

**APPROACHES FOR INTEGRATING SKILL-BASED
ACTIVITIES IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS**

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of an examination of the implementation of skill-oriented activities in 10 programs administered as part of the Out-of-School Time Programs for Youth (OST) initiative of the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) during the 2010-11 school year. The evaluation builds on research findings on the importance of skill development in youth programs and findings on the need for improvement in this area from prior evaluations of the OST initiative. The purposes of this evaluation were to assess the challenges of implementing skill-oriented activities, to identify implementation approaches and program elements that can be replicated across the OST initiative, and to inform DYCD's policy goals of improving the quality of OST programming for elementary- and middle-grades youth.

Ten OST elementary- and middle-grades programs were selected for this study because evidence from previously collected evaluation data, as well as from DYCD program staff, indicated that they had incorporated skill-building program content into youth activities. In the 2010-11 school year, data were collected from the 10 study programs using the following methods: (1) site visits that included interviews with program directors, staff, and youth, as well as structured observations of youth activities, (2) a survey of youth (N=619), and (3) youth enrollment and participation data from DYCD Online, the agency's management information system. In addition, a survey was administered to all directors of Option 1 OST programs (N=261).

In general, the experiences of the 10 study sites, all of which implemented skill-based programming, indicate that it is possible for OST programs to do so without exceptional human or financial resources. Findings also indicate that the 10 study sites were not otherwise different from other OST programs in terms of the characteristics of the youth served, program staff characteristics, and program director characteristics. This high level of similarity suggests that virtually any OST program can adopt the approaches described in this report to strengthen youth skills. These approaches include:

- ***Establishing an explicit program structure***, including clear expectations and management to promote a learning environment and regularly reinforcing the program structure through consistent, ongoing application of rules and procedures
- ***Establishing and enforcing a youth attendance policy*** that emphasizes consistent youth engagement
- ***Using outcome measures*** to evaluate program and staff success
- ***Recruiting capable staff*** through a formal hiring process that emphasizes skill and commitment to high-quality programming
- ***Training and monitoring staff*** through lesson plans and ongoing training efforts that address specific staff needs

- ***Implementing cross-disciplinary activities*** that are theme-based or project-based and intentionally focused on developing youth skills and possibly using a formal curriculum package, based on preliminary evidence that such packages seem to promote incorporation of skill-building elements

Based on the analysis presented in this report, the evaluation team suggests four areas in which DYCD support can help to broaden the use of skill-based programming across the OST initiative:

- ***Promote explicit program structure.*** DYCD policy guidance can encourage, in particular, the use of promising components such as the use of a defined curriculum, requirements for staff to submit lesson plans, enforced staff and youth attendance policies, and well-defined expectations for youth outcomes.
- ***Encourage broad use of outcome measures.*** Outcome measures should not be burdensome to staff but should enable program directors to gauge the success of both staff members and activities, in order to shape and improve subsequent program offerings. Providing specific examples of outcome measures to program directors would help them develop workable measures for activities in their own programs.
- ***Help programs raise staff quality.*** DYCD could provide support in this area by profiling programs that have effective procedures in place to recruit and hire high-quality staff and by providing sample materials such as employment applications and tests of basic skills that program directors could incorporate into their hiring process.
- ***Provide professional development on skill-oriented activity development through targeted training.*** Program directors are interested in offering more project-based activities to build youth skills in their programs but often don't know where to begin. Use of a formal curriculum is sometimes a helpful step in the right direction. In addition, training sessions in which directors work through the development of specific activities, including defining outcomes, developing sample lesson plans, and content, might be beneficial. This would give directors an activity they could implement in their program as well as the broader understanding necessary to develop additional activities on their own.

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Overview

In September 2005, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) launched the Out-of-School Time (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 New York City zip codes with large numbers of youth in poverty, youth who are English Language Learners, and youth who are eligible for state-subsidized childcare.

Research studies on OST programming (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000; Noam, 2008; Vandell et al., 2006) have identified several important features of out-of-school time youth programs that are high in quality. These features include (1) intentional learning environments with clear goals and meaningful, engaging activities, (2) a mastery orientation with structured opportunities for skill-building, and (3) youth-centered programming with developmentally appropriate activities built around youths' strengths and involving youth voice. Studies have found that programs are most successful in explicitly and intentionally building youth skills when they have established a clear vision for the program (Wimer, Bouffard, Little, & Goss, 2008). In addition, a meta-analysis of evaluations (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007) found that youth development programs are most effective in promoting positive outcomes when they use the following approaches:

- A coordinated *sequence of activities* that breaks down learning steps and provides youth with opportunities to connect these steps (often facilitated by structured lesson plans or curriculum materials)
- *Active learning* opportunities for youth to learn by doing, practice new skills and behaviors, and receive feedback on their performance
- At least some program activities *focused* on clear learning goals
- Activities that *explicitly target* specific, concrete skills

In October 2011, DYCD issued a new request for proposals (RFP) for the Out-of-School Time Program for Elementary and Middle School Youth, in which DYCD communicated its vision for OST programs. Consistent with research studies and findings from the evaluation of the OST initiative, the 2011 OST RFP placed a strong emphasis on skill-oriented programming by requiring activities “be based on a curriculum or set of sequenced activity plans that map a path to achievement of specific learning goals or acquisition of specific skills.”

Policy Studies Associates (PSA) has evaluated the OST initiative since DYCD launched the citywide initiative in 2005. For the first five years of the evaluation, evaluation reports described the initiative's efforts to scale up rapidly and serve large numbers of youth across New York City, as well as the implementation challenges that programs faced in maintaining a well-trained, stable staff and offering skill-focused program content with engaging, active learning opportunities (Russell, Mielke, & Reisner, 2009). Most recently, a report in this series on a

sample of 10 randomly selected OST programs noted evidence and examples of skill-building activities, but also found that this was an area with substantial potential for improvement (Sanzone, Vaden, Russell, & Sinclair, 2011).

