Guiding Principles for Learning & Development in High Quality Wisconsin Afterschool Programs

High quality afterschool programs offer educational and recreational learning opportunities that have a significant impact on the success of all children and youth. A warm, responsive relationship with a highly trained teaching staff is foundational. It is expected that staff will intentionally integrate developmental knowledge with the attitudes, skills and concepts that children and youth need to make steady progress socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively. Outstanding programs maintain high expectations for all children and youth using clear performance standards. A continuous cycle of assessment, which is understood by the professional staff and families, must be utilized to track progress and success.

1. All children/youth can lean and they deserve to have high expectations established that are appropriate for their age and are culturally and technologically appropriate for meeting individual differences.

2. Children/youth learn best through intentionally planned instruction and activities that enable them to construct knowledge through real life connections, peer and adult interactions, meaningful and imaginative experiences and active engagement with the environment

3. The learning environment for children/youth stimulates and engages their curiosity about the world around them and meets their cognitive, physical, social/emotional, cultural and creative needs where by the children/youth feel safe and secure

4. Language, literacy (both reading and writing) and numeracy development is supported and integrated throughout the program

5. Children's/youth's development and learning is enhanced and supported when staff is knowledgeable about growth and development, educational theory and practice. When staff participates in on-going opportunities for quality professional development, work with children/youth families and communities and are intentional in their relationships children benefit

6. High quality programs recognize and provide for a broad spectrum of individual needs in diverse populations of children/youth which include but are not limited to: English language learners, children/youth with special needs, and children from diverse cultural backgrounds and socio-economic groups

7. Children's/youth's development, learning, knowledge, and health are enhanced when a strong partnership exists between families, children's/youth's home, school and communities

8. High quality programs have collaborative relationships and on-going communication with a child's/youth's school to provide smooth transitions for children/youth and families to assure continuity of learning

9. High quality programs are defined by a set of guidelines and standards that maximize children's/youth's growth and development that increase their abilities to use essential life skills across domains of key learning areas

10. High quality programs use an appropriate system of assessment that documents children's/youth's growth and development in relationship to a defined set of program goals and standards to guide teaching and learning

The following are critical components of a high-quality afterschool program in Wisconsin:

- **Strong management and organization.** The program management develops positive two- way communication with staff, children and youth, families and the community; strives for low staff-to-child ratios; provides ongoing support, professional development and career ladder opportunities for staff; and implements systems that promote individual, family and cultural identity as the foundation of learning and development for children and youth.

- **Strong partnerships with children and youth, families, schools and communities.** Staff at all levels work with community partners to coordinate resources and create opportunities based on community needs. Whenever possible, resources are shared across partners to achieve community goals. Staff provide important information to families and facilitate connections to needed community services and supports. Staff engage in two-way communication with partners and actively involve partners in decision-making, programming and events.

- . A **knowledgeable, experienced, diverse staff who represent the community they serve.** Staff at all levels understand and apply concepts of child development, foster positive relationships with children and youth, and recognize and accommodate individual needs of children and youth. Staff seek opportunities for professional development and continuous improvement of their programs.

- A **safe, healthy, nurturing and engaging environment for children and youth.** Program space is safe, clean and designed with the educational significance of physical space in mind. Classroom areas are welcoming and arranged to support learning, promote positive interactions and encourage independence. The physical health of children and youth is a priority, including nutrition and physical activity as appropriate. A code of conduct is maintained and communicated to staff, children and families. Reasonable accommodations are made for inclusion of all children and youth.

- **Positive human relationships and interactions among staff, children and youth, families and communities.** Staff at aU levels demonstrate respect for one another and model healthy adult relationships, while teaching children and youth to interact positively with one another and make responsible choices. Staff establish relationships with families in a comfortable, respectful, welcoming way. Staff demonstrate their value for the culture and language of children and youth, their families and communities.

- **Deliberate and dynamic programming that responds to community needs and addresses the interests and needs of children and youth.** Developmentally appropriate, child-centered activities and current resources inspire learning, promote active engagement and complement school-day activities. Staff at all levels adapt research-based concepts and activities whenever possible. The programming has a clear structure, but provides opportunities for children and youth to make choices about their experience.

