



Accreditation Standards and Quality Assessments

Incorporating healthy food and physical activity into afterschool and out-of-school time (OST) programs is an integral component of a comprehensive strategy to prevent childhood obesity. This factsheet emphasizes the need to make continuous improvements in the quality of programs, access to programs, and strengthening the field, and examines the pros and cons of applying accreditation standards to OST programs, recognizing that practitioners as well as researchers remain divided over how best to maintain and measure quality. To learn more, please visit the Center's [*Minnesota Afterschool and Out-of-School Time Toolkit for Healthy Eating and Physical Activity*](#).

Pros and cons of accreditation systems

Accreditation systems are valued in the fields of early childhood education, formal education, and school-age care programs as tools that can be used to build internal capacity for continuous quality improvement and cultivate a community of peer reviewers who are knowledgeable about a field's program standards. However, the application of accreditation standards to OST programs has been controversial and experts, including those in Minnesota, remain divided on a course of action.

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Three invitational forums, sponsored by the Greater Twin Cities United Way and the Minnesota Department of Education, were held recently with a cross-section of Minnesota leaders in the field to vet the pros and cons of implementing an OST accreditation system.¹ An outcome of the forums appears to be the evolution of general support for making continuous upgrades to program quality, improving access to programs, and strengthening the field. In the absence of a formal accreditation system, major funders of Minnesota OST programs have required quality assessments.²

An issue brief developed in conjunction with the forums points out that an important distinction between accreditation and other approaches that strive to ensure and promote quality (such as program evaluations) is “the consensus implied in shared criteria, a standard process and common tools.”³ By comparison, quality assurance approaches rely on the ability of individual programs to select their own approaches to assess quality.⁴ Another noted distinguishing characteristic of accreditation is that it typically results in some type of public recognition, in the form of a certificate, press release, or the like, issued and endorsed by the accrediting organization.

A wide range of programs and multitude of settings have made the use of an accreditation system challenging for OST programs, and have raised questions about its general suitability. Perceived risks of accreditation include the following:

- there is no guarantee that accreditation would result in better quality programs;
- the system would likely serve a gatekeeping function;
- the results could be misused or lead to unintended consequences; and

- the process might be unduly burdensome for some OST programs, stifle innovation, or shift attention away from programming to paperwork.

On the flip side, accreditation could:

- provide a standard set of tools for program planning and implementation;
- provide meaningful guidance for funding and policy development;
- assist families in making informed choices;
- support marketing and promotion efforts; and
- provide a common language for consistently describing standards of practice.⁵

Current national and state standards

Controversy aside, both national and state accreditation standards have been developed specifically for afterschool programs.

The [National AfterSchool Association](#) (NAA), a membership association for professionals affiliated with afterschool programs in diverse school and community-based settings, recently partnered with the [Council on Accreditation](#) (COA), an independent, not-for-profit, accrediting organization, to transition its accreditation program to COA. COA then merged NAA’s afterschool standards with COA’s standards based on agreed-upon elements — best practice, outcomes-oriented, effective in advancing quality, and responsive to the unique needs and diversity of programs. The merged standards, [COA Standards for After School Programs](#) (COA standards),⁶ address practices in program administration, human resources, and programming and services and, overall, support quality programming and promote positive outcomes for participating children and youth. Significantly, COA standards include internal and external assessment steps. COA emphasizes that the process

of evaluating and improving a program in an accreditation cycle is as important, or perhaps more important, to providers than the recognition that an accreditation offers.⁷

COA standards on nutrition insist on the availability of drinking water, healthful foods, and age-appropriate servings. Specific examples provided include limits on sugary drinks, foods high in fat, sugar, and salt, and a “balance of fruits, vegetables, grains, and proteins.” However, COA standards do not provide guidance on the amounts, preparation, or variety of these components. COA standards also encourage social learning opportunities during afterschool snacktimes or mealtimes to ensure that children are not rushed, are offered culturally appropriate foods, and enjoy the foods they are offered.

COA standards on physical activity require programs to provide adequate space for indoor and outdoor structured and unstructured play, age-appropriate games and sports, and safe outdoor play equipment. COA standards, however, do not address the intensity or duration of physical activity.

COA has placed the afterschool standards under its *Standards for Child & Youth Development Programs*, which also incorporates components of the NAA’s *Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Standards* (NAA HEPA Standards).⁸ NAA HEPA Standards are voluntary and evidence-based and are designed to provide practical, best practices for implementing nutrition and physical activity standards in K-12 OST programs as a complement to any required standards. NAA HEPA Standards encourage, but do not require, sites, programs, licensing boards, and national programs to aspire to its espoused values. Some of the standards can be incorporated easily into practice, while others may require careful planning, training, retraining, or budget revisions. These standards are intended to be used for guidance in conjunction with supplementary materials such as cycle menus, rotations for physical activity, and quality improvement toolkits.

The [Minnesota School-Age Care Alliance](#) (MNSACA), a state affiliate of the NAA, has developed standards of its own for afterschool programs that are primarily school-age care programs. Accreditation through MNSACA lasts for three years and is based on the national COA standards. The MNSACA standards include required and emerging indicators. Emerging indicators are those that “are linked to exceptional outcomes in youth but may still be only partially implemented in high quality programs.”⁹ Afterschool programs must meet 100% of the required indicators and 80% of the emerging indicators in order to achieve accreditation.

