


**Achieving Program Quality in the
DYCD Out-of-School Time Initiative:
Strategies from 15 Programs**

Christina A. Russell
Karen Walking Eagle
Monica B. Mielke

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Contents

	Page
Summary	1
Overview and Research Methods	1
Rich Program Content.....	2
Skill-Building and Project-Based Learning.....	3
Developmentally Focused Programming.....	4
Opportunities for Positive Relationships	5
Opportunities for Personal Discussions.....	5
Benefits of Positive Relationships	6
Effective Staff Supports.....	7
Characteristics of Staff Members.....	7
Resources and Training for Staff.....	8
Conclusions.....	9
Activity Content.....	10
Relationships.....	10
Staffing Supports	10
References.....	10

Summary

This report focuses on 15 programs operated under the Out-of-School Time Programs for Youth (OST) initiative of the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) during the period 2005-06 to 2008-09. It expands on findings from the first three years of the evaluation that identified program features that were positively associated with high levels of program participation and with desirable social and academic outcomes, including: (1) rich program content and exposure to new experiences; (2) opportunities for youth to interact positively with peers and with staff; and (3) effective supports for staff that equip them to meet the needs of participating youth

This report describes strategies used by programs in program year 2008-09 in which youth reported the most positive experiences. While the data do not support causal links between specific strategies and outcomes, this report describes those factors that appear to facilitate positive youth experiences.

The programs included in this study adopted many different programmatic approaches and staffing structures as they worked to implement the multiple goals of OST and to support youth both socially and academically. However, a common thread across the promising strategies described in this report is that they were all developed with explicit intentionality and with a clear, concrete focus on the needs and interests of participants. Common elements of promising strategies include:

- Activities that offer youth active learning opportunities to build skills in areas that interest them
- Activities that meet participants' developmental needs and that explicitly focus on developing strong personal relationships and relationship skills
- Design of program operations to ensure that staff have the supports and skills needed to implement program content as well as relationship goals

Overview and Research Methods

In September 2005, DYCD launched the OST initiative to provide young people throughout New York City with access to high-quality programming after school, on holidays, and during the summer at no cost to their families. Consistent with the original design of OST, services are concentrated in high-need neighborhoods, targeting high-priority zip codes that have been identified based on the size of the youth population, the youth poverty rate, the percent of youth disconnected from school or work, the number of English Language Learners in public schools, the number of single-parent families, and the number of children eligible for state-subsidized childcare.

DYCD contracted with Policy Studies Associates (PSA) in 2005 to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the OST initiative. PSA designed the evaluation to describe the

characteristics of OST programs and participants and to assess the initiative's contribution to the growth and development of New York City youth. Over the course of the evaluation, we identified program features that were positively associated with high levels of program participation and with desirable social and academic outcomes, including: (1) rich program content and exposure to new experiences; (2) opportunities for youth to interact positively with peers and with staff; and (3) effective supports for staff that equip them to meet the needs of participating youth (Russell, Mielke, & Reisner, 2009).

This report is organized around discussions of the strategies that programs have used to effectively implement these features. It focuses on the fourth year (2008-09) of implementation of the OST programs and on data from the 15 OST programs that have been part of the evaluation's in-depth study since 2005. In that year, we randomly selected these programs to represent on a proportionate basis the grade levels served and location (school-based or center-based) of all OST programs. The 15 OST programs include seven elementary-grades programs, five middle-grades programs, and three high school programs.

While primarily a qualitative description of strategies used to enhance program quality in these 15 programs, this report also incorporates quantitative data collected over the first four years of the OST initiative. We used survey data collected from OST participants, parents, and program directors, and we also analyzed program participation data to identify patterns within programs over time and across programs in 2008-09. Our goal was to describe the strategies used by those programs that have distinguished themselves—currently or over time—in one or more areas of program quality or in providing positive youth experiences.¹ These strategies were described in data we collected through annual site visits to each of the sampled programs. The visits included interviews with program directors, program staff, and participants, as well as structured activity observations. The data provide insight into the strategies used by programs to achieve high quality and positive youth experiences and the challenges programs faced in achieving quality.

In the sections that follow, we describe strategies used in programs in which youth reported the most positive experiences and those in which participants reported lower than average experiences. While the data do not support causal links between specific strategies and outcomes, this report describes those factors that appear to facilitate positive youth experiences.

