STANDARDS FOR QUALITY
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

PROGRAM QUALITY PRACTICES

Positive Relationships

Safe & Supportive Climate

Active, Engaged Learning & Skill Building

Youth Voice, Choice & Leadership

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Quality Staff & Support

Intentional Program Design & Improvement

Diversity, Access & Inclusion

Family, School & Community Engagement

A GUIDE FOR COLLECTIVE, ONGOING IMPROVEMENT FOR YOUTH

By reflecting research on best practice and youth and community voice,
these standards represent core elements of a high-quality
youth development program.

We know this to be true – programs of all types and sizes that are
committed to quality can strive to improve and better
engage youth to achieve, connect and thrive.

Detroit Youth Development Alliance and Youth Development Resource Center

Youth engage in
high quality
youth development

Youth strengthen assets
& skills to achieve,
connect & thrive

Youth graduate from
high school
ready for success
in college, work
and life

WHY STANDARDS?

The adoption of quality standards across youth development programs in a community creates opportunities for common language and goals among a coordinated network of providers working on behalf of young people (Yohalem et al, 2012). Research is clear that high-quality programs are more likely to engage and retain youth. And, youth who regularly attend youth development programs are more likely to experience success in school and life (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Goerge et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2007).

5 WAYS TO USE THE QUALITY STANDARDS TO IMPROVE YOUR PROGRAM'S QUALITY

1. Select a quality standard to discuss at a staff meeting. As a team, identify your program's areas of strength and areas for improvement. Identify 2-3 concrete action steps your program can take to improve quality in this area.

2. Seek out staff training opportunities aligned with the quality standards.

3. Ask for ongoing feedback from youth and families about how the program can improve. Ask for specific feedback related to the quality standards, such as asking youth what they want to learn and what activities interest them. Regular input and reflection circles and short surveys to rate program activities can be used for quick improvement cycles. Surveys of youth's skills at the beginning-middle-end of the program can also be used to understand the impact of program activities on youth.

4. Use the quality standards in combination with a program quality self-assessment tool, such as the Michigan Department of Education's Model Standards for Out-of-School Time After-School Programs in Michigan Self-Assessment Checklist or the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) developed by the David P. Weikert Center for Youth Program Quality (training required).

5. Know that achieving the highest quality possible in your program is an ongoing process. Commit to ongoing cycles of assessing, reflecting, planning and improving.

HOW WERE THE QUALITY STANDARDS DEVELOPED?

In 2014, the Detroit Youth Development Alliance and Youth Development Resource Center engaged the network of providers working with youth in Skillman Foundation Good Neighborhoods to outline elements of quality youth development programs. A scan of quality standards from across the country was completed by YDA and YDRC staff. Then, over 75 youth and 100 youth workers and managers from across six neighborhoods in Detroit shared their ideas for what quality youth programming looked like to them.

The resulting quality standards draw on best practice research, as well as standards from other cities and states across the country, but were ultimately created to reflect the wisdom of Detroit's youth and community youth development providers. The standard indicators are not meant to be exhaustive or to drive funding decisions, but rather to outline core elements of quality that matter to our community's youth and to the caring adults who support their development. As a community, we can continuously improve quality together.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE SKILLMAN FOUNDATION
Kids matter here

Detroit Youth Development Alliance and Youth Development Resource Center, 2014

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Youth benefit when programs develop, nurture, and maintain positive interactions and communication among staff, volunteers and participants. Relationships are the "glue" of a youth development program and should be respectful, caring and uplifting.

YOUTH SAY...

○ "Adults encourage you to better yourself. They have high standards for us."
○ "Adults are trustworthy, considerate, respectful and caring. They help you do better."
○ "There is chemistry. The relationships between youth & youth and youth & adults should be close enough to 'vent' to one another with trust."
○ "You get to use your personality."
○ "People are accepting, relatable, and understanding."

YOUTH WORKER AND MANAGER SUGGESTED INDICATORS:

○ There is open communication, active listening, mutual respect, trust and good rapport – peer-to-peer, adult-to-youth, and adult-to-adult.
○ Staff, volunteers and youth know each other's names, interests and personalities. All participants spend considerable time getting to know each other at the beginning of the program.
○ Individuals and the group learns through conflict resolution. Conflicts are addressed as a community, when appropriate.
○ There is laughter, humor and smiling faces.
○ Staff and volunteers are accessible and interested in youth's lives, but maintain appropriate boundaries.