Evaluation Approach

Reflecting the growing consensus about the importance of skill-building content in effective youth programming, PSA refocused the ongoing OST evaluation in 2010-11 to examine approaches for incorporating skill-based learning into program activities. The purpose of this refocusing was to understand the challenges of implementing skill-based activities and to identify strategies and program elements that could be replicated across the OST initiative. The evaluation team used previously collected data and input from DYCD program staff to select 10 OST elementary- and middle-grades programs that incorporated skill-building program content into youth activities. The 10 sites represented all five boroughs and varied in terms of program size and the level of involvement of the nonprofit organization operating the OST program in guiding program activities.

PSA then collected data on each of these programs using the following methods:

- ***Site visits.*** Members of the evaluation team conducted two-day site visits to each of the 10 programs in Spring 2011 to interview program directors, staff, and youth participants. The team asked program directors to describe the goals of their programs, the involvement of their sponsoring nonprofit organization, program resources, steps involved in program planning, and challenges. While on site, the teams also conducted structured observations of youth activities.
- ***Youth enrollment and participation data.*** The evaluation team analyzed participation and enrollment data for the 10 sites, as collected from DYCD Online, the agency's management information system. A total of 1,694 youth were enrolled in all grades served by the 10 OST study sites during the 2010-11 school year.
- ***Survey of youth in the study programs.*** In Spring 2011, the evaluation team asked each of the 10 programs to administer a brief survey to the 931 youth in grades 3 through 8 who were current participants as of January 2011, according to records in DYCD Online. Nine of the 10 study sites administered the survey and 619 participants completed the survey. The youth survey response rate was 67 percent across the 10 sites. Excluding the program that did not administer the survey, the youth survey response rate was 82 percent.

In addition, PSA collected the following data from all OST programs, including the 10 study sites:

- ***Survey of all OST Option 1 program directors.*** The evaluation team administered an online survey to 377 directors of OST elementary- and middle-grades programs operating under Option 1 of the OST initiative, which supports

comprehensive programs throughout New York City. This survey asked directors about program staffing, supports, training, and challenges to implementing project-based learning approaches. The response rate for this survey was 69 percent, with responses from all 10 directors of the selected study sites.

The first section of this report provides a description of the 10 study sites, and the second section describes strategies for program management, staffing, and training that the 10 sites used to support the implementation of skill-focused learning activities. This section includes examples of skill-based activities observed during evaluation site visits that were notable both because they successfully integrated multiple disciplines and because they were not costly to implement. The third report section summarizes findings related to program staffing and the use of published curricula, for the overall OST initiative. Finally, samples of locally developed lesson plan forms are provided in the appendix.

Description of the 10 Study Sites

To address possible criticism that the positive findings in the 10 study sites could not be replicated elsewhere in the OST initiative, PSA first reviewed the characteristics of the youth, program directors, and staff members in the 10 study sites, and each program's access to staff training resources and activity space. PSA found that in each of these areas, the 10 study sites were typical; that is, the 10 sites were similar to sites studied in past evaluations of OST programs conducted by PSA. Youth were largely Hispanic/Latino or Black and over 25 percent of the youth spoke Spanish as their primary language. The program directors brought a moderate level of experience to the job and relied heavily on young adults who were college students to serve as group leaders. Most of the youth activities took place in classrooms, gyms, and cafeterias.

Youth Characteristics

Youth in the seven elementary-school and three middle-school OST study sites were evenly divided between boys and girls, and over half (59 percent) of youth were Hispanic or Latino. Black, non-Hispanic youth represented about one-quarter (27 percent) of participants. English was the primary language of 68 percent of youth; 27 percent of youth spoke Spanish as their primary language. In surveys, youth were generally positive about their academic abilities, engagement in school, and level of academic support received at home, similar to responses by youth participants in previous OST evaluations.

Program Director Background

Seven of the 10 program directors in the study sites had completed at least a four-year college degree, including two with a master's degree or higher. These program directors reported a moderate level of experience in youth development, with five of the 10 reporting that they had six or more years of relevant experience prior to becoming an OST director. When asked about

experience in nine management areas critical to successful program operation—recruiting and hiring staff, supervising staff, developing activities for youth, program design, developing lesson plans, reviewing lesson plans, training staff and volunteers, managing youth programs, and measuring youth progress—more than half of the 10 program directors had less than six years of experience in each of the areas.

Program Staffing

Given the scarcity of resources, each OST program must make careful staffing decisions to maximize the quality of programming but at the same time stay within their budget and maintain the youth-to-staff ratios required by the School Age Child Care (SACC) regulations. As expected, college students and specialists (including professional artists, coaches, and dancers) played prominent roles in the 10 study sites. Nine of the 10 study sites reported that their staff included college students, and nine of the 10 reported that they employed at least one specialist. Certified teachers and teens were less often part of the program staff.

Four of the program directors in the 10 study sites reported that they had an education specialist working in their program. Three of the four education specialists in the study sites were certified teachers, and the fourth was a former school administrator.

Staff Training and Monitoring

Program directors in the 10 study sites reported that staff received the most training on topics related to direct, in-class support: homework help, classroom management, project-based learning, and goal-setting for youth. Staff received the most frequent training from their program directors and the least frequent training from off-site sources such as DYCD, their nonprofit organization, and technical assistance providers such as the Partnership for After-School Education (PASE).