Rich Program Content

DYCD's vision for the OST initiative included the provision of support for the academic, civic, creative, social, physical and emotional development of youth. Providing the full range of activity content can be a challenge, however, due to the multiple pressures that programs face. For example, in 2008-09, 95 percent of responding parents said that they enrolled their child in the OST program because they wanted their child to get help with homework and to do better in school. Forty-four percent of parents identified homework help as the most important activity,

¹ We focused qualitative reporting on cases where quantitative comparisons revealed differences that were statistically significant and of a reasonable magnitude (*p* values of .05 or smaller and effect sizes of .1 or larger).

and 33 percent identified academic enrichment activities as most important. Program directors typically worked to meet these academic support needs through a combination of homework help and other enrichment activities. As one director explained, “We focus on helping youth develop life skills, not just academics...responsibility, sympathy, empathy...” Another noted:

You have others in the school to help [youth] with math, reading, [and] taking tests. You have [the OST] program to help [youth] become more personable. [The OST] program should not just focus on academics, but also the social aspect.... When you give the child self-esteem, they can learn multiplication.

Described below are strategies that OST programs use to meet the challenges posed by the multiple objectives for OST programming.

Skill-Building and Project-Based Learning

High-quality after-school programs offer activities that build and expand participants’ skills and content knowledge and that provide youth opportunities to collaborate and to contribute their ideas (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). They involve the practice and progression of skills; require analytic thinking; and challenge youth intellectually, creatively, developmentally, or physically. Successful programs help youth build skills by offering engaging activities that motivate and interest youth. Reflecting these principles, directors of the 15 OST programs in the study sample worked to provide varied activity content that allowed youth to engage with learning in ways that differed from their school-day experiences. “I would like [youth] to look at learning in a different way,” said one program director. “Learning is not a lecture, it can be fun.” Exposure to new and engaging experiences is also an important objective for program directors. “Part of my job is to help them discover new things,” explained one director. “Some of them, unless they [participate in the OST program] are not exposed to different things. Unless they try different things, they won’t know what they like and what they are good at. So my priority is exposing them to different activities.”

Illustrating this objective, a middle-grades program focused on a skill-building, project-based learning activity to improve its levels of enrollment and participation and evolve from a program that staff said lacked focus and a strong incentive for youth attendance to one where participating youth were engaged and excited. In its first years, the program offered activities ranging from Regents test preparation to step dance to discussion-based activities, but failed to consistently engage students. In 2006-07, staff summarized the program’s problems this way: “There’s no direction [to this program.] There’s no central line under which we’re all working. We’re all doing our own thing. We don’t know what others are doing, we don’t know the goal...nothing is done to bring us together and to offer something coherent.” Due to resource constraints, by 2008-09, the program offered youth only one enrichment activity with a narrow range of goals and objectives: music writing and production. The instructor described how participants learned music production. “We spent a couple of weeks on the basic principles and [youth were able] to apply their skills in other areas [such as] video mixing. This semester they’ve come in and taught me a lot about digital mixing. They feel empowered because they are helping me...I show them what I have and they go from there. It’s pretty autonomous.”

This opportunity to develop detailed knowledge in a specialized area appealed to the core group of participants, who could engage in collaborative tasks with their peers, including writing lyrics, editing music tracks, and performing. In our observations, we saw youth working individually and in small groups to create beats, record lyrics, and produce music on laptop computers. The instructor helped youth build on previously learned skills by reviewing the concept of a music “hook” before laying out the next steps of the process—writing lyrics and eventually completing a music video. Youth responded positively to this smaller, more focused program and to having an instructor with whom they shared a passion. One participant summarized his feeling this way: “During the day you may be stressed with homework, but after school you come to the program and it’s a relief and you can express yourself. It takes away any problems that you had before.” Another noted, “Music [keeps me coming]. They have every instrument in the world...the things you have here nobody has in their house. So, if you come here, you come in here for an opportunity.”

Developmentally Focused Programming

Through our interviews and observations, we found that OST programs that stood out because of the quality of youth experience offered programming that encouraged youth leadership and input into activity design. For example, an elementary-grades program in the study sample offered many opportunities for youth to make choices, solve problems, and participate in leadership development activities. This program consistently achieved high levels of enrollment and participation, and youth reported high levels of satisfaction over the course of the evaluation. Most notably, the program had a goal “to teach kids about friendship, respect, and responsibility.” Staff emphasized the program’s focus on values and good manners. “Values and manners are lacking in most schools, not just in after-school programs. We want youth to speak properly, to love themselves enough that they won’t compromise, and to care for humanity.” In keeping with these goals and priorities, youth attended a daily assembly period designed to build confidence and a sense of community within the program. These daily assemblies offered structured and frequent opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles and speak publicly in ways that, according to staff, have allowed students to “feel good about the talents or skills that they have.”

