization to determine why certain units outperform others. In contrast, external benchmarking focuses on comparing an organization to others that demon-

strate best practices while providing similar services (Barber, 2004; Mancuso, 2001; Patton, 2001). One of the major advantages of the latter approach is that organizations are exposed to new ideas and proven practices (Barber, 2004).

When developing a benchmarking system it is important for researchers to use analytical criteria. According to Michael Scriven (2007), these criteria should focus on primary indicators of merit (also known as comlists), should be based on evidence from across organizations, and should be combinable into a valid rating. Within this section of the paper, we provide detailed descriptions of how the primary indicators of quality were selected, as well as how the quality benchmarks were validated.

Identification of the Literature

A synthesis of literature was conducted for this study. This approach is similar to a meta-analysis, defined as a "type of systematic review that uses statistical methods to combine and summarize the results of several primary studies" (Cook/Mulrow,/ Haynes, 1997, p. 376). This is the preferred model for analysis in reviewing a large body of literature. In this study, the strategy of synthesizing literature was chosen because few studies with qualifying quantitative data or empirical evidence emerged from the literature search. In acknowledging the limitations of this process, caution should be taken when drawing formal inferences to the larger population.

Two search strategies were used in order to identify relevant studies and reports. First, searches were conducted of multiple library databases using CSA Illumina (ERIC, Education: A Sage Full-text Collection, NITS, and PsycINFO) using variants of the term "afterschool program" as keywords or descriptors. Second, searches were made for afterschool program studies and reports on the web sites of the Afterschool Alliance, After School Corporation Harvard Family Research Project, RAND Corporation, and Public/Private Ventures.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then established in order to determine which studies and reports should be further reviewed. Studies eligible for inclusion (a) were published or written between 1985 and 2007, (b) were written in English, (c) referred to programs for K-12 students, and (d) either concluded with or commented on quality indicators of afterschool programs. Furthermore, in order to cover a broad range of relevant literature, studies could be either empirical investigations that aimed to identify characteristics of effective afterschool programs or reviews of literature that summarized quality indicators based on existing literature and/or the author's own experience and knowledge. All studies focused on college students were excluded from review.

From all the previously mentioned sources, the research team identified 54 studies that met the criteria for inclusion. These studies included review articles, summaries, policy reports, and evaluation reports. They were often written by researchers and experts who had extensive experience in the field of afterschool programming.

Theoretical Model and Coding of the Literature

The 54 studies in the final sample were each independently reviewed by three research team members. Except for the principle researcher whom reviewed and approved of the ratings, the team members all worked in the educational field for over five years. Each study was coded for the presence of quality indicators and benchmarks focused on the three broad categories of program organization, program environment, and instructional features. Since the quality indicators and benchmarks emerged from the coding process, the research team used a system of deliberate discussion and consensus rather than Kappa coefficients to obtain reliability.

Despite observed differences among the 54 articles, 14 benchmarks with substantial overlapping consistencies emerged. Each of the benchmarks received support from at least one-quarter of the sources. The following describes each benchmark, their prevalence in the literature, and the indictors extracted.

Program Organization

Research on quality afterschool programs consistently identifies strong program organization as a crucial element for effective programs (Alexander, 1986; Beckett/Hawken/Jacknowitz, 2001; C. S. Mott Foundation Committee on After-School Research and Practice, 2005; Fashola, 1998; Huang, 2001; McElvain/Caplan, 2001; Philadelphia Youth Network, 2003; Schwendiman/Fager, 1999). In 2005, the C. S. Mott Foundation Committee on After-School Research and Practice suggested a "theory of change" framework for afterschool programs that explicitly links program organization and participant outcomes to program effectiveness and quality. Seven specific elements of program organization are consistently referenced in the literature. They include program management and program administration ($n = 40$); staff support, experience, and training ($n = 49$); family and community involvement, and community partnerships ($n = 39$); and evaluation ($n = 19$).

Program management and program administration. Effective program management is necessary for quality-based afterschool programs. Huang (2001) specified that effective program organization should include a strong team of program staff who demonstrate leadership skills, positive organizational climate and inclusive decision-making. More specifically, it is important to have leadership articulate a shared mission statement and program vision that motivates staff, provides a positive organizational climate that validates staff commitment to these goals, as well as open the communication channels between afterschool, day school, parent, and community (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Wright/Deich/Szekely, 2006). Strong program management also provides adequate compensation for staff, thus decreasing the likelihood of high turnover rates (Beckett et al., 2001; C. S. Mott Foundation, 2005; de Kanter, 2001). Moreover, a strong leadership team and committed staff must also plan for program sustainability and growth through effective administration (ERIC Development Team, 1998), including a systematic organization of student records, program attendance, resource needs, program budget, a future financial plan and marketing (St. Clair, 2004).