Type of Activity Space

The evaluation team observed a total of 163 activities during site visits to the 10 study sites. These activities occurred in settings typical of programming seen in other OST programs and other after-school programs. More than two-thirds of activities took place in classrooms, and 15 percent of activities took place in either the school cafeteria or gym, similar to the patterns reported in previous OST evaluation reports. Despite the use of classrooms and gyms for activities, evaluators found a substantial presence of skill-oriented programming in the non-homework activities observed in the elementary- and middle-grades programs with, 72 percent of elementary and 79 percent of middle-grades enrichment activities focused on building or practicing specific skills (Exhibit 1).¹

¹ All activity observations were conducted using an observation instrument developed by PSA. All site visitors were trained to use the following definition of skill-building when observing activities: “Skill-building activities are content-driven and develop core skills. This type of activity can include activities which build on a previously

Exhibit 1
Observed activities in the 10 study sites
by type of space, participation, and context, in percents

Activity characteristics	Percent of observed activities in:		
	All sites	Elementary grades	Middle grades
All observations (n=163)	100%	57%	45%
Type of activity space (n=154)			
Classroom	68%	72%	62%
Gym	9	8	10
Cafeteria	7	8	6
Library	1	0	2
Auditorium	5	6	7
Other activity space	10	7	13
Participation Type (n=134)			
By age or by grade	73%	85%	54%
By interest (youth choice)	25	15	43
All attendees	2	0	3
Skill focus of activity (excludes homework activities) (n=126)			
Skill building/practice	76%	72%	79%
Not skill-oriented	24	28	20
Among skill-oriented activities, skills addressed (n=94)			
Artistic	44%	42%	48%
Reading/writing	17	17	17
Physical/athletic	15	11	19
Math/numeracy	7	4	12
Interpersonal communication	5	6	5
Decision making	1	2	0
Other skills	20	30	10

Notes: Observations in which youth in both an elementary grade and a middle grade participated were included in the analyses for both the elementary and middle grades.

The category "Other activity space" includes computer labs, art rooms, music rooms, hallways, outside playgrounds.

The category "Other skills" includes skills not specifically tracked on the PSA observation instrument, including cooking, keyboarding, money/finance, theater, and dance.

Exhibit reads: Across all 10 sites, 57 percent of the observations documented elementary grade activities and 45 percent documented activities in the middle grades. Sixty-eight percent of all activities took place in a classroom setting.

learned skill and are intended to help youth reach the next level of mastery, or help youth develop and build upon a new skill. Skill-building can characterize any kind of learning, whether academic or non-academic."

Common Strategies for Implementing Skill-Building Programming

During the visits to each of the 10 study sites, the evaluation team interviewed the program director, several staff members, and a small group of youth. The team also observed activities to gain a first-hand understanding of the programming offered. The common strategies observed in the site visits are described below, organized into the following topic areas:

- Establishing an explicit program structure
- Establishing a youth attendance policy
- Using outcome measures to evaluate program and staff success
- Recruiting capable staff
- Training and monitoring staff
- Specific skill-based activities observed

In each of these topic areas, the descriptions include specific examples that illustrate the low-cost, creative approaches program directors used to improve program quality.

Establishing an Explicit Program Management Structure

While the push for more skill-based program content may come from DYCD, the nonprofit organization operating the OST program, or both, successful implementation lies in the hands of the program director. The directors at several sites visited for this study had made important changes to youth programming after they assumed a leadership role in the program, efforts that were successful in part because they first focused on program management. They counteracted the resistance to change through the use of structure (e.g., formal curricula and clear guidelines for staff and youth), consistency (even-handed application of the structure with few exceptions) and persistence (continued pushes for change and enforcement of new structures). By first establishing a strong foundation through program management, the program directors were then able to focus more on the quality of program content, including the amount of skill-based programming offered to youth.

One program director was assigned by her nonprofit organization to rescue a struggling program. As she described it, when she arrived the program did not have a good relationship with the school, to the point that the principal did not provide a room in the school to serve as the OST office. Parents had taken youth out of the program because they were concerned about safety. She faced the challenge of revamping a program while at the same time continuing to provide services to the youth. She commented on her gradual approach to change:

The first thing I did when I saw the disarray was to try to build a little foundation, but it was very hard. Because you're running a program and developing a program, and at the

same time, you're trying to build a foundation. The house is up already, and you're trying to fix the foundation. And then, as things developed, I started developing protocols, protocols for everything. And that's what I try to do. I build it a little step at a time, when I've got the tools to build another step.

The experience of this program director illustrates an approach seen in many programs, in which the program director adds structure that becomes an integral part of the program and then later adds other elements, as part of ongoing improvement efforts. Program directors reported that they learned from management approaches that they tried even if they didn't work, regularly identified additional areas to address, and monitored all of their improvement efforts on an ongoing basis.

While these improvement efforts included many formal elements described later in this report (such as lesson plans and regular staff meetings), they also included many *ad hoc*, simple solutions put in place to improve the overall program environment, thus creating an atmosphere conducive to learning and skill development. For example, one program director was concerned about chaos in the cafeteria as youth disposed of their trash. Her solution was to circulate staff around the cafeteria with the trash can, rather than have the youth get up from the tables to dispose of the materials.

Because prior to that, the kids would get up. They'd run to the water, and if there's something spilled, they could slip, and would be jumping all over the place. And now, this way is calm and they just sit there. So it's not trying to control and contain like tying down. No. They converse, they have discussions, they socialize, but in a safe environment.

This change was easy to implement, and actually reduced the burden on staff because, although they had to collect the trash, they did not need to deal with disruption.

In another program, the director was frustrated that her staff did not dress appropriately, so she adopted a staff uniform and provided identical polo shirts to all staff.

The staff were popping out of everywhere and I didn't think it was appropriate, there was no dress code. So then I decided, "You know what? I've been telling you guys it's not right to dress this type of way but if you come dressed up like that, you're going back home. You will not be able to work." But it was killing me to send my staff away, because I need my staff. So then I had a little money, and I bought those shirts, and now I don't have problems any more. And when we go on trips and everything I'll wear a shirt, too, and everyone recognizes us.

Finally, in an effort to reduce staff absenteeism, one program director established procedures for both illness and scheduled time off, all designed to maximize program continuity for youth in the program.

Because it's a part-time job, [some] people think that it's not as important. Because we're working with children, they need to be here. That was half my battle when I first

started. The calling out, the emergencies, being sick. If they're sick and it's more than two days, I require a doctor's note. I came up with "request off" forms with the idea that this is a two way street. I understand that people need to take days. Do me the favor of filling out the form two weeks in advance. And on the form, it asked them for coverage. It allows for that teamwork—that team effort, they need to rely on one another. If a counselor is calling out [they need to indicate] what materials they are going to provide so that it really is seamless for the children. Even though it's a part-time position, I treat it as a full-time expectation.

