



## **The Wyoming Afterschool Quality Improvement Initiative**

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In 2011, the Wyoming Afterschool Alliance (WYAA), a C.S. Mott Foundation Statewide Afterschool Network and an initiative of the Wyoming Community Foundation, in partnership with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), launched the second of a three-phase project to help afterschool programs start down the path of continuous program improvement to better serve the children of Wyoming.

Following a requisite “needs assessment” phase, WYAA initiated this project with a pilot to introduce Wyoming afterschool programs to NIOST’s Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS). APAS includes several tools that are research-based and tested, and are used extensively by programs throughout the United States. These tools help programs identify strengths and weaknesses and offer specific recommendations and practices that programs can adopt to improve the quality of programs and outcomes for children and youth.

In the fall of 2011, NIOST trained seventeen afterschool programs in the use of the APAS Survey on Afterschool Youth Outcomes (SAYO) and Assessment of Afterschool Program Practices (APT). In addition, fifteen experienced afterschool professionals from across the state were trained as Quality Advisors (QAs) to provide one-on-one coaching to these programs throughout the pilot year. During the first year of the pilot, these seventeen programs – with support from their QAs – engaged in a comprehensive evaluation process which included identifying research questions, customizing APAS tools, collecting data, and using findings to develop and implement action plans for improving services for youth.

### **Early Successes from the First Year of the Pilot**

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- **Youths’ engagement in learning and relations with adults appear to have improved over the program year.**

Research has found powerful links between youths’ levels of engagement and their achievement and persistence in school. High levels of engagement have been found to be particularly important to the success of at-risk youth. Similarly, research shows that youth who have a supportive, stable relationship with an adult are more resilient to stress, have healthy development, and perform well in school, and are less likely to engage in risky behavior.

In the first year of the pilot (Phase II), staff SAYO-S ratings of youth’s engagement in learning and relations with adults showed modest increases from the fall 2011 to the spring 2012 data collection periods. Staff reported that youth benefited from their participation in the afterschool programs by demonstrating improvement in their interpersonal/social skills and other 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills. Staff attributed these benefits to specific aspects of the program, such as youth’s positive relationships with adults and with peers. The positive results from the first year of the

pilot suggest that the project is showing great potential and that programs are using data to understand how they are influencing youth outcomes.

- **Program participants and Quality Advisors see the value of undertaking the work of continuous program improvement, and feel their participation in the pilot has been very helpful for their programs.**

At the end of the pilot year, participating programs and QAs were asked to provide feedback on their impressions of the project and its impact on their work. Participants responded enthusiastically about their experience with the project – 100% of those surveyed reported they see the value of undertaking the work of continuous program improvement, and the majority of pilot sites felt that using the data collection component (SAYO) and the program assessment tool (APT) had been “very helpful” for their program.

Both participating programs and their assigned Quality Advisors believe that their level of awareness of what defines “quality” has increased, and that intentional strategies have been implemented due to use of the APAS tools. One participant responded, *“I think it forces me and my staff to step back and look at our program from a different perspective and think about areas we can improve. It is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day of the program and the idea that ‘if it's not broke, don't fix it.’ However by using SAYO and APT, I see areas needing improvement that I may not have otherwise taken the time to look at.”*

All of the programs surveyed reported that they were including staff in activities such as participating in APT observations, reviewing results of SAYO data, and making changes to their practices. One program reported, *“It was very helpful for the staff to be thinking about their interactions with kids and to be more aware of the importance of their role in the Club.”* Another participant said, *“Staff are finding that if they fine tune their activities – often which doesn't require any more supplies, just a bit more thought – they see a difference in the youth engagement. Staff seem to be putting more effort into planning activities.”*

### **Continuation Plans for Phase III**

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As a result of these initial findings, WYAA and NIOST are implementing important next steps to continue additional training and support for the program sites and the Quality Advisors to reinforce use of APAS assessment tools and to gain further understanding of quality programming. These next steps also provide time and resources to help programs to develop strategies that support continuous quality improvement.

The vision of the WYAA is to be able to offer curriculum via online learning modules in the near future that will ultimately lead to a professional credential for the Wyoming Youth Development Worker.

For more information about the Wyoming Afterschool Alliance and *The Wyoming Quality Improvement Initiative Project*, please contact: Linda Barton, [lbarton@wyafterschoolalliance.org](mailto:lbarton@wyafterschoolalliance.org)  
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