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH:

Effective relationships are associated with positive feelings on the part of youth and fewer discipline problems in school (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). When youth have opportunities to experience success in a collaborative setting with peers, their sense of social competence and readiness to learn can increase (Hromek & Roffey, 2009).

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Youth benefit when the program provides a safe and nurturing environment that supports the developmental, emotional, physical health and mental well-being of all students.

YOUTH SAY...

○ "The program feels welcoming and like family. There's a positive energy. It should feel like a second home. There are happy faces. It's a fun place to be and youth enjoy coming back."

○ "There are no bullies and no negative teachers. There are no people cussing, no kids being left out, and no kids or staff being disrespectful or not caring. It is peaceful and safe, with no gang activity, drugs, or violent language."

○ "The program has the proper materials and equipment."

○ "There are no unsafe building hazards or a lack of supervision (physical and emotional)."

○ "Youth sign in and out. Youth and adults come and leave as a group, or car-pool if someone is going in the same direction as you and needs a lift."

YOUTH WORKER AND MANAGER SUGGESTED INDICATORS:

○ Safety and security procedures are in place, including a sign-in and sign-out process and personal check-ins with youth. The program starts and ends on time, so that youth are welcomed and supervised as they are arriving at and leaving the program.

○ Youth are supervised by adults during indoor and outdoor activities.

○ Healthy and balanced meals and/or snacks are served. Foods are youth-friendly and culturally appropriate.

○ The physical environment is clean, has adequate facilities for basic needs (water, restrooms, etc.) and for program activities. Needed equipment and supplies for activities are safe and available.

○ Emergency procedures are posted and a fire extinguisher and first aid kit are available.

○ The emotional climate of the program is friendly, supportive, positive, collaborative, and non-judgmental.

○ There are clear expectations and guidelines so that the program has order. Youth are involved in designing a community conduct agreement with support from staff.

○ Staff and program activities are responsive to individual youth's needs. Staff connects youth and families with resources when needed.

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH:

When environments promote basic needs for physical safety and social support, youth's engagement in learning increases (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Youth's sense of belonging and collaboration is linked with positive academic and disciplinary outcomes (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Hromek & Roffey, 2009; Marzono & Marzono, 2003).

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Youth benefit when the program design and activities reflect active, meaningful, and engaging learning methods that expand student horizons, and serve the physical, cognitive, social, emotional and creative development of all participants. Program offerings respond to youth's interests and build real skills for success in school, work and life.

YOUTH SAY...

○ "Youth are able to learn new things without feeling like they are in school."

○ "The program helps you grow. It offers opportunities to youth seeking self-mastery and real-life applied skills. Youth will be able to better themselves in a number of areas, whether it's physical, mental, etc."

○ "The activities are hands-on. Not too much lecturing."

○ "The program gives the youth something to look forward to and makes them want to change the community for the better."

○ "Adults 'keep in real' by helping us reach our dreams, rather than just selling us dreams. They listen as much as they talk."

YOUTH WORKER AND MANAGER SUGGESTED INDICATORS:

○ The program uses project-based learning and experiential, real-world activities. Youth can apply what they learn in the program to everyday life. Activities are relevant to their lives.

○ The program has knowledgeable instructors who can provide well-designed, age appropriate activities aimed to meet specific, holistic learning objectives. Staff guide and facilitate learning.

○ Youth experience measurable growth in learning and skill development.

○ The program accommodates different learning styles and provides challenging but achievable tasks or projects. Youth have opportunities to demonstrate their learning in the program.

○ Youth are encouraged to try things out and learn from mistakes.

○ Peers and adults are interacting, brainstorming and sharing in the project or activity.

○ Adults create a space for debriefing and self-reflecting on program activities and learning. Adults ask open-ended questions to encourage reflection.

○ Youth have opportunities to mentor, lead or coach other youth in an activity.

○ Youth show they are actively engaged by returning to the program and creating word of mouth.

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH:

Active learning experiences, which allow youth to practice and explore new skills, promote learning and improve academic achievement (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011; Mayer, 2004)

The use of SAFE – sequenced, active, focused, and explicit – learning activities are more likely to lead to positive youth outcomes (Durlack, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010).

Youth benefit when the program creates intentional opportunities for youth to play a meaningful role in program design and implementation, to exercise choice, and to access authentic leadership roles.

YOUTH SAY...

○ "Adults let youth have a say in how the program is run or what is implemented. They are in the planning process. Youth get to express themselves."

○ "Adults should accept and consider input and critique from youth."

