

Evidence-Based Practices for Out-of-School Time Programs

Purpose of This Brief

Out-of-school time (OST) professionals use evidence often, including in applying for funding, in designing and planning programming, and in making program improvements (Lentz, 2025). Evidence use can be challenging, however, because it requires time and resources for professionals to search for the evidence, read it, and consider how to apply it to their local context (Lentz, 2025; Coburn et al., 2009).

The purpose of this brief is to help make evidence use more accessible for professionals and to support professionals who need or want to incorporate evidence into their program. We reviewed commonly cited and supported evidence to determine what practices go into operating a high-quality OST program today. We distilled the practices into one list and then vetted the list with OST experts—including researchers, field leaders, and practitioners—to ensure the list is relevant.

In this brief, we share the following:

- The list of evidence-based practices grouped by focus area, including [Developing the Program Structure](#), [Supporting Staff](#), and [Working With Young People](#)
- [Why evidence matters](#), along with [when the evidence-based practices might be helpful](#)
- Appendices detailing our [methods](#) and [how to use the practices in this brief](#)

What Is Evidence?

Evidence is any information used to inform practice, such as research, data, and lived experiences (Lentz, 2025; Coburn et al., 2009). Here, we highlight *written* evidence commonly used in the OST field, including **reports, research publications, briefs, and practice guides**.



This work was completed as part of the [OST Cost Study](#) at the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®). With support from the Wallace Foundation and in collaboration with the Afterschool Alliance and National Afterschool Association, AIR is studying what it costs to operate a high-quality OST program today. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Wallace Foundation. Learn more about the OST Cost Study [here](#).

Suggested citation: Lentz, A. K., Alexander, H. A., & Richter, J. Y. (2025). *Evidence-based practices for out-of-school time programs*. American Institutes for Research. <https://www.air.org/project/out-school-time-cost-study>

Developing the Program Structure

Defining the Program

1. Develop and regularly revisit a shared vision and goals for programming. ^{B, C, D}
2. Define program's role and influence in the community. ^{C, E}
3. Articulate key characteristics of the program setting. ^{C, D, E}
4. Elevate family and young people's voices to guide program design and delivery. ^{B, D, E}
5. Build relationships within the community to support programming. ^A



What Is the Program Structure?

We use the term **program structure** to refer to all aspects of the organizational operations and design.

Supporting Operations

6. Seek and obtain the funding needed to operate. ^{A, E}
7. Maintain the organization's finances. ^A
8. Engage in continuous quality improvement practices that involve staff and young people. ^{B, D, E}
9. Manage facility and program operations. ^{A, C}
10. Engage in data collection, analysis, and reporting for research-, evaluation-, and development-related activities. ^{A, B, E}
11. Adhere to reporting requirements of funders, board members, and other interest holders. ^{B, D}

Engaging Families and Young People

12. Develop and follow a standard process for recruiting participants. ^{B, C, D}
13. Support young people's enrollment and retention in the program. ^{B, C, D}
14. Offer meaningful incentives for young people's participation. ^A
15. Write and follow a family engagement plan that fits the local context. ^{B, C, D, E}

Supporting Staff

Hiring and Onboarding Staff

1. Develop and share clear, transparent, and accessible job descriptions and postings. ^G
2. Hire staff, volunteers, and board members (if applicable) from the community. ^{B, C, D, F}
3. Set workers' wages at a level that is both fair and livable. ^{E, G}
4. Offer benefits to all employees. ^G
5. Follow standardized interviewing and onboarding procedures. ^{D, G}

Supporting Staff at Work

6. Maintain a performance management system tied to meaningful rewards and incentives that recognize workers for their efforts. ^G
7. Help workers identify and plan for their career goals. ^{D, E, F, H}
8. Support staff in completing professional development related to their career goals. ^{B, D, E, F}
9. Use worker input and shared decision-making to improve their experiences. ^{D, G}
10. Implement consistency in workers' schedules. ^G
11. Identify and address all factors that may affect workers' safety, health, and well-being. ^{E, G}
12. Meet regularly with all staff and volunteers. ^A
13. Recognize and appreciate workers' efforts and contributions. ^{D, E, G}



Who Are the Staff?

We use the term “**staff**” to refer to all full- and part-time staff that work at an organization. Where applicable, we also recommend including intern and volunteer staff when considering practices.