These examples may seem like small changes, but based on conversations with program directors and on-site observations, the changes had a substantive impact on program environment and were helpful in the program directors' efforts to establish a well-organized program.

Establishing a Youth Attendance Policy

Program attendance is commonly recognized as an indicator of a program's effectiveness. Prior evaluations of the OST initiative concluded that regular program attendance is strongly associated with the positive youth outcomes sought through the initiative (Russell, Mielke & Reisner, 2008). Of the 10 programs visited for this study, six (all of which served youth in the elementary grades) had mandatory attendance policies for youth enrolled in the program. Attendance requirements ranged from five days per week to restrictions on the number of unexcused absences and early pick-ups. One program director described the attendance policy in her school as "everyone needs to be here on time, every day." In this program early pick-up was permitted only for emergencies and for planned appointments such as doctor's visits. In contrast, in another program that did not have mandatory attendance, programming was frequently interrupted as parents picked up their children in the afternoon, making it difficult for staff to gain momentum as they led activities.

Although attendance policies had the intended effect of increasing participation hours for the program, directors also put these policies in place as a matter of fairness to youth on waiting lists. If an enrolled student did not attend regularly, the program director preferred the slot be used by a child on the waiting list who would attend regularly and benefit from the program offerings. Some of the program directors with clear expectations for attendance described the rationale for these policies as follows:

[Youth] are required to attend five days, and if they're absent, they have their parents bring a doctor's note. If the child is picked up three times early with no reason, with no doctor's note, that counts for one absence out of my program. And three absences without a doctor's note, the child is dismissed from our program and another child from the waiting list comes into the program. This program is free for you, but there's a waiting list. My program gets full in two days. This is very competitive, so orientation day, there's about 200 parents there for 100 spots. So it's first come, first serve. I don't hold spots.

I have to tell the parents that a five-day commitment is required. First of all, because I have 100 kids on a waiting list, so I can't see giving programming to a kid who's only

going to come three days a week and I waste that spot for a kid that really needs it for the five days.

Program directors also pointed to the importance of continuity and consistent youth engagement as a driving force in their decision to implement clearly defined attendance policies. Most of the youth activities build to a culminating event or performance, and in order to prepare for these events, it is important that students attend the program on a regular basis.

Youth enrolled at the 10 study sites had higher program attendance rates than youth studied in past PSA evaluations of OST programs. Participants in the seven elementary-grades programs in this study attended 416 hours of OST programming on average, with 56 percent of participants meeting the target level of 432 hours of participation. Participants in the middle-grades programs attended for an average of 267 hours, with 63 percent achieving the target of 216 hours (Exhibit 2). In the comprehensive evaluation report that examined participation data from all OST programs, 42 percent of elementary-grades participants attended for the target number of hours (with a mean of 377 hours), as did 47 percent of middle-grades participants (with a mean of 218 hours) (Russell et al., 2009).

Exhibit 2
OST participants' expected and actual mean attendance hours
in the 10 study sites

Hours of attendance	Elementary (N=1,183)	Middle (N=511)
Expected hours	432	216
Actual hours	416	267
Percent of participants meeting expected hours	56%	63%

Note: As in previous years of the evaluation, the expected number of hours of participation was computed based on DYCD's program-level Rate of Participation expectations.

Exhibit reads: Elementary-grades youth were expected to attend OST programming for a minimum of 432 hours, and youth in the elementary grades in the 10 study sites attended 416 hours on average.

Using Outcome Measures

Measuring outcomes often presents a challenge to program directors and staff, and is an area in which programs use many different approaches. Past OST evaluation reports described limited use of data for program improvement, aside from compilation of DYCD Online enrollment and participation data (Sanzone et al., 2011). In visits for this study, the evaluation team found examples of program directors using varied strategies to assess outcomes and using those assessments for program improvements.

First, among the 10 study sites, the evaluation team found that nearly all program directors were using activity enrollment, attendance, and youth engagement as a gauge of program success. The program directors discontinued activities with low attendance in favor of more popular ones, and some reworked unpopular activities to encourage greater student engagement. For example, one site had a music activity that was a fusion of jazz, electric guitar, and drums that was not popular with the youth. Using the same instructor, they redesigned the activity to focus on hip hop and the activity became very popular.

This project-level examination of the value of an activity in terms of student engagement can be a precursor for broader, substantive evaluations of participant outcomes. The level of youth engagement in an activity was an underlying gauge of success for all of the program directors and was examined by the evaluation team during activity observations by looking at the extent to which youth were on-task, collaborative, and attentive to peers and staff. The evaluation team also gauged the extent to which staff used effective strategies to engage youth in the activities, by actively encouraging the participation of all youth and by listening to or observing youth during the activity.

Many program directors in the 10 study sites reported that, while indicators such as activity enrollment and attendance are helpful guides for program management, they only serve as a measure of program success in the broadest sense. One program director made this point, cautioning that it is important to look beyond program subscription to assess the value of an activity in terms of the skills that youth are learning:

I think it's a combination of judging, not only by numbers, but also how important is it to the seven or eight kids who are in that activity. And what was the outcome? Great art? Great photography? If that's the case, then we're going to keep it regardless of numbers.