In contrast, in a middle-grades program in which youth rated their experiences lower than average in our sample of programs, participants had few opportunities to engage in structured and well-organized activities that appealed to their interests. According to one youth participant, “Our parents make us come. I wouldn’t otherwise come...It’s boring, the same thing over and over.” Our observations revealed that much of the activity time was spent in open recreation activities such as basketball, in which there was little instruction or structure. Staff reported that other project-based activities that the youth enjoyed were eliminated for budgetary reasons. For example, “Cooking got knocked off...in the beginning we had it twice a week, but it was very expensive.” Staff in this program struggled to identify and implement activities that appealed to the developmental needs of youth and fully engage them. The director noted: “I’m just not happy with the way it’s turning out.”

Opportunities for Positive Relationships

Successful programs encourage or facilitate the development of positive relationships among youth and between youth and program staff (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Durlak and Weissberg (2007) also concluded that an important feature in after-school programs that aim to promote social and emotional learning is staff members who show positive affect toward youth and engage personally with youth. The program directors we interviewed emphasized the importance of staff members who can connect on a personal level with youth. As one director said, “To me, it’s pretty much common sense. In the youth industry you can have a master’s degree, but if you’ve never sat there and dealt with kids before, you won’t do a good job.” Another director explained that she seeks out younger staff who she believes will relate well with youth. She said: “I want the staff to engage in the activities with the youth rather than being directive with them. That gets the youth to buy in [to the program].” As the directors suggested, we found that the presence of positive relationships also was associated with high levels of youth participation and positive experiences.

Overall, our observations of the quality of relationships in program activities, as well as participants’ reported assessments of their relationships with peers and staff on surveys, were consistently positive over the course of the evaluation. In general, as in previous years of the evaluation, participants reported strong relationships in the program. For example, a majority of youth “agreed a lot” that in the program they feel safe (69 percent), have a lot of friends (64 percent), and are treated with respect by the staff (64 percent). However, we observed a notable improvement in the quality of relationships over time in two programs, while another program showed evidence of a notable decline in the quality of relationships. As described in the section below, we found that programs that demonstrated strong relationships between youth and staff intentionally provided opportunities for youth to reflect on and strengthen these interactions through discussion.

Opportunities for Personal Discussions

In one program that demonstrated improvement, the OST program began offering intentional opportunities for youth to express their feelings and concerns, which both staff and youth said helped to build relationships. During these sessions, the program leader allowed each student to talk about anything that was on his or her mind without interruptions. Youth in this program also identified several staff members with whom they could talk about personal concerns, and several noted that it was easy to get along with the very friendly staff. One youth said, “[The best part of this program] is the staff because they are nice, show us respect, and give us free time.” Program staff emphasized the importance of intentionally promoting positive relationships among youth as a means of counteracting negative social influences in the surrounding community. As one staff member noted: “We have seen improvements... When they have someone whom they connect with, they behave better.”

Directors also integrated opportunities for personal discussions and relationship-building into project activities. One director reported that staff had detected racial tensions between

groups in the program. In response, the director introduced a monthly theme-based program that required the groups to interact in a positive way. At another program, staff introduced mixed-age groups to promote positive relationships among older and younger youth. “In group activities, the older kids love to help the younger kids. They ask if they can help the kindergartners, especially if they have younger siblings in the program. You see the cross-age interaction during snack and program activities. In this program, the norm is for kids to filter from grade to grade.”

In contrast, in the program where we observed a decline in the quality of interpersonal relationships, interviews revealed tension between staff and youth and challenges in managing youth behavior. The director said that, while youth demonstrate an appropriate demeanor in interactions with him, they did not afford staff the same courtesy. “With their group leaders, they talk back to them. They’re disrespectful, and we need to work on that,” he explained. He also said that staff struggled to keep youth focused and on task, and he expressed a desire for increased training on strategies for managing “youth situations” for his young and somewhat inexperienced staff. “I feel our staff is under-trained for certain youth situations. I would like for them to have more training.” Observers noted that staff rarely connected with students on a personal level (e.g., by exchanging jokes or participating in other light-hearted conversations—interactions that were often observed at other programs). Rather, youth-adult interactions emphasized order and structure, and observers noted that youth were frequently rebuked for infractions.