Working With Young People

Creating the Environment

1. Maintain a safe and supportive program climate. ^{C, D, E, F}
2. Emphasize and support the well-being of young people. ^{B, C, E}
3. Prioritize positive relationships between adults and young people. ^{C, D, E, H}
4. Facilitate positive relationships between young people. ^{B, C, D, E}
5. Cultivate safety and consistency in behavioral expectations and conflict management. ^{C, D, E}

Supporting Young People's Development

6. Use developmental science when planning for and implementing activities with young people. ^{D, E, F}
7. Get to know the young people in the program and engage them in designing the program's environment and activities. ^{C, D, E, F}
8. Use engaging instructional techniques to support young people's development. ^{B, C, E, F}
9. Track young people's progress by measuring outcomes that reflect their needs, perspectives, and experiences. ^{B, E}
10. Support young people in achieving personal goals within and outside of programming. ^{C, E}



Working With Young People

These practices apply most directly to **youth-facing staff**, who are directly interacting with, instructing, mentoring, building relationships with, or otherwise supporting young people during program implementation.

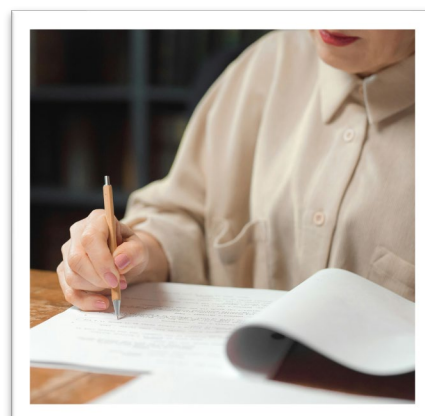
Why Evidence Matters

Evidence provides information on what works well in settings where young people grow and develop (Lentz, 2025; Coburn et al., 2009). OST professionals can use evidence to identify practices that have proven important or successful in other programs, so that they do not need to start from scratch when designing, implementing, or improving their own programs (American Institutes for Research, 2020; Lentz, 2025). This can build efficiency in the field by leveraging existing information to support programming and can also build buy-in among interest holders by having justification for deciding to adopt new or modify existing practices (American Institutes for Research, 2020).

When the Evidence-Based Practices Might be Helpful

OST professionals can use this brief to quickly find evidence that supports the practices they are already using, or to identify new practices they want to implement. Although this can be useful in a variety of activities, we offer a couple examples of when this brief might be helpful:

- **In planning meetings with your team** to review what practices you are already using and to identify new practices that could improve operations. For example, if your team reviews all practices under “Working with Young People,” and finds that you already implement most practices, but do not support young people’s goals *outside* of programming (Practice 10), you might start planning for how to talk with young people about their goals outside of the program and how best to support them.
- **To justify program design or practices** when talking to funders or other interest holders, such as board members. For example, if your program engages in data collection, analysis, and reporting for research-, evaluation-, and development-related activities (Practice 10 under “Developing the Program Structure”), but requires new software or resources to support this task, you can highlight the evidence citing this practice when justifying the need.



Evidence Referenced in Practices

Practice that was added or modified under guidance of OST Expert Working Group as detailed in [Appendix A](#).

Every Hour Counts. (2021). *Putting data to work for young people: A framework for measurement, continuous improvement, and equitable systems*.

<https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Every-Hour-Counts-Measurement-Framework.pdf>

Forum for Youth Investment (with Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children). (2021). *Design principles for community-based settings: Putting the science of learning and development into action*.

https://soldalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/eb0b6a_61db3771b95747f19cdc99c1d795cde8.pdf

Forum for Youth Investment. (2022). *Organizational quality assessment*. David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2025). *The future of youth development: Building systems and strengthening programs*. The National Academies Press.

<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/27833/the-future-of-youth-development-building-systems-and-strengthening-programs>

National Afterschool Association. (2021). *Core knowledge, skills, and competencies for afterschool and youth development professionals*. [https://cdn.ymaws.com/naaweb.org/resource/collection/F3611BAF-0B62-42F9-9A26-](https://cdn.ymaws.com/naaweb.org/resource/collection/F3611BAF-0B62-42F9-9A26-C376BF35104F/NAA_Core_Knowledge_Skills_Competencies_for_OST_Professionals_rev2023.pdf)

[C376BF35104F/NAA Core Knowledge Skills Competencies for OST Professionals rev2023.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/naaweb.org/resource/collection/F3611BAF-0B62-42F9-9A26-C376BF35104F/NAA_Core_Knowledge_Skills_Competencies_for_OST_Professionals_rev2023.pdf)

National Afterschool Association. (2024). *Out-of-school time job quality standards*.