Staff support. A strong management team that is committed to achieve program goals should provide their staff with adequate support to perform their duties. At the basic level, staff must be provided with sufficient materials to conduct program activities (St. Clair, 2004). Positive working environment, such as clear expectations for staff performance, a job orientation prior to beginning work, time and space to express concerns, continuous feedback on their performance, a shared decision-making process, opportunities for staff to collaborate and express their individual talents are all strategies that will promote sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and provide opportunities for staff to make an impact on program quality (Beckett et al., 2001).

Staff experience and training. In order to enhance staff efficacy, the staff must have the appropriate experience and training in working with afterschool students (Alexander, 1986; Fashola, 1998; de Kanter, 2001; ERIC Development Team, 1998; Harvard Family Research Project, 2005; Huang, 2001; Schwartz, 1996). For example, each staff member should be competent in core academic areas for the respective age groups that they work with. Beyond academic competency, staff should also be culturally competent, knowledgeable of diverse cultures and the social influences that can impact the lives of the students in the program (Huang, 2001; Schwartz, 1996). When the demographics of program staff reflect the diversity of the community in which the program is located, these staff can better serve as mentors and role models to the student participants (Huang, 2001; Vandell/Shumow, 1999). To ensure high quality instruction, staff should be consistently provided with opportunities for professional development (Wright, 2005). To demonstrate academic effects, it is also important for students in the program to have sufficient access to qualified staff – to ensure each student is given sufficient attention, according to her or his individual needs. Thus, having adequate staff to student ratios is an important indicator of quality for afterschool programs (Yohalem, Pittman/Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004).

Family and community involvement. Research on afterschool programs consistently associates family and community involvement with program quality (Owens/Vallercamp, 2003; Tolman et. al., 2002). Programs can promote family and community involvement by setting defined plans to involve parents, family members, and community volunteers. For example, they can organize orientation sessions for incoming students and their families. At these sessions, families can be introduced to different involvement opportunities. Meanwhile, staff can regularly communicate with parents and families to provide a clear channel of communication that keeps parents informed of their children's progress in the program (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Wright et al., 2006). With open communication, families may also feel more comfortable engaging with staff about how the program can better support the needs of the student participants. When family involvement is acknowledged and encouraged, families and staff can work together to ensure high quality programming (Chung, 2000; Tolman/Pittman/Yohalem, Thomases/Trammel, 2002).

Community partnerships. Beyond students' families, the local community is another valuable resource for afterschool programs. Research shows that high quality programs are consistently engaged with local community members, leaders, and organizations that can form important partnerships in program planning and funding

(Birmingham/Pechman/Russell/Mielke, 2005; Harvard Family Research Project, 2005; Owens/Vallercamp, 2003; Wright, 2005). Through these partnerships, students can further develop knowledge of community resources, services, and histories. In turn, students may be encouraged to participate in community service projects that can reflect a sense of empowerment and pride in their respective communities. Programmatic efforts to form community partnerships can include inviting community members as guest speakers and recruiting local volunteers.

Evaluation. As an instrument to inform continuous self-improvement, periodic evaluations are critical for the sustainability of afterschool programs (Huang, 2001). Furthermore, having evidence of program outcomes is essential for continued and/or increased funding and support (Scott-Little/Hamann/Jurs, 2002; Wright et al., 2006). Therefore, evaluations should be administered regularly to ensure continuous improvement and assess program effectiveness (C. S. Mott Foundation, 2005).

Thus, high quality afterschool programs should have a detailed plan for evaluation of program activities, staff performance, and student development (Seppanen et al., 1993). Student's academic improvement and social skills development can be especially important in documenting program outcomes. Overall satisfaction evaluations can also be assessed among staff, students and families to ensure expectations and needs of all program participants are being met (Fashola, 1998). Evaluation findings should be consistently reviewed and made readily available to examine program progress.

Program Environment

The program environment focuses on how the structure of the afterschool program creates an atmosphere conducive to positive academic achievement and self-esteem for youth; they are "attractive affective contexts" for youth development (Kahne et al., 2001, p. 421). The four main elements of the program environment, which are consistently referenced by the research include: safe environment (n = 30), student health and well-being (n = 27), well-equipped/suitable physical space (n = 21), and positive relationships (n = 30).

Safe environment and well-equipped/suitable physical space. First and foremost the most important feature of the program environment is safety and security within the indoor and outdoor space. It is well documented that program space should be safe, clean, and secure for cultivating confidence and self-esteem for students (Chung, 2000; National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2002; New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition, 2002; North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs, n.d.; Philadelphia Youth Network, 2003; St. Clair, 2004; Wright et al., 2006); no potential harm should be placed upon the health and physical/emotional well-being of students (Safe and Sound, 1999). Adequate and comfortable space is needed for staff members to conduct a range of activities that promote both the mental and physical wellness of students. The indoor and outdoor space should also be used appropriately; catering to the activity being carried out (e.g., sports, creative arts, and eating), so that the goals of the activities are sufficiently met. In addition, there should be ample storage space for equipment, materials, and personal possessions. Equipment

should be able to be stored for easy student access and availability. The main aim is to make sure that students are in a safe, supervised environment that provides ample resources for mental and physical growth. The establishment of a physically and emotionally safe environment thus helps the development of positive relationships within the program environment.