Second, programs typically used lesson plans as a tool to establish targeted youth outcomes for each activity. These outcomes included the overall learning goals of the activity and the skills the youth were expected to attain at the conclusion of the activity, as well as interim milestones or benchmarks of success. It is important that projects and activities clearly define goals up front so that the program director and other staff can assess whether or not the activity is successful in promoting youth learning. For example, one of the study sites prescribed the questions each student was expected to be able to answer at the end of a "Career World" activity:

1. *What are your skills? What abilities do you have?*
2. *What do you like to do in your spare time?*
3. *What are some career choices that match your skills and interests?*
4. *What training do you need for these careers?*
5. *How much do professionals in this career earn?*
6. *How do you dress for an interview?*
7. *How do you develop a resume?*

Other examples of specific outcomes defined in lesson plans included a list of the vocabulary words students were expected to master through the activity. For an activity on the human body learning, outcomes included youth successfully labeling parts of the brain on a worksheet, measuring their height, and creating a graph showing the height of all students in the class. A fashion activity with an end goal of creating sewn garments for an end-of-year fashion show included examples of interim outcomes: youth were expected to learn about sewing and safety issues in the first week of the activity and about color wheels in the second week, before they embarked on the task of creating the garments for the final show.

Third, several program directors included staff assessment of activities as a component of their evaluation of program success in achieving desired youth outcomes. In one program, the director described her efforts as follows: “I do observations and I also have staff members and senior group leaders do observations when they get a chance. And we discuss it on Fridays: How did it go? What worked? What didn’t work? What do we have to change?” All program directors also reported they used their own observation of youth during regular sessions and culminating events to determine whether the activity was successful.

Finally, the directors described how they monitored their staff during activities to ensure that their instructional strategies promoted youth learning. For example, one director asked students questions about the activity content to see if they understood what the staff member was teaching:

If a teacher is explaining a neutral color, [the director] will walk in and ask a student to explain what a neutral color is. [We] do a quick assessment to make sure everything is on track. It is definitely a crucial part of lesson planning to clearly explain everything to students.

The director reported that she tried to correct any problems by reiterating to her staff that they need to make lessons clear and easily understandable for participants. One program director described her process to work with staff to improve specific theme-based “academies,” using a rubric to rate the implementation of each academy and offering suggestions as to how they can raise their ratings.

[For her academy one staff member] did a travel agency and it went well, but it wasn’t as strong as some of the other academies. So I said, if you can really pinpoint x, y, and z to do in this academy then it would bump your rating up to this. We base the ratings on a rubric. A three is “meets standards.”

Recruiting Capable Staff

Recruiting, hiring, and retaining high-caliber staff is a challenge that all OST programs face. The part-time program positions are usually staffed by college-age youth in their first formal job. The program directors at the 10 study sites described many challenges in their efforts to staff their program but also described successes in the areas of formalizing the hiring process and retooling current staff to support skill-based activities.

Formal hiring practices. In their approach to staffing their programs, directors in five of the 10 study sites had established a prescribed application process that required applicants to submit a formal resume and references. Some program directors tested applicants' basic reading, writing, and math skills, all with the goal of improving staff qualifications.

When I recruit, I look for experience working with children. I also give them a little test, 10 questions in their application forms that they have to answer. I look to see if they can write, if they can interpret the question and understand the question. I have people [whom] I interview that can't answer my little questions, and [the questions are] very simple.

When I first came here, there was no application for the job. ... So I did an application. We put the packages together on what was needed, references. There was no place for references before.

You kind of can tell when you go through an interview with someone from the language that they're using about the community and how they see our young people. For me it's a big thing if someone has [a negative perspective of the community], then automatically you don't qualify, because there are enough put-downs in our community already that I really just want someone who's positive, who has a positive outlook on our young people.

Hiring and retaining qualified staff was a challenge raised by many of the program directors visited for this study. One program director cited the tough nature of the neighborhood surrounding the school as a contributing factor in staff retention.

October is gang season. Our art teacher walked outside not too long ago during recruiting season, and he was in between two gunmen. And he just kind of had to back up out of the way. So not everybody wants to work in that kind of environment. We actually over-hire because probably five or eight [specialists] end up leaving after the first two or three weeks. Just because they can't handle it, but we kind of know how to do that, how to deal with that.

Retooling staff for skill-based instruction. It is possible, although challenging, to shift from a recreation-focused program to a program with skill-building activities as its centerpiece. When the program director at one of the study sites first made this shift, she was concerned that the existing staff would not be able to change the type of programming they provided but even so, encouraged them to try. As the director described it, the existing staff were "just used to doing homework and gym time, they weren't being challenged."

As she rolled out the new skill-based focus, she found that, while some of the existing staff did not rise to the challenge of the new programming, others showed promise. The program director worked to provide support to those staff members, also strategically enlisting the support of the education specialist for the program. The program director described her initial approach as lenient, asking the staff to complete brief lesson plans, providing encouragement and suggestions for activities. As the end of the first semester, under the new approach, some of the

staff exceeded expectations and went beyond what they were asked to do. One of these staff members described her experience:

It was difficult at first. I thought it was too structured, but now I realize that there was a need for it. There was a need to have everything in order and to have the lesson plans and have the kids learning and it's fine.

Another long-time member of the staff also described how her perspective on the new program changed with time.

At first I thought it was very structured and [took] away time from something fun, but it actually adds to what they're learning, it shows them how to make a word bank, a graph, a timeline. And the lesson plans you definitely need because if you came in everyday and just made it up you would be lost. So yeah. I agree. I think at first it was a little bit much, but now we've been doing it and we've adjusted to it and figured how to put [together the materials] throughout my whole cycle instead of just waiting until the last minute doing all that.

While the program director acknowledged that staff who did not want to change left to take positions elsewhere, she felt that the staff who made the transition were stronger than ever before and were now some of the greatest cheerleaders for the program.

It's hard. And you're going to lose people in the process. But at the end, the people who matter are going to stay. That is what I think.

Training and Monitoring Staff

In order to effectively implement skill-based instruction, program staff must plan activities ahead of time, considering not only the materials and supplies needed to conduct the activity but also a description of the skills that the activity will develop in youth. Successful planning requires training to support staff as they learn and apply lesson planning skills, and also requires monitoring to ensure that staff continue the necessary planning throughout the year. In interviews, the program directors in the 10 study sites described approaches they used to support staff in improving instructional quality.

Staff training. Although the 10 study sites used varied resources in training, several directors said that money and timing often make it difficult for all of their staff to attend offsite trainings. These directors found that the best solution for them was to train their own staff. This approach allowed them to provide training on an ongoing basis and to focus the training on specific identified areas of staff need.