Benefits of Positive Relationships

A program focus on maintaining positive relationships can serve as an important precursor to other youth outcomes, including engagement and belonging in the program. For example, in the early years of the OST initiative, one director acknowledged that recruiting and retaining youth was a challenge. Unlike other directors faced with this challenge who tended to focus on improving program content or marketing efforts, he explained that his strategy for addressing this problem was to focus on building relationships with youth. He said that relationship-building and overall program stability were facilitated by the fact that many of his staff members, particularly the youth leaders, were from the same community in which participants lived. “This makes a big difference in terms of quality and stability,” he noted, adding that hiring from the community also helped to reduce staff turnover. Youth were able to establish stronger relationships with staff they knew from the community and who worked in the program for longer periods. This, coupled with formal, structured program activities that required youth to share feelings, discuss meaningful topics, and ask questions, contributed to strong youth-adult relationships and improved participation.

Program directors also pointed out that strong relationships between youth and adults helped to control inappropriate behavior within their programs and helped to maintain an orderly environment and positive atmosphere. “There are a lot of issues happening with the students at their homes,” said one director. “We are trained to recognize if something is going on even if they aren’t talking about it. We talk to the students and make them feel welcome.” Without this kind of intervention, she explained, the situation could become disruptive. She continued: “We

teach students to calm themselves and walk away instead of becoming angry and hitting someone.” Another program director described an example of a troubled youth “who was really angry and didn’t get along with anybody.” As he became more involved in the program, his behavior and attitude changed. “Now he is the supervisor of the clean-up crew. Everybody loves him [...]. Being in the program helped him. Seeing him change that way was worth it.... He loves [the program] so much now that he doesn’t want to leave.”

Several directors emphasized that relationships among youth in the program also facilitated improved social outcomes beyond the program. For example, in one middle-grades program, participants were drawn from several schools, an arrangement that had sparked tensions in the past. In response, the program provided OST staff with training in conflict mediation, conflict resolution, and leadership. Staff attributed the reduction in tensions among students to application of this training as well as to intentional efforts to design activities that encouraged cross-school interaction and positive verbal exchanges among youth. In interviews staff and youth frequently spoke about a “rap session” activity, which allowed staff as well as youth to “get whatever is on their mind out.” These regular Friday sessions helped to promote closer, more open relationships between staff and participants. “I would recommend sitting down and getting kids in a comfort zone to talk about what’s on their mind,” said the program director. “It helps you understand them a little more. You’re not as quick to discipline because you know where they are coming from. It helps with the relationships between me and the staff too. I share personal things as well. It helps.” The sessions were also a venue in which staff discussed academic, postsecondary, and career goals with participants.

Effective Staff Supports

Knowledgeable, skilled, and capable staff members are central to quality programming (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007), and findings from the first three years of the OST evaluation pointed to effective staffing supports as a key feature of quality programs (Russell et. al., 2009). In this section we describe strategies used to build staff capacity and effectiveness in the OST programs visited.

Characteristics of Staff Members

Many program directors rely on a core group of young staff members, for their capacity to relate well to youth participants and for the relatively low wages that the program budgets can more easily support. Nine of 15 project directors reported that they hired high school students, many of whom were screened, selected, and referred to the OST program by their high school. Nearly all program directors (13 of 15) reported that they had college students on staff. Program directors described strategies that they used to ensure that these younger staff members had the necessary skills and commitment to work in the program. For example, many of the college students who were hired were enrolled in teaching programs and had prior experience working with youth. According to one director, “Mainly we look for people who are focusing on education. We know it will benefit them and help them out in their program. [...] You want to help them out and they will give you 150 percent. They can use their experiences for their

papers and figure out if they want to go into that field or not.” Another director also recruited staff members from undergraduate teaching programs and sought staff members who were committed to working with youth. “It’s not good pay that is keeping them here. I have had a staff member who left to work [at a restaurant] which paid them more. But she wasn’t satisfied with what she was doing. There are some staff members that I have to let go. It’s just not for everyone. It takes tremendous leadership skills.”

One program trained high school students to serve as apprentice staff in OST programs for younger students. These high school apprenticeships were required to complete training seminars that prepared participants for teaching academic enrichment curriculum like KidzMath and KidzLit and to lead recreational sport activities. Site-level training, on the other hand, focused on managing classrooms and ensuring the safety of youth. This training addressed first aid, detecting child abuse, and writing up required reports for accidents.