Student health and well-being. Another facet of the program environment is the need to promote student wellness through health and nutrition education (de Kanter 2001; National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2002; North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs, n.d.; Philadelphia Youth Network, 2003; Wright, 2005). Nutritional time in afterschool programs offer students time to share meals and socialize with their peers while developing healthy snack habits that enhance student's well-being (Chung, 2000). Furthermore, quality-based afterschool programs provide environments that enhance the well-being of students by educating them and providing them with nutritious snacks adequate to portion size; and instructing the staff to minimize the health risks of students (e.g., having students wash their hands, having frequent restroom breaks). Exposure to health and wellness practices in the program environment allows students to be active and more fully engaged in nutrition and fitness related activities in their own lives (Wright, 2005).

Positive relationships. The emotional climate of the program environment is characterized by warm, supportive relationships between the staff members and students, among the students themselves, and between staff members. These three types of relationships within the program setting signify positive, influential connections for the students (Beckett et al., 2001; Birmingham et al., 2005; Huang, 2001). First, the interaction between the staff members and students is vital for demonstrating affirmative adult-student relationships, aside from primary-based interactions within the home (Beckett et al., 2001; Birmingham et al., 2005; Bodily/Beckett, 2005; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1994; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition, 2002). Quality-based afterschool programs are structured to have written guidelines for staff-student relations so that the staff members are able to set appropriate guidelines and limits for students through positive behavior management strategies.

Secondly, staff members should be expected to be emotionally invested in the lives of their students. Quality-based programs foster this relationship by enforcing a small staff-student ratio that provides a "family-like" atmosphere, and contributes to positive social development for students (Beckett et al., 2001; Bodily/Beckett, 2005; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1994; Chung, 1997, 2000; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1999). Staff members are able to form more personable, one-on-one relationships with students through daily conversations and engagement (St. Clair, 2004). Consequently, this initiates a sense of community and belonging for the students because they are personally bonded to staff members (Wright et al., 2006).

Thirdly, positive peer relationships and friendships are a key ingredient in shaping students' social-emotional development (Safe and Sound, 1999; Huang, 2001; Halpern, 2004; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; Pechman/Marzke, 2003; Safe and Sound, 1999; Huang, 2001; Yohalem et al., 2004; Yohalem/Wilson-Ahlstrom/Yu, 2005). Students need to interact with each other, building strong "partner-

ships" based on trust and respect with their peers (Yohalem et al., 2004). Healthy interaction with other students of various ages, and being involved in age appropriate activities helps students to demonstrate appropriate problem solving strategies, especially during times of conflict (Wright et al., 2006).

Finally, the adult relationships between staff members are important in constructing an emotional climate within the program environment. Students observe positive adult interactions through effective communication and cooperation of the staff in working together to meet the needs of students and the program (Yohalem et al., 2005). This relationship is an appropriate way in which the staff can model positive behavior to students. Staff members, for that reason, need to embrace assessment-based improvement plans as "relevant, contextual, and potentially helpful" (Weisberg/McLaughin, 2004). Staff members must see the relevance of quality-based standards in shaping positive developmental outcomes for students.

Thus, the program environment within high quality afterschool programs should offer a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment for all participants. This includes a physical and social environment that fosters resilient outcomes through the reinforcement of positive relationships, nutrition, and physical/academic activities (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; Huang, 2001; New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition, 2002; St. Clair, 2004).

Instructional Features

Afterschool programs vary greatly in their emphasis: ranging from providing supervision or tutoring, to the promotion of specific learning and development. Increasingly, though, despite any specific curricular emphasis, programs are focusing on providing a well-rounded variety of activities and opportunities that support the physical, social, and cognitive development of their student participants. The three main instructional features, which are consistently referenced by the research include: 1) the quality of activity implementation ($n = 44$), offering a variety of activities (academic = 36, enrichment = 32, socialization = 18), and emphasizing principles of youth development ($n = 15$).

Quality of implementation. According to Yohalem/Wilson-Ahlstrom/Yu (2005), setting and opportunities provided to participants vary greatly across programs. However, despite the variety that exists, there are steps that programs can take during the design of their curriculum and implementation of activities to help ensure quality. This is especially important for quality-based programs since the tailoring of teaching strategies and curricular content to the needs of students may be associated with student outcomes (Bodily/Beckett, 2005). Employing a variety of research-proven teaching and learning strategies can help staff members to increase engagement among students with different learning styles (Birmingham et al., 2005). Furthermore, a failure to design activities that meet the needs and interests of students may result in reduced program attendance. For example, Sepannen and colleagues (1993) suggested that reduced afterschool enrollment for students in upper elementary and above may be the result of a lack of age appropriate activities for older students.