○ "Youth can pick activities and segue into different choices based on their experience and interest, rather than allowing youth to go into situations blindly. There is a list of options."

○ "Adults have youth speak in front of others to bring them out of their shell."

○ "Youth are put in leadership positions."

YOUTH WORKER AND MANAGER SUGGESTED INDICATORS:

○ Youth are involved in planning and leading activities.

○ Staff offer youth choices based on their interests.

○ Youth are offered leadership roles, as well as leadership development and training opportunities. They become leaders among their peers.

○ Youth are engaged in advisory councils, youth-led boards, program/board committees and have an actual vote on policies & procedures.

○ Youth plan and lead youth retreats or summits.

○ Staff survey youth and give them ongoing opportunities for feedback on the program. Staff are receptive to youth's ideas and their opinions are highly regarded. Youth feel comfortable voicing new ideas, as well as what is not working well at the program, and are asked to help come up with solutions.

○ Adults mentor youth without limiting their creativity and voice.

○ Youth feel ownership of the program which increases retention.

○ Youth have a voice in hiring or evaluating staff.

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH:

Opportunities for youth leadership and autonomy can contribute to positive gains for youth, including engagement, intrinsic motivation, self-determination, academic competence, and reduction of problem behavior (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Deschenes et al., 2010; Russell, Mielke, & Reisner, 2009; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Soenens & Vansteenskiste, 2005; Eccles et al., 1997; Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Briere, 2001).

Youth voice has been associated with improvements in youth's strategic thinking (Larson & Hansen, 2005)

QUALITY STAFF & SUPPORT

Youth benefit when the program recruits and retains trained staff and volunteers who are focused on creating a positive learning environment and who receive ongoing coaching and professional development.

YOUTH SAY...

○ "Staff and volunteers should be trained to listen first and not judge. They should know what to say back to the youth. They should be trained in a special way to understand the youth's frustrations."

○ "Professionalism and trustworthiness are #1."

○ "They need to know that every child doesn't come from a positive environment or from a negative environment."

○ "They are motivational and know many ways of teaching. They inspire us to become someone like them or better."

○ "Quality staff are focused, organized leaders who know how to stay on track."

YOUTH WORKER AND MANAGER SUGGESTED INDICATORS:

○ The program hires staff who have the appropriate education, verifiable work experiences, and commitment to inclusivity to support youth's development and learning.

○ There is a process to support the orientation, training and ongoing professional development of staff.

○ The program has adequate staff capacity and a low adult-to-youth ratio (maximum of 1-to-15 for grades 4 and up).

○ Staff are paid a living wage that is adequate to retain staff and reduce turnover.

○ Staff is appropriately dressed.

○ Staff attends to youth's needs.

○ Staff have a passion for the mission and vision of the program/organization and can clearly communicate it.

○ Supervisors provide effective and consistent staff evaluation, assessment and feedback.

○ Staff have access to affordable, quality professional development and are trained in positive youth development and best practices.

○ The program has a culture of ongoing communication among staff for sharing ideas and fostering professional growth and development. Staff meet regularly to plan and improve the program.

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH:

A skilled and stable workforce in youth development programs plays a significant role in quality, stability, youth engagement and continuity of connection (Fashola, 2002; Huang & Dieteil, 2011; National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2003).

INTENTIONAL PROGRAM DESIGN & IMPROVEMENT

Youth benefit when programs are intentionally designed with clear outcomes that positively impact youth's knowledge, skills and behavior. Youth also benefit when staff continuously use a variety of information to assess and improve the quality of the program's design, activities and management to ensure positive experiences and outcomes for youth.

YOUTH SAY...

○ "The program is well planned and well thought out."
○ "There is a blueprint or sketch of the program activities."
○ "There is inspiration and innovations – recreating and compromise to make the program better."
○ "The program uses the design process to see what the end users want, put it out in the market to test it, and start again."
○ "The program takes surveys of all the students to find out if they are getting what they want out of the program, if they are enjoying it, and if they feel they are getting better at skills used in the program."

YOUTH WORKER AND MANAGER SUGGESTED INDICATORS:

○ The program has goals and learning objectives.
○ The program uses established and researched curricula and best practices.
○ Youth contribute to the program design. The program is designed with a sequence of activities that work for youth.
○ Though planned and structured, the program is flexible to meet common goals and to change as needed.
○ Youth and staff know what positive results to expect from the program.
○ The organization and program has a clear mission, vision and business/financial plan.
○ Surveys and ongoing feedback are used to design and improve programs. The program uses assessment and evaluation instruments – both pre/post and ongoing to measure youth's skill level and growth in behavior, skills and knowledge.