- **Systems for evaluation and continuous improvement.** Staff at all levels develop and implement plans for evaluating the program's effectiveness, the results of which are both used to guide program improvement and communicated to key stakeholders on a regular basis. Evaluation may include assessment of participants' educational, social, and emotional growth and development. Authentic evaluation systems allow all participants (staff, children and youth, families and community partners) to assess the program's effectiveness.

Sources

Continuous Improvement Process for Afterschool (National Community Education Association)

Critical Work Function Assessment Tool (Washington Afterschool Network)

High/Scope Youth Program Quality Assessment (High/Scope)

The NAA Standards for Quality School-Age Care (The National AfterSchool Association)

Pathways to Success for Youth: What Counts in After-School. Intercultural Center for Research in Education and National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005

Program Observation Tool (Washington Afterschool Network)

Program Quality Self-Assessment Tool (New York State Afterschool Network)

Self-Assessment and Planning for Quality (North Carolina Afterschool Network.)

The School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute)

School-Age Standards (YouthNet of Greater Kansas City)

Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs: A Follow-Up to the TASC Evaluation. Policy Studies Associates, November 2005

Standards for Quality School-Age Child Care (National Association of Elementary School Principals in collaboration with the Wellesley College School-Age Child Care Project)

Learning Principles in Afterschool Programs

- **Learning that is Active:**
Learning and memory recall of new knowledge is strengthened through different exposures - seeing, hearing, touching, and doing. Afterschool learning should be the result of activities that involve young people in "doing" - activities that allow them to be physically active, stimulate their innate curiosity, and that are hands-on and project-based. Hands-on learning involves the child in a total learning experience, which enhances the child's ability to think critically.

- **Learning that is Collaborative:**
Knowledge should be socially centered, as collaborative learning provides the best means to explore new information. Afterschool programs are well-positioned to build skills that allow young people to learn as a team. This includes listening to others, supporting group learning goals, resolving differences and conflicts, and making room for each member to contribute his or her individual talents. Collaborative learning happens when learners engage in a common task where each individual depends on and is accountable to each other.

- **Learning that is Meaningful:**
Young people are intrinsically motivated when they find their learning meaningful. This means having ownership over the learning topic and the means to assess their own progress. Motivation is increased when the learning is relevant to their own interests, experiences, and the real world in which they live. Community and cultural relevance is especially important to new immigrant youth and those from minority cultures. Rather than learning that is focused on academic subjects, young people in afterschool can apply their academic skills to their areas of interest and real world problems. Also, when learning involves responsibility, Leadership and service-to others, it is experienced as more meaningful.

- **Learning that supports Mastery:**
Young people tell us they are most engaged when they are given opportunities to learn new skills. If young people are to learn the importance and joy of mastery, they need the opportunity to learn and practice a full sequence of skills that will allow them to become "really good at something." Afterschool activities should not promote the gathering of random knowledge and skills. Rather, afterschool learning activities should be explicitly sequenced and designed to promote the layering of skills that allows participants to create a product or demonstrate mastery in a way they couldn't do before. Programs often achieve this by designing activities that lead to a culminating event or product that can be viewed and celebrated by peers and family members. For older youth, many programs are depending on apprenticeship models to assist youth in achieving a sense of mastery.

- **Learning that expands Horizons:**
Young people, especially those from low-income families and neighborhoods, benefit by learning opportunities that take them beyond their current experience and expand their horizons. Learning about new things and new places promotes a greater sense of potential of what they can achieve and brings a sense of excitement and discovery to the learning environment. Afterschool programs have the flexibility to go beyond the walls of their facilities. They can use the surrounding community as a classroom and bring in individuals and business that young people may not otherwise come into contact with. Expanding young people's horizons also includes helping them to develop a global awareness. This includes increasing their knowledge of other cultures and places and their understanding of the issues and problems we have in common across cultural and political divides