Variety of activities. Providing a variety of activities is a practice supported in the afterschool literature. By emphasizing variety, programs are able to extend rather than duplicate the school day experience (Wright, 2005; Wright et al., 2006). This is important since programs that focus rigidly on the school day curriculum have been found to have lower participation (Kugler, 2001). In part, this may be due to gender differences. For example, Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) found an association between participation in programs offering a variety of activities and positive social relationships for boys. In addition, their research suggested that a long-term lack of variety in programming might be associated with negative outcomes for boys, but not for girls. Posner and Vandell (1999) extended this finding when they found gender differences concerning activity preferences. In their study, they found that girls spent greater amounts of time socializing and doing academic activities during out-of-school time than boys, while boys spent greater amounts of time than girls participating in coached sports.

Support youth development. Increasingly, among the educational community, there is a call for the development of the whole child. In 2004, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development adopted the position that educational practice and policy should focus on development of the whole child. As part of this position, they provided a framework for how communities, schools and teachers can contribute to this movement. The child development literature also describes a whole child approach to cultivate the students' intellectual, social and emotional well-being in order for them to achieve their full potential (Hodgkinson, 2006; Schaps, 2006).

In order to develop the whole child, education programs need to focus on a variety of youth outcomes (American Youth Policy Forum, 2004). As schools are increasingly emphasizing cognitive outcomes on core academics, afterschool programs have the opportunity to fill an important gap. In other words, afterschool programs can provide students with additional opportunities to develop skills, knowledge, resiliency, and self-esteem that will help them to succeed in life (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Beckett et al., 2001; Huang, 2001; Wright et al., 2006). With this in mind, researchers and policymakers are placing increasing emphasis on the inclusion of youth development principles within afterschool settings (Birmingham et al., 2005; Kahne et al., 2001).

Therefore, the instructional features of afterschool programs should emphasize the quality and variety of activities, as well as principles of youth development. This includes giving students opportunities to develop personal responsibility, a sense of self-direction, and leadership skills (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; C. S. Mott Foundation, 2005; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004, 2005, 2006).

Identifying quality indicators and benchmarks within these specific areas, that are not only preventive of negative outcomes but also promote positive youth development, will be an important step toward informing policy on afterschool activities and instruction. Efficient organization, environment and instruction are crucial for maintaining high quality afterschool programs. Mission and vision statements enable program staff to take leadership in achieving stated goals and organizing programmatic efforts to achieve those goals. Having a strong team of program staff who are qualified, experienced and open to professional development opportunities is critical for successful organization and an overall high quality program. Beyond program staff, involvement of children's families and communities can enhance the

afterschool program experience, foster program growth and increase program sustainability. It is important for quality afterschool programs to look continually for ways to improve. Thus, consistent and systematic methods of evaluation are important to ensure children, families and communities involved in the program are being effectively served.

2 Validation Study

Program Identification and Recruitment of Participants

In this study, external benchmarking was utilized. In order to ensure that the programs evaluated would demonstrate best practices, a referral list was passed among the California State coordinators for them to recommend afterschool programs that they deemed as functioning "above the par." A comprehensive examination of program histories, profiles on parent satisfaction, awards received, and performance records was then conducted to affirm the quality of the five most frequently mentioned programs and their afterschool sites. The location of the programs in Los Angeles County and their service of elementary students was also taken into consideration.

Based on the recommendations and review of documents, five sites at each of three afterschool programs (Los Angeles Better Educated Students for Tomorrow [LA's BEST], Lawndale Realizing Amazing Potential [RAP], and Pasadena Leading Educational Achievement – Revitalizing Neighborhoods [LEARNs]) were selected for the study. These three programs have each been designated as a *California After School Partnership* (CASP) *Regional Learning Center*. Furthermore, each of the programs serves similar student populations. The student population at all three programs were predominately Latina/o, followed by African American. Furthermore, White, Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander students composed approximately 15% of the total population served at each program. On average, most of the students who were enrolled in the programs qualified for free or reduced lunch. The three programs also shared major programmatic features (i.e., homework assistance, academic enrichment, and non-academic enrichment) as required by their receipt of state or federal funding. Participants at each program site included the program directors ($n = 15$) and site staff ($n = 102$). At two of the afterschool sites the assistant program directors also participated ($n = 2$).

Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation

During 2007, two-day site visits were conducted at each of the 15 afterschool sites. Three instruments were developed for use during these visits: an observation protocol, a program director survey, and a site staff survey.