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH:

Program design is intentional when it is:
• developmentally appropriate for the age and stages of youth involved,
• there is fit between the organization's mission and programming,
• when activities support participant growth and development and are based on a theory of change, and
• when the activities are explicitly designed to develop positive youth outcomes. (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005).

DIVERSITY, ACCESS & INCLUSION

Youth benefit when the program, policies, procedures and services create an environment that values and embraces diversity and equity regardless of race, color, religion, sex, age, income level, national origin, physical or intellectual ability, sexual orientation and/or
gender identity and expression.

YOUTH SAY...

○ "The program welcomes ANYBODY. It provides equal treatment."
○ "There is dialogue and open conversations."
○ "There are multiple races, genders, ages and cultures interacting and bonding. Inclusion = youth who are LGBTQA. The program helps youth realize others' beliefs, individuality and uniqueness."
○ "The program gives youth access to technology like new computers."
○ "Transportation is available."

YOUTH WORKER AND MANAGER SUGGESTED INDICATORS:

○ Adults model inclusive behavior and promote open dialogue with youth about diversity, access and inclusion.

○ Staff and volunteers have cultural knowledge and highlight differences and celebrate them, rather than ignoring race and diversity.

○ Youth from different backgrounds are included and their unique needs are served.

○ Activities highlight various cultures and experiences, offer diverse presenters, and build knowledge of the multicultural community. Youth have opportunities to go to other communities to experience diverse cultures, races, etc.

○ The physical environment is barrier free to provide access to youth with disabilities. Activities are adapted to allow participation by youth with varying physical, intellectual and social abilities.

○ There are staff and volunteers who reflect the youth and community being served. Bilingual literature and staff are provided to meet the needs of youth and families. Interpreters are available for staff who are not bilingual/bicultural.

○ Free programming with transportation is made available for youth who otherwise could not participate.

○ The program has an anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policy. Staff ensures that the program is inviting, safe and inclusive to all.

○ Neighborhood safety issues that present a barrier to attendance are identified and addressed.

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH:

Successful programs are responsive to the different aspects of youth's lives and identities. The programs recognize and respect diverse customs and traditions. Bias or discrimination are not tolerated (California Tomorrow, Addressing Equity and Diversity: Tools for Change in Afterschool and Youth Programs).

Youth benefit when families, schools and communities are actively engaged in program development and implementation. Youth also benefit when the program intentionally links afterschool curricula and activities to the school day to ensure programming is aligned with and enriches academic standards.

YOUTH SAY...

○ "Engaging family and community means to gain respect and understanding and to create bonding experiences, like engaging at the park through basketball."

○ "Engaging families means talking to the family to share information and to learn about and from one another."

○ "There is chemistry. Staff smile and communicate with families."

○ "The program should reach students in school to promote programs that youth could go to. That's where youth are!"

○ "The program engages in community communication through fliers and websites, and in community events and meetings."

YOUTH WORKER AND MANAGER SUGGESTED INDICATORS:

○ The program hours are flexible to meet the needs of families and accommodate schedules.

○ Staff establishes rapport with parents and communicates with the home to assist the youth. Multiple communication methods are used (i.e. newsletters, phone calls, texts, family dinners, group meetings).

○ There are opportunities for parents/family members to engage in volunteering or in interactive activities or workshops that stimulate family learning and growth.

○ Families are involved in focus groups and program planning committees.

○ Staff works with the school or teachers to identify specific academic standards the program can address. School staff contributes to program planning. There are common goals between school curricula and program activities.

○ Staff collaborate with school and community leaders and communicate regularly.

○ Staff connect youth to other programs in the community that meet their needs.

○ The program hosts public, culminating events where youth share program experiences with families and the community.

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH:

Programs that engage families can create partnerships that support youth's afterschool and school experiences (Bouffard, Little & Weiss, 2006; Harris, Rosenberg, & Wallace, 2012; Little, 2012). Participation in afterschool programming, alignment with school day content, and adults working with youth in and out of school who share information about student progress can improve school success outcomes (Durklack, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Farmer-Hinton, Sass & Schroeder, 2009; Lauer et al., 2006; Nafzger, Vinson, Manzeski, & Gibbs, 2011; Naftzger et al., 2013; Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010). Community outreach can support collaboration among service providers and ensure a more comprehensive service delivery system (Yohalem et al., 2012).