Many programs hired certified teachers and specialists to provide additional staffing support. Eight programs employed at least one certified teacher, and six employed school-day paraprofessionals or school aides. In addition, six program directors indicated that they had designated a paid, part-time staff member as the program’s master teacher or education specialist. As with younger staff members, when specialists—most of whom were adults who were talented or certified in specific areas like music, art, or dance—were hired, program directors often insisted on prior experience working with youth. One director explained that she asked about job applicants’ background and experience with youth to help determine which age-group to assign them to in the program.

Resources and Training for Staff

A reliance on young staff members meant that program directors needed to develop effective supervisory structures to provide their young staff with the supports they needed to deliver high-quality programming to youth. According to one director, “My staff is primarily young, high school seniors and college students. Even though they’ve worked with children before, they’re not trained professionals [...]. Their job is to provide a safe environment and to teach an activity. Any time you have to divert from [these primary goals and responsibilities] because of disruptions, it takes away from the quality of your program.” Directors accomplished this by offering training to staff members, relying on published curricula, and implementing procedures for staff evaluation.

One program in which youth reported notably positive experiences and where we observed activities that were consistently substantive and engaging had a strong focus on staff training and evaluation. In interviews, we learned that staff participated in training at the beginning of the year to become oriented to their roles and participated in an end of year reflection activity in which they reviewed and assessed what had happened over the year and developed plans to address challenges and problems going forward. One staff member said, “We also have in-house trainings at [this organization]. They teach you how to work with students. There are a lot of issues with the students at home, and we are trained to recognize if something is going on even if they aren’t talking about it.” The director also worked with staff throughout

the year to develop their practice and conducted several formal evaluations. Staff is required to submit quarterly summaries of their work, assess their progress, and describe any challenges they were facing. In addition, the director provided staff with specific feedback on how to incorporate particular content and delivery strategies into their work. The director reported that these steps had strengthened the quality and developmental orientation of activities.

In our activity observations, one program demonstrated notable improvements over time in the extent to which activities targeted learning goals and engaged youth. This program had begun using externally-developed, published curricula to structure both academic enrichment and recreational activities. According to the director, the new curricula gave “some structure to what staff member do” and the structure and sequence helped youth because “kids need to see consistency.” Quality content was also supported by requiring instructors to prepare lesson plans that the program director reviewed every week.

Program directors also reported that they evaluated staff using activity observations, one-on-one performance reviews, lesson plan checks, and informal conversations. Thirteen of 15 program directors indicated that they required at least some of their staff to submit written activity or lesson plans for review on a regular basis and conducted formal one-on-one staff performance reviews; ten conducted observations of staff leading program activities and held informal meetings with staff. For example, one director said that he periodically evaluated both the work ethic and the academic performance of his staff, most of whom were students. “[We look at] how they interact with children, how they talk to parents, how the children respond to them. We see how they do in school; they need to have an least an 85 average because they need to lead by example. Information collected via these methods provided insight into staff knowledge, attitudes, attendance, abilities, and work habits, and helped program directors to determine training and technical assistance needs, according to interviews.

Conclusions

Evaluation data collected throughout the OST initiative in the 15 programs that are the focus of this report revealed that the quality of youth experiences in the program was generally constant over the first few years of the initiative, although we found some variation across programs. We identified certain strategies used in programs that made notable strides in implementing or improving high-quality programming. Encouraging widespread adoption of these strategies in OST programs could lead to increased OST activity quality, youth participation, and youth social and education outcomes.

Activity Content

- Youth are engaged in opportunities to develop in-depth knowledge and expertise in specific content areas and are motivated by occasions in which they can showcase new skills and knowledge to peers and to the community.
- Youth are engaged in activities that allow them to make choices, contribute their ideas and thoughts, solve problems, collaborate with their peers, and develop leadership skills.
- Programs assess and modify their offerings periodically to help ensure that they continue to reflect the evolving interests and needs of their participants.

Relationships

- Programs have a sustained and deliberate focus on building relationships among participating youth and between adult staff and youth.
- Programs provide youth with regular, scheduled opportunities to talk with peers and adults on relevant topics, share feelings, and ask meaningful questions.

Staffing Supports

- Programs hire staff who can relate to youth and who can support them academically and socially.
- Program directors conduct structured staff supervision and evaluation, including training on curriculum and lesson plans.

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