Observations. The observation protocol was designed to examine quality indicators of program environment and instructional features. Within this instrument, items focused on the presence of instructional features were measured dichotomously. In most cases these measurements took place three times and normally lasted 45–60

minutes in length. Dichotomous measurements were also made concerning staff and student relationships. In contrast, items focused on program environment were primarily measured using a four-item scale: *not evident*, *somewhat evident*, *moderately evident*, and *consistently evident*. Each observer was trained on how to complete the ratings and scales before entering the field.

The observation procedures were designed to emphasize breadth rather than depth, with each researcher shadowing a different staff member over the course of an afternoon. Each site visit included two observers, resulting in four observations being collected per afterschool site. The afterschool staff members who were shadowed were selected in order to ensure that each site visit included different grade levels (i.e., primary and upper elementary) and programmatic requirements (i.e., homework assistance, academic enrichment, non-academic enrichment, snack time, and check-in and check-out). Furthermore, observations of the different programs were conducted at different times during the school year: LA's BEST during spring 2007, Lawndale RAP during summer 2007, and Pasadena LEARNs during fall 2007.

Surveys. All staff members at the afterschool sites were asked to complete one survey during the week prior to the research team's site visit. The program director survey focused on indicators of program management and was completed by the staff member at each site who manages day-to-day operations. All items on this survey were asked using four-point agreement scales with a score of 1 representing *strongly disagree* and a score of 4 indicating *strongly agree*. The activity leaders were also asked to complete a site staff survey, which included questions focusing on all three broad categories: program organization, program environment, and instructional features. Unlike the program director survey, this instrument included both the four-point agreement scale as well as *check all that apply* items.

Data Analysis for the Validation Study

When developing benchmarks, Scriven's (1981) weight and sum methodology can be used to measure criteria and calculate overall quality. Within this study, weighting systems were developed to analyze the relevance of (1) the indicators and (2) the benchmarks based on their prevalence at the high-quality afterschool programs.

Given the results of the synthesis of literature, the research team considered all of the benchmarks and indicators as criteria for determining what high-quality afterschool programs ought to have in place (under ideal conditions). However, in daily practice, afterschool practitioners constantly deal with competing demands and limited time, space, and resources; because of these factors, even high-quality programs may not be able to implement all of the benchmarks and their indicators. At the same time, afterschool programs with different focuses (such as academic or positive youth development) may not target the same skills and student outcomes. Under this rationale, it was decided to weight the surveys, observations, and benchmarks using a two-thirds rule.

Step 1 – Weighting the indicators. First, all data were analyzed at the site-level. If an indicator was examined by a single item from the instruments, then two-thirds of the responses aggregated to the site-level was required in order to consider the indi-

cator as prevalent or "met." If an indicator was examined using multiple items from the instruments, then two-thirds of the responses, or at least two-thirds of those items aggregated to the site-level, would be required to consider the indicator as "met." When an indicator was analyzed with items from both survey instruments (site staff, project director), aggregate responses were considered equally. When an indicator was analyzed with items from one or more survey instruments and the observation protocol, aggregate survey responses were considered more heavily (2:1) than the observers' responses. This was done to account for the fact that the research team shadowed only four staff members at each site.

Step 2 – Weighting the benchmarks. Second, the data was analyzed at the benchmark-level. Benchmarks that were found to be present across at least two-thirds of the sites were considered "core," or mandatory for high quality. In other words, the research team considered these benchmarks as necessary components for the daily operation of quality afterschool programs. Taking into account their prevalence in the literature, those benchmarks found to be present at less than two-thirds of the sites were then classified as additional or "exemplary" components that programs could use to further enhance their overall quality.

Step 3 – Finalizing the indicators. Finally, the results from the two-thirds rule were used to determine which indicators would be included in the QBRS. Indicators for benchmarks that met the criteria for being classified as core were automatically accepted. In contrast, only those indicators that met the two-thirds rule for the exemplary benchmarks were included.

Results of the Validation Study

Program organization. For program organization, seven benchmarks were extracted from the synthesis of literature, with each having between three and five indicators. When using the two-thirds rule most of the benchmarks had all or most of their indicators met. The exceptions included family involvement and community partnerships, with fewer sites having plans in place for parent involvement ($M = 0.46$), opportunities for parent feedback ($M = 0.46$), plans for community involvement ($M = 0.46$), or partnerships with local organizations ($M = 0.60$). As a result, the benchmark for family involvement barely met the threshold for core quality with a mean of exactly 7.00. Furthermore, community partnerships was the only benchmark failing to meet the two-thirds rule ($M = 5.73$) and was therefore classified as exemplary (see Table 1).