I can do the research on areas that I'm comfortable on and then train staff. Or I already have set trainings that I'm responsible for. [...] Sometimes we'll throw in a best practices or academic support [training].

One program director who also does her own training of staff noted that she likes to focus her efforts on providing training based on the specific needs of her staff.

[Training] depends on what comes up. So if people are struggling with lesson planning, we may pull a lesson plan apart and talk about the components. [...] We may focus on creative read-alouds or writing activities that will engage young people. It's based on the needs of my staff.

A director for a large elementary-school program used outside consultants to train her staff, but supplemented the training by conducting role-playing activities with staff members following the formal training to help staff apply their training to real situations that come up in after-school programs.

The program directors in the study sites also recognized the value of having more seasoned staff work directly with younger staff as an aid in professional development. One director hosted a panel of staff comprised of both old and new staff members, so that the newer staff could learn from the experiences of older staff.

We brought both staff together and they learn from each other, those who have been with us for a long time and those newer staff. I have people who have been with us 11 years now, since we first opened our after-school program at [a school] in Brooklyn. We did a panel with the oldies and the newbies, as we call them, and the new were able to ask the old what their experiences were and what their challenges were at the beginning. And it was an awesome training.

Lesson plans. As described earlier, several of the directors in the 10 study sites had developed one-page lesson plan forms that offered a prescribed structure for staff to follow as they developed their lesson plans. These straightforward forms (samples of which are provided in the appendix of this report) generally asked staff to briefly describe the activity, the supplies needed for the activity, and the learning goals and objectives for that activity. The program directors required staff to submit lesson plans using these forms either weekly or monthly, with week-by-week details for the planned activities. One director developed a form that is now used by all eight sites managed by the same nonprofit organization.

Another director gave her staff of teaching artists flexibility to develop lessons around program themes, but required staff to submit plans at the beginning of each semester that detailed the culminating event as well as the activities leading up to the culminating event. In the director's words, lesson plans were "the road map for the entire semester." The director praised her staff for taking lesson planning seriously, noting that the small number of teaching artists at her site made it easy for the director and co-director to monitor implementation.

The program director at one site felt that lesson plans were critical and spent hours working with staff to help them learn to create plans, but was frustrated that some staff seemed to struggle with this skill. Her solution was to provide staff with pre-packaged lesson plans that staff members then supplemented with their own materials and resubmitted for her approval. In this program, the program director also developed some lesson plans that her staff used program-

wide at the start of the school year. For example, one lesson she designed, Classroom Community, helps the staff “*build a community inside that classroom about respecting each other, the ground rules, chores and everything. So that everybody will be in the same page.*”

Examples of Skill-Based Activities Observed in the 10 Study Sites

In the visits to the 10 programs, evaluators observed several examples of program-wide themes and specific activities that were good examples of intentional, skill-based programming. Common common elements among these examples included the following:

- All of the activities were led by group leaders, generally college students.
- None of these activities required that group leaders to have training beyond that required to effectively work with youth. Additional content-specific training was not required.
- All of these activities had minimal requirements for supplies, and none required travel, specialists, or other costly resources.
- The activities were cross-disciplinary and could be implemented either at a specific grade level or across grades.

The first three examples below describe theme-based activities that were implemented program-wide, and the second three were stand-alone activities within programs.

- ***Imaginary trip to the Brazilian rainforest.*** This was a four-week theme implemented in an elementary-grades program. Each grade planned an imaginary trip to the Brazilian rainforest. Groups of students were challenged to determine how to get to Brazil, how to change money, what to take with them, and what they would eat while they were there. The depth of the discussion in each OST classroom was tailored to the age/grade of the youth. The theme was designed to incorporate geography, math, cultural awareness, and facts about the rainforest. The culminating product for this theme was a display of youth artwork in the OST display space.
- ***Career world.*** In this multi-week theme, youth at the elementary level learned about and discussed careers, the skills and education required for each career, and the steps it takes to get a job. During the study team’s visit, youth in all grades were working to create age-appropriate versions of their resumes. Younger youth were completing a worksheet form focusing on basic skills (e.g., remembering and understanding their address), while older youth created resumes that listed skills and interests. The culminating event was Career Day, which youth attended dressed as if for a job interview while parents and guests presented information on their profession or occupation.

- **Academies.** In one elementary-level program, staff used a highly structured process to plan a 10-week academy based on their personal interests. Each academy had a culminating event and addressed the following core components: English/language arts, health and wellness/fitness, character development and service learning, arts, math, social studies, and science and technology. In addition, each academy was required to produce a graph, chart, structure, and a word wall. Staff completed lesson-plan forms for each week that showed the type of activity (individual, small group, or large group), the weekly focus/goals, and the core components to be addressed that week. Staff also completed a wish list for each academy, which described the skills students would acquire as well as materials and resources that would be needed to complete the project. The program provided examples of activities that satisfied the core component requirement to assist staff in planning the academy.
- **Poetry slam.** In this middle school activity, youth worked with a group leader to study various poets and write their own original poems. All of the youth read their poems aloud in the program-wide culminating event. In the session observed for this study, each of the youth read their poem aloud, and the other group members provided constructive feedback both on the content and presentation of the poem. The group leader served as a mediator during the feedback to keep the interactions positive and constructive.
- **Cooking.** The OST program director developed an elementary-level cooking class that involved several different components, including: nutrition/health, menu planning, cooking, public speaking, healthy eating choices, and food science (including organic food, sustainability, and environmental impact). Youth were expected to learn about making healthy and environmentally friendly eating choices, how to prepare foods, and how to present a meal to others. Public speaking and presentation were a major part of the activity. During the warm-up activity observed for a fondue cooking class, youth were making off-the-cuff presentations on food types that the instructor wrote down on a set of cards (e.g., chocolate, beans, etc). Each youth went to the front of the classroom, selected a card, and spoke for 15 seconds about the word on the card. For example, if the word was “chocolate” they described it, explained its uses. If they said “umm” more than 3 times they were “out.” All of the students were engaged, participating, and supportive of one another.
- **Community service.** In this middle school activity, youth developed a survey with five questions asking local residents what they liked about the neighborhood and what they would change. The youth administered the survey and tallied the results. They put together a graphic display showing the survey results along with pictures of themselves administering the survey in the surrounding community that made up a display on the bulletin board near the OST office in the school.