[https://cdn.ymaws.com/naaweb.org/resource/collection/09323F21-6295-4670-80D5-824790C2B13D/NAA OST Job Quality Standards for Release.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/naaweb.org/resource/collection/09323F21-6295-4670-80D5-824790C2B13D/NAA_OST_Job_Quality_Standards_for_Release.pdf)

Wallace Foundation. (2022, April). *From access to equity. Making out-of-school time spaces meaningful for teens from marginalized communities*. [https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-](https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/from-access-to-equity-making-out-of-school-time-spaces-meaningful-for-teens-from-marginalized-communities.pdf)

[08/from-access-to-equity-making-out-of-school-time-spaces-meaningful-for-teens-from-marginalized-communities.pdf](https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/from-access-to-equity-making-out-of-school-time-spaces-meaningful-for-teens-from-marginalized-communities.pdf)

References

- American Institutes for Research. (2020). *What does the research say about afterschool and summer programming?* <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Guide-2-Research-Recognizing-the-Role-of-Research-and-Evidence-in-OST.pdf>
- Coburn, C. E., Honig, M. I., & Stein, M. K. (2009). What's the evidence on districts' use of evidence. In J. Bradford, D. Stipek, L. Gomez, D. Lam, & N. Vye (Eds.), *The role of research in educational improvement* (pp. 67–87). Harvard Educational Press.
- Lentz, A. (2025). *Evidence and its use in out-of-school time programs* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Delaware].

Appendix A. Methods

In the fall of 2023, our project team conducted a search with our internal librarian to identify reports, research publications, briefs, and practice guides that discuss OST programs. Our librarian used search terms related to OST (e.g., “out of school time,” “outside of school program,” “afterschool,” “summer program,” “summer learning,” or “enrichment program”) and terms related to the type of research (e.g., “meta-analysis,” “meta-synthesis,” “meta-review,” “systematic review,” “synthesis,” “summary,” “practice guide,” “intervention report,” or “what works clearinghouse”). This search produced 380 results.

An internal team of researchers then screened results to determine whether each result was (1) relevant to OST programs, (2) based in the United States, and (3) included discussion of program quality, which resulted in 198 pieces of evidence. We narrowed our review to include only resources that were (1) published later than 2020; (2) from a reputable, national entity in the OST field (e.g., National Afterschool Association, Every Hour Counts); and (3) applicable to *all* OST programs and agnostic to a specific content focus. This resulted in a list of seven pieces of evidence that we reviewed with internal OST experts for confirmation of inclusion or missingness.

In the winter of 2023, we coded each resource for the practices they name, then reviewed the coded practices for where they repeat across sources to create a composite list. We thematically grouped the practices for organizational purposes. In the summer and fall of 2024, a working group of AIR’s OST experts and an external panel of OST leaders in various contexts across the United States (as listed in Exhibit A1) reviewed the practices to determine relevance to current practice and identified missing practices. The project team reviewed feedback from experts and revised practices as appropriate.

Exhibit A1. OST Expert Working Group

• Julee Brooks (Woodcraft Rangers) • Dirrick Butler (Project OneTen) • Linda Galib (AIR) • Sil Ganzó (ourBRIDGE) • Jessie Kerr-Vanderslice (AIR) • Dr. Neil Naftzger (AIR) • Dr. Dorothy Moulthrop (Open Doors Academy) • Dr. Marlo Reeves (AIR)	• Samantha Sniegowski (AIR) • Dr. Amy Syvertsen (AIR) • Gislene Tasayco Prado (AIR) • Heather Taylor (Tahlequah Public Schools and Boys and Girls Club of Tahlequah) • Angie Toone (Utah Afterschool Network) • Dr. Femi Vance (AIR) • Dr. Deepa Vasudevan (AIR)
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Note. Here we provide the organizational affiliation of the contributor from the time of this work’s completion.

Appendix B. How to Use the Practices in this Brief

We organized the practices into three sections: (1) [Developing the Program Structure](#), (2) [Supporting Staff](#), and (3) [Working With Young People](#). Each section contains a list of practices followed by small letters. These letters refer to the piece of evidence that named that practice. For example, Practice 1 under “Developing the Program Structure” cites evidence B, C, and D:

1. Develop and regularly revisit a shared vision and goals for programming. B, C, D

[The references](#) in this brief list all the pieces of evidence by number. References B, C, and D refer to pieces of evidence from Every Hour Counts and the Forum for Youth Investment:

- B. Every Hour Counts. (2021). *Putting data to work for young people: A framework for measurement, continuous improvement, and equitable systems*.
<https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Every-Hour-Counts-Measurement-Framework.pdf>
- C. Forum for Youth Investment (with Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children). (2021). *Design principles for community-based settings: Putting the science of learning and development into action*. https://soldalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/eb0b6a_61db3771b95747f19cdc99c1d795cde8.pdf
- D. Forum for Youth Investment. (2022). *Organizational quality assessment*. David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality.

When referring to practices from this brief, please credit each practice’s original source using the [reference page](#). For example, if you wish to cite this practice in a funding application or report, you could say:

“As stated by Every Hour Counts (2021) and the Forum for Youth Investment (2021; 2022), it is important that we regularly review our vision and goal for our program.”