Program environment. In contrast to the previous category, only one of the indicators for program environment failed to meet the two-thirds rule. This indicator focused on staff efforts to minimize health risks ($M = 0.20$) and was classified under the student health and well-being benchmark. As a result, this benchmark barely missed meeting the two-thirds rule with a mean of 6.60. The remaining three benchmarks under this category each received a mean score of 9.33 or greater, and were therefore classified as core (see Table 1).

Instructional features. Three benchmarks were extracted from the literature concerning instructional features. In this case, all six of the indicators concerning quality of implementation met the two-thirds rule. In contrast, the indicators under variety of activities that focused on high quality tutoring and homework help ($M = 0.60$) as well as the indicator concerning a balance of both competitive and non-competitive team sports ($M = 0.40$) failed to meet the two-thirds rule. Despite this, since the remaining three indicators had mean scores ranging from 0.87 to 1.00, the benchmark for variety of activities was still able to meet the criteria for core quality ($M = 8.60$). The only benchmark in this category that was classified as exemplary was activities that support youth development ($M = 5.86$). In this case, four of the six indicators failed to meet the two-thirds rule and were later excluded from the QBRS. These focused on student opportunities to help with program selection and development ($M = 0.47$); student opportunities to share their ideas, concerns and opinions ($M = 0.60$); opportunities for student choice and self-direction ($M = 0.40$); and, the promoting of student leadership abilities ($M = 0.27$).

Table 1. *Quality Benchmark Rating System Score Sheet*

	Benchmark	Score	Core Quality	Exemplary Quality
Program Organization				
1.	Program management	8.50	√	
2.	Program administration	8.00	√	
3.	Staff support	8.00	√	
4.	Staff experience and training	8.40	√	
5.	Family involvement	7.00	√	
6.	Community partnerships	5.73		√
7.	Evaluation	8.27	√	
Program Environment				
1.	Safe environment	9.73	√	
2.	Student health and well-being	6.60		√
3.	Well-equipped and suitable physical space	9.33	√	
4.	Positive relationships	9.37	√	
Instructional Features				
1.	Quality of implementation	9.90	√	
2.	Variety of activities	8.60	√	
3.	Activities support youth development	5.86		√

Note. "√" indicates whether the benchmark met the criteria for core or high quality.

3 The Quality Benchmark Rating System Tool

Following the validation study, the research team designed the QBRS. The tool was structured with checklists (or comlists) for measuring the benchmarks and indicators. In addition, a score sheet was developed for users to record their benchmark scores and ratings.

The QBRS was divided into the three broad categories included in the theoretical model. Using the QBRS, scores could be used at the benchmark-level to determine primary indicators for a broad category (e.g., program organization) or could be used at the indicator level to determine specific strengths and weaknesses for continuous program improvement (e.g., where to focus future staff training).

Constructing the Checklists

With the core benchmarks established, the next step was to design the layout of the quality checklists concerning program organization, program environment, and instructional features. As shown in Tables 2–4:

- Each individual benchmark was provided with a definition under its title to clearly define what it stood for.
- Next, the associated indicators, as established by the two-thirds weighting system, were listed to the right of each benchmark. Each of these was adapted to the form of a question for ease of use.
- Lastly, the weight (or rating score) for each indicator was listed to its right.

Table 2. *Program Organization Checklist*

Benchmarks	Indicators		
Program Management: Program has a collaborative management system to meet specific goals outlined in the mission statement.	1. Does the program consider staff input in decision-making?	❑	2.0
	2. Does the program consider student input in decision-making?	❑	1.0
	3. Is there a clear mission statement present for the program?	❑	3.5
	4. Is there day school and afterschool collaboration?	❑	3.5
Program Administration: Program has effective management and plan for long-term sustainability and growth.	1. Have program policies been developed for student participation and attendance?	❑	3.0
	2. Is the budget maintained and adjusted to meet resource needs?	❑	3.0
	3. Is a long-term financial plan in place for sustaining and fostering program growth?	❑	4.0
Staff Support: Program staff are given adequate support.	1. Is the staff well-paid?	❑	2.0
	2. Are staff provided performance feedback?	❑	4.0
	3. Does staff receive an orientation before working with youth?	❑	4.0
Staff Experience and Training: All staff members have adequate training and experience to ensure high quality instruction.	1. Is there an adequate staff-student ratio?	❑	2.0
	2. Is the staff competent in core academic areas?	❑	2.0
	3. Does the staff participate in professional development?	❑	2.0
	4. Does the program director participate in professional development?	❑	2.0
	5. Does the staff reflect the cultural diversity of the community?	❑	2.0
Family Involvement: Program has a clear plan for family involvement.	1. Does the staff regularly communicate with parents/families?	❑	5.0
	2. Is there a program plan in place for parent involvement?	❑	3.0
	3. Are parents provided with opportunities to provide feedback about the program?	❑	2.0
Community Partnerships: Program engages in community partnerships.	1. Are youth encouraged to participate in service projects/programs?	❑	10.0
Evaluation: Program has a system in place for evaluation of students, staff, parents, and program activities.	1. Is there a method of evaluation for staff performance?	❑	2.0
	2. Is there a method of evaluation for program activities?	❑	2.0
	3. Is there a method of evaluation for student engagement?	❑	2.0
	4. Are students' academic/social skills improvement evaluated?	❑	2.0
	5. Are evaluation findings used for program improvement?	❑	2.0