- **Spelling relay.** This elementary-level activity took place in the gym and integrated academics and movement. The staff divided the youth into two teams (the evaluation team observed second-graders) and put two large sheets of paper on the wall at one end of the gym. At the other end of the gym, the two teams stood in separate lines. For each turn, the staff whispered a word to the first child in the line who then ran to the other end of the gym and wrote it on the paper. If they spelled the word correctly, they gained a point for their team. If there was an error in the spelling, the counselors worked with the entire group to learn the correct spelling.

Implementation Strategies Seen in a Broader Context

Findings from the program director survey (completed by 69 percent of Option 1 program directors) provided some insight into the current status of three of DYCD's priority areas for program quality: the use of specific curricula (including KidzLit, KidzMath, and CookShop), the educational attainment and experience in youth development of OST program directors, and the use of education specialists in OST programs.

Use of Specific Curricula

DYCD has made a significant investment in several skill-building curriculum pilots, by training program directors and staff in the use of KidzLit, KidzMath, and CookShop, among other efforts. To determine the prevalence of these and other curricula across the OST sites, the evaluation team asked program directors across all Option 1 sites whether they used a formal curriculum in their program to guide activities. Across the OST initiative, 62 percent of responding program directors reported using a formal curriculum in their program.

All of the 10 study sites reported incorporating project-based learning activities into youth programming, but only six of the 10 program directors said that they were using a formal curriculum, implying that a formal curriculum is not *required* for a program to implement project-based learning. However, analysis of the program director survey suggests that using a formal curriculum may be helpful. For each of the skill-building activity components the survey asked about, the percentage of program directors reporting that the component was included in all or most program activities was significantly higher in programs that used a formal curriculum to guide activities than in those that did not (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3
Skill-building activity component included in OST activities,
by use of a formal curriculum, in percents

Activity component	Percent of program directors reporting the component was part of most or all program activities:	
	Program <u>used</u> a formal curriculum to guide activities (N=163)	Program <u>did not use</u> a formal curriculum to guide activities (N=101)
Work together as a team	86%	73%
Practice specific skills	74	55
Engage in hands-on, project-based learning	72	59
Learn new, specific skills	72	59
Work toward culminating product or event	72	51
Be introduced to new ideas or places	71	55

All differences significant at $p < .05$.

Exhibit reads: Eighty-six percent of program directors using a formal curriculum to guide activities reported that most or all of the activities in their program had youth work together as a team. Among program directors not using a formal curriculum to guide activities, 73 percent reported that most or all of their program activities had youth work together as a team. This difference is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Program directors who reported they were using an externally-developed forum curriculum were asked to identify those curricula. In response to this question, 40 percent reported using KidzLit and 33 percent reported they used KidzMath, two programs supported by DYCD pilots (Exhibit 4). Many program directors also reported they also use materials developed by their nonprofit organization, which they may or may not use in concert with externally developed curricula.

To understand how programs integrated formal curricula, the evaluation team examined a site in the study that was implementing KidzLit and KidzMath. This site used the curricula in cycles rather than across the entire school year, and at the time of the site visit had recently concluded a KidzLit cycle. The program director liked the materials and felt they were easy to implement “because it comes with its curriculum and it’s easy for the staff just to do. It’s a good segment.” The program director added that in the 2011-12 school year, they were already planning to use KidzLit for the entire year. At this site, the program director and staff had also received training on the CookShop curriculum, but it was not being offered in the program because they did not have sufficient funding to purchase food for the activities.

Exhibit 4
Use of externally developed structured curricula
in OST programs, in percents

Curriculum	Percent of programs using a structured curriculum (N=163)
KidzLit	40%
KidzMath	33
CookShop	12
Robotics	7
Fun Food/Smart Food	6
The Basics of Biology	2
Exploring Birds	2
Space Science in a Backpack	1
Bones and Boulders	1

Exhibit reads: Among programs that use an externally-developed structure curriculum, 40 percent of program directors reported using KidzLit.

Program Director Education and Experience

The 2011 OST RFP for OST programs described the desired qualifications of program directors as follows: “Program directors would have a relevant four-year Bachelor’s degree and at least three years of demonstrated successful experience in a supervisory position providing services to elementary or middle school youth.” Based on the responses to the program director survey, many but not all of the program directors in the 2010-11 school year had the minimum qualifications required for the next DYCD funding cycle.

Across the OST initiative, three-quarters of 2010-11 program directors had completed at least a four-year college degree, and 28 percent had a master’s degree or higher. However, this meant that a quarter of the program directors did not have a four-year degree. In their youth-development experience, the 2010-11 program directors were well aligned with DYCD expectations. Sixty-four percent reported that they had six or more years of experience working in youth development, and 12 percent reported that they had two years of experience or less.

Use of Education Specialists

The 2011 OST RFP also describes several staffing areas that will be a focus in the coming funding cycle, including a requirement that all programs include “an educational specialist with expertise in curriculum development and lesson planning. The educational specialist would have at least a four-year college degree; experience in lesson planning, curriculum development, and implementation of structured programming for students in elementary and middle school and

preferably, teaching credentials and some teaching experience.” This mandate will require many programs to make changes in their current staffing patterns. As of the 2010-11 school year, slightly more than half (53 percent) of program directors reported that they had an education specialist in place. Of these, 71 percent reported that the education specialist worked with their program exclusively, and 26 percent worked with multiple programs within their nonprofit organization.