Together, MNSACA’s required and emerging indicators touch on all of the elements of a comprehensive strategy for creating afterschool program environments that support healthy eating and physical activity. Still, the required indicators for nutrition lack specificity. For instance, no definitions are provided for what constitutes a high fat or high sugar meal item, and many foods that may appear to be healthy — like granola bars, muffins, or sports drinks — may contain excess fats or sugar. More specific guidance such as a list of approved and unapproved food and beverage items may help afterschool providers serve truly nutritious meals and snacks.

Minnesota tri-agency guidelines

Three state agencies in Minnesota recently partnered on the development of guidelines for OST programs. Working together, Minnesota’s Departments of Human Services, Education and Health developed indicators for learning, social and emotional development, and health for children aged five to 12 years of age. MNSACA actively participated in the development of the indicators, working with the [Children’s Cabinet](#), a tri-agency partnership established by Governor Mark Dayton, which brings together the commissioners of Human Services, Education and Health to ensure that all of the state’s children are

healthy, safe and prepared to achieve their full potential. The guidelines are designed to be used by parents, community members, practitioners, and policymakers to help increase awareness and stimulate adoption of quality indicators in OST programs.¹¹

MNSACA Required and Emerging Indicators¹⁰

Required indicators for creating afterschool program environments that support healthy eating and physical activity:

- Make water available at all times
- Limit high fat, sodium, and sugar foods
- Balance fruits, vegetables, and proteins
- Offer or encourage youth to drink water, low or non-fat milk, or 100% juice
- Require staff to sit and eat with children during meal times
- Require staff to model healthy eating behaviors
- Encourage children to manage their own portion sizes
- Limit sedentary screen time to 20 minutes per day
- Provide at least a half hour of play every three hours of program time

Emerging (encouraged) indicators:

- Provide youth 30 minutes of vigorous activity every day
- Provide healthy snacks representing a variety of cultures

Although Minnesota’s tri-agency guidelines are not part of an accreditation program, they have the potential to positively influence how programs approach quality improvement. However, the current guidelines offer relatively few specifics about how to create healthy eating and physically active OST environments. The state indicators specify only that children in quality OST programs will possess a “healthy use of television, movies, and video games,” and “healthy living practices, such as healthy eating, physical fitness...”¹² Strategies for providers include activities for children and youth to learn about [My Plate](#) guidelines and food preparation, but no standards are provided to specify the types of food offered, the duration of screen time, or opportunities for physical activity.¹³

Opportunities

Strengthening obesity prevention standards in Minnesota’s tri-agency OST guidelines or through an accreditation system could help create model OST programs and foster a community of providers that are knowledgeable about best practices for healthy eating and physical activity. Accreditation requires a significant investment of funds and staff time; consequently, it tends to be most attractive and best-suited to well-established programs that already meet most of the required standards and have the capacity for organizational change. Programs that lack adequate resources for accreditation may have more pressing needs or see little benefit in the process, and may avoid participating for these reasons. Targeting accreditation standards may not be the most effective way to reach programs that are most in need of help establishing quality practices. As this discussion continues to play out, recommendations for improvements in existing quality assessment tools and highlighting tools that include nutrition and physical activity assessments will be useful in Minnesota.

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Endnotes

- ¹ See KATE WALKER, UNIV. OF MINN. EXTENSION, EXTENSION CTR. FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT, *THE QUESTION OF YOUTH PROGRAM ACCREDITATION* (2012), available at <http://www1.extension.umn.edu/youth/research/docs/youth-program-accreditation-issue-brief.pdf>.
- ² *Id.* at 8–9.
- ³ *Id.* at 2.
- ⁴ *Id.* at 2.
- ⁵ *Id.* at 5–6.
- ⁶ COUNCIL ON ACCREDITATION, *AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM STANDARDS* (2008), available at <http://coanet.org/standards/standards-for-after-school-programs/>
- ⁷ *Id.*
- ⁸ NAT'L AFTERSCHOOL ASSOC., *STANDARDS FOR HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS* (2011), available at <http://naaweb.org/resources/item/56-healthy-eating>.
- ⁹ MINN. SCHOOL-AGE CARE ALLIANCE, *MAAP 2.0 GUIDE: MNSACA MINN. AFTER SCHOOL ACCREDITATION PROGRAM* (2012), available at <http://mnsaca.org/associations/9802/files/MAAP20InformationalGuide.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ *Id.*
- ¹¹ MINN. DEP'T OF HUMAN SERVICES, MINN. DEP'T OF EDUC., & MINN. DEP'T OF HEALTH, *SCHOOL-AGE INDICATORS OF PROGRESS 2012: MINNESOTA'S LEARNING GUIDELINES FOR AGES FIVE TO TWELVE* (2012), available at http://www.mncpd.org/docs/ECIPs_5-12.pdf.
- ¹² *Id.*
- ¹³ *Id.*