Table 3. *Program Environment Checklist*

Benchmarks	Indicators		
Safe Environment: Program space is safe, clean, and secure.	1. Is the program space safe, clean & secure?	❑	4.00
	2. Is a system in place to keep unauthorized people from taking children from program?	❑	3.00
	3. Are youth carefully supervised?	❑	3.00
Student Health and Well-being: Program environment should enhance students' health.	1. Does the program environment enhance students' health?	❑	4.00
	2. Are healthy and nutritious snacks provided?	❑	4.00
	3. Is the equipment safe for activity play?	❑	2.00
Well-equipped/ Suitable Physical Space: Program provides physical space that is appropriately equipped and suitable for afterschool.	1. Does the program's indoor and outdoor space meet the needs of all program activities?	❑	3.33
	2. Is the space arranged well for a range of activities?	❑	3.33
	3. Is the space arranged well for simultaneous activities?	❑	3.33
Positive Relationships: Program develops, nurtures, and maintains positive relationships.	**Staff-Child Relationship**		
	1. Is there a small child-staff ratio?	❑	1.25
	2. Does the program have guidelines about staff-student expectations?	❑	1.25
	3. Does the staff relate to children and youth in positive ways?	❑	1.25
	4. Does the staff respond appropriately to the individual needs of children and youth?	❑	1.00
	5. Does the staff encourage children to become more responsible?	❑	1.00
	6. Does the staff interact with children to help them learn?	❑	1.00
	Child-Child Relationship		
	7. Do children interact with one another in positive ways?	❑	1.00
	Staff-Staff Relationship		
	8. Does the staff work well together to meet the needs of children?	❑	0.75
	9. Does the staff communicate with each other while the program is in session?	❑	0.75
	10. Does the staff provide role models of positive adult relationships?	❑	0.75

Table 4. *Instructional Features Checklist*

Benchmarks	Indicators		
Quality of Implementation: Program provides a variety of age-appropriate activities that reflect the goals and philosophy of the program.	1. Are the activities appropriate (i.e., ages, learning styles, and abilities) for the children in the program?	❑	2.5
	2. Are the activities in line with the interests of the children in the program?	❑	2.0
	3. Do the activities reflect the languages and cultures of the families served?	❑	1.5
	4. Do the activities meet the physical, social and emotional needs of the students?	❑	1.0
	5. Does the program use a variety of instructional methods and strategies that reflect current research and policies on teaching and learning?	❑	2.0
	6. Are children offered multiple opportunities for developing and practicing new skills?	❑	1.0
Variety of Activities: Program provides a balance between academics and enrichment.	**Core Academics**		
	1. Is high quality academic support offered, such as tutoring and homework help?	❑	1.0
	2. Is instruction offered in a variety of core academic areas?	❑	3.0
	Enrichment		
	3. Are there enrichment opportunities in a variety of areas?	❑	3.0
	4. When provided, do athletic programs include both competitive and noncompetitive team sports?	❑	1.0
	Socialization		
	5. Are children provided regular opportunities for socializing?	❑	2.0
Activities Support Youth Development: Activities provide opportunities for *development of personal responsibility*, self-direction, and leadership.	1. Does the program promote youth development?	❑	5.0
	2. Does the program enable participants to develop life skills, resiliency, and self-esteem via activities?	❑	5.0

Quality Benchmark Score Sheet

CBO/District: _____

Afterschool site: _____

Program director: _____

Assessment period: From To

Benchmark	Score	Core Quality (Y/N)	High Quality (Y/N)
Program Organization			
1. Program management			
2. Program administration			
3. Staff support			
4. Staff experience and training			
5. Family involvement			
6. Community partnerships			
7. Evaluation			
Program Environment			
8. Safe environment			
9. Student health and well-being			
10. Well-equipped and suitable physical space			
11. Positive relationships			
Instructional Features			
12. Quality of implementation			
13. Variety of activities			
14. Activities support youth development			

This score sheet provides an overview of program quality at a glance. Each of the three major program components are listed with the score of each associated benchmark listed. The score sheet also provides a quick reference as to whether the benchmarks are considered as "core" or 'exemplary". In other words, core benchmarks are used to evaluate program quality and exemplary benchmarks are included as indicators for exemplary program practices.

Figure 1. Quality Benchmark Rating System Score Sheet.