Further, the 2011 OST RFP states that “the educational specialist will have expertise in curriculum development and lesson planning with at least a four-year college degree and experience in curriculum development and implementation. Teaching credentials are recommended.” The majority of education specialists in place in 2010-11 satisfied the planned requirements for the next funding cycle, with 59 percent who were either current or retired teachers (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5
Background of education specialists in OST programs, in percents

Education specialist background	Percent of programs employing education specialist (N=137)
Certified teacher, currently teaching	57%
Retired teacher	2
School staff	5
Staff from the CBO	14
School administrator or former administrator	8
Other	14

Exhibit reads: Across the 137 programs with education specialists, 57 percent were certified teachers, currently teaching.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The experiences of the 10 OST sites that were the focus of this study lead the evaluation team to conclude that it is possible to implement skill-based activities successfully in OST programs. Data collected throughout the OST initiative also suggest that the typical OST program has similar youth, staff, and director characteristics as the programs in this study, suggesting that they have the foundation to adopt similar approaches and to implement program activities that are intentionally designed to strengthen youth skills. Further, using a formal curriculum package may lead to wider incorporation of project activity elements.

Based on the analysis presented in this report, the evaluation team offers four areas in which DYCD support will help to broaden the use of skill-based programming across the OST initiative, consistent with DYCD’s policy goals:

- ***Promote explicit program structure.*** Consistent application of clear program structure was a prominent element in supporting skill-building programming in all 10 of the study sites. Components of this structure included use of a defined curriculum, requirements for staff to submit lesson plans, enforced staff and youth attendance policies, and well-defined expectations for youth. None of the program directors put all of the elements of structure in place at one time, instead they added elements on an ongoing basis and enforced them consistently, gradually shaping or reshaping the program.
- ***Encourage broad use of outcome measures.*** Many of the program directors observed for this study had developed outcome measures for their activities that were not burdensome to staff but enabled the program director to gauge the success of both staff members and individual activities and to help shape subsequent program offerings. This is an area in which providing examples of outcome measures to program directors would help them develop appropriate measures for activities in their own program.
- ***Help programs raise staff quality.*** Directors interviewed for this evaluation frequently mentioned the quality of their staff as a major asset to their programs. Many of these directors recruited and retained high-quality staff by implementing rigorous hiring policies, such as requirements for professional resumes and references during the application process. Setting the standard at the outset that the staff should act in a professional manner emphasizes the desire for quality in all aspects of these programs. DYCD could provide support in this area by profiling programs that have explicit procedures in place to recruit and hire high-quality staff and by providing sample materials such as employment applications and tests of basic skills that program directors could incorporate into their hiring process.
- ***Provide professional development on skill-oriented activity development through targeted training.*** Program directors are interested in offering more project-based activities to build youth skills in their programs but often don't know where to begin. Use of a formal curriculum is sometimes a helpful step in the right direction. In addition, training sessions in which directors work through the development of specific activities, including defining outcomes, developing sample lesson plans, and content, might be beneficial. This would give directors an activity they could implement in their program as well the broader understanding necessary to develop additional activities on their own.

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Appendix
Examples of Lesson Plan Forms Used in Study Sites

Office Use Only:
 _____ Goals Met
 _____ Age Appropriate
 _____ Approved _____ EC Initials
 _____ Approved _____ SC Initials

 ACADEMY LEADER

 ACADEMY

**AFTERSCHOOL
 ACADEMY ACTIVITY PLAN**

DATE SUBMITTED: _____

WEEK: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

MON TUE WED THURS FRI

Grade: K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

SUPPLY LIST:

QUANTITY	ITEM DESCRIPTION

CORE COMPONENTS
 CHECK CORE COMPONENTS COVERED IN THIS LESSON

- English Language Arts
- Health & Wellness/Fitness
- Science/Ecology/Technology
 Arts (Music, Art, Drama, Dance)
- Character Development & Service Learning
 Values, Diversity
- Social Studies
- Math
- Culminating Project/Event
 Family, Branch and
 Board Involvement

Type of Activity:

Individual Activity; Small Group; Large Group

LESSON OUTLINE:

Length of Time	Activity Description

GROUP DISCUSSION TOPIC: _____

Assessment: Students were motivated/engaged; Needs Improvement; Students were not motivated/engaged

Activity Lesson Plans for the month of: _____

Instructor's Names: _____

Class Activity: _____

Group: _____

Week	Objective & Procedure:	Necessary Materials:
One	<u>Objective:</u> <u>Procedure:</u>	
Two	<u>Objective:</u> <u>Procedure:</u>	
Three	<u>Objective:</u> <u>Procedure:</u>	
Four	<u>Objective:</u> <u>Procedure:</u>	

Weekly Lesson Plan				
Teachers and Grade:			Lesson Plan Dates:	
Mad Scientist	Togetherness	Reading Zone	Math	Clubs!
<u>Monday</u> <u>Goals:</u> <u>Objectives:</u>	<u>Tuesday</u> <u>Goals:</u> <u>Objectives:</u>	<u>Wednesday</u> <u>Goals:</u> <u>Objectives:</u>	<u>Thursday</u> <u>Goals:</u> <u>Objectives:</u>	<u>Friday</u> <u>Goals:</u> <u>Objectives:</u>
<u>Activities:</u> 1) 2)	<u>Activities:</u> 1) 2)	<u>Activities:</u> 1) 2)	<u>Activities:</u> 1) 2)	<u>Activities:</u> 1) 2)
<u>Materials:</u>	<u>Materials:</u>	<u>Materials:</u>	<u>Materials:</u>	<u>Materials:</u>
Goal 1 – Provide a healthy, safe environment. Goal 2 – Foster high expectations for participants. Goal 3 – Foster consistent and positive relationship with adults, peers, and a sense of community. Goal 4 – Support the needs of working families. Goal 5 – Strengthen young people’s academic skills.			Goal 6 – Support healthy behavior and physical well-being. Goal 7 – Support the exploration of interest, development of skills and creativity. Goal 8 – Support youth leadership development. Goal 9 – Promote community engagement and respect for diversity.	