4 Discussion

The validation study showed that all 15 sites had a clear mission statement, and staff input was considered strongly in program decision-making. In addition, and as expected, these 15 sites demonstrated strong standings on most of the benchmarks

under the three major components of program organization, program environment, and instructional features. As important as what these sites affirmed, it was also necessary to draw implications based on what the researchers learned. The experiences of visiting these high-functioning program sites accentuated the need for certain benchmarks to be further examined.

In the area of program organization, the benchmark for parent involvement barely met the criteria for being established as core, while community partnerships was the least prevalent benchmark at the sites. Parent involvement, defined as families being welcomed to visit and parents being able to provide feedback, was reported to be moderate and weak, respectively. Program directors also stated that there was not a clear plan for parent involvement at the sites. Additionally, although parents' comments were welcomed, they were not given an instrumental role in making important decisions within the programs. Similarly, community involvement was also confirmed to be low, especially with regard to having community members as guest speakers, thus decreasing the chances of building stronger partnerships between the program and the larger, surrounding community.

Similar findings were also concluded in a nationwide study (Herman/Huang,/ Goldschmidt, 2005), especially on parent involvement. Even though literature has consistently revealed the importance of parent involvement in their children's academic outcomes (Henderson/Mapp, 2002), a clear relationship between program outcomes and parent involvement in afterschool settings has not been established. In fact, very few successful afterschool programs could demonstrate that they had high degrees of parent involvement, though nearly all demonstrated that they had a high degree of parent satisfaction. Further investigation on which elements of parent involvement were the contributing factors to student outcomes, or a clearer definition of what one considers parent involvement in afterschool settings, are much needed.

For program environment, the benchmark of student health and well-being also needs to be further examined. Many afterschool studies drew on a school effectiveness model to set benchmarks for afterschool programs. Since afterschool programs were faced with limitations in terms of space (a sick room) and resources (school nurse, nutrition counselor), further examination on what should be considered as appropriate or not appropriate in afterschool settings ought to be conducted, and appropriate guidelines should be established. In this study, the weakness in this benchmark could be partially accounted for due to the handing out of both healthy and unhealthy snacks during nutrition time. There was also a lack of providing appropriate guidelines to staff in minimizing health risks. For example, only about a third of the sites had staff members actively making sure that students were washing their hands and separating students when they were ill.

Lastly, in the area of instructional features, the benchmarks on activities that support youth development could be further enhanced. While general forms of support for youth development were strongly prevalent across the sites, other, more specific forms of youth development were often lacking. For example, students were often not included in setting personal goals, providing suggestions, providing comments, or reflecting on the settings and activities of the program. Despite the lack of student choice and autonomy within these afterschool programs, at times, staff demonstrated a lot of willingness to promote general youth development skills. However, since it is a recently advancing field, many lacked the knowledge and skills to promote such concepts. Since positive youth development is the foundation for building good citi-

zenship, this could be a program element that enables policymakers to direct more funding toward staff development.

5 Conclusions and Implications

Current literature recognizes the need to identify good practices in quality-based afterschool programs (Beckett et al., 2001; Bodily/Beckett, 2005; C. S. Mott Foundation, 2005; Pierce/Bolt/Vandell, 2010; Yohalem/Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Consequently, numerous studies have examined indicators and benchmarks that could define program quality (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1994; Goldsmith/Arbreton/Bradshaw, 2004; Huang, 2001). However, even though quality-based indicators have been identified, the research community still lacks a concrete, easily accessible system that can be provided to the afterschool programs for the purpose of continuous self-improvement. This study attempts to address this research gap through the development of a benchmark system that is based on a multi-method approach including a synthesis of literature, field studies, and data analysis.

Despite this, the research community should further this work by addressing some of the limitations of this study. First, the criteria for examining afterschool program quality were based on the theoretical framework set out by Huang (2001) and the primary indicators drawn from the synthesis of literature. Since few of the articles that met the search criteria included quantitative data or empirical evidence, the research team chose not to calculate effect sizes. Secondly, since the available literature on quality indicators has increased substantially since the original synthesis of literature was conducted, it would be advisable to expand the initial search and conduct further coding before drawing formal inferences to the larger population of afterschool programs. By including more recent studies, future studies might also be able to locate more empirical studies and calculate effect sizes. Thirdly, the number of afterschool sites could be increased in order to conduct subgroup analyses based on background variables or program characteristics such as those being explored in the current statewide evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers and After School Education and Safety programs in California (See Huang et al., 2011)

Finally, this evaluation tool would be very useful for afterschool programs that do not have access to trained researchers to assess their effectiveness and begin a process of continuous self-improvement. Additionally this tool can also helped afterschool researchers to expand their sample base by having the programs collect some of the preliminary data themselves.

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Note: An asterisk marks those publications providing data for the synthesis of literature.

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