

A Crosswalk Analysis of OST Competencies



Introduction

With the lengthening workday and the increased need for dual-income households, parents are faced with the growing challenge of balancing work demands with their child-rearing responsibilities. Most schools dismiss students around 3:00 p.m., yet parents do not usually leave work until 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., creating a “discrepancy between parents’ work schedules and their children’s school schedules” which often results in an “after-school gap’ of 15 to 25 hours per week.”¹ This ‘after-school gap’ has stressed the importance of after school and out-of-school time (OST) programs, for these programs not only fill the idle void “between the hours of 3 and 6 PM’ when “many delinquent activities tempt teenagers”, but they are “an ideal opportunity in which to nurture the academic, social, and personal skills needed to thrive in today’s world.”²

Not surprisingly, the growing need for these after school and OST programs has resulted in numerous programs that attempt to serve the 18.5 million children whose parents reported that they would enroll their children in an after school or OST program if one was available, or the more than 15 million children who “are alone and unsupervised after school”.³ Despite the growing need for these OST programs, they cannot thrive and provide high quality programming without professional staff and skilled youth workers. Emerging research in the OST field underscores the importance of professional development for staff who serve youth and highlight standards of practice that should be met by programs in the field. These standards of practice are often referred to as Core Competencies, for they articulate what staff and youth workers need to do and know in order to ensure that they are providing high quality programming.⁴ This brief memo will analyze three such sets of competencies, established by the National AfterSchool Association, The Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Professional Development, and a collaborative of Philadelphia professional development practitioners. While there are some distinct differences between the three lists of core competencies, they fundamentally seek to highlight the necessary skills needed to provide high quality programming in the OST field.

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NAA Core Knowledge

Development of Framework

The National AfterSchool Association (NAA), “is the leading voice of the after school profession dedicated to the development, education and care of children and youth during their out-of-school hours.”⁵ As such, the NAA partnered with the National Institute of Out-of-School Time (NIOST) to conduct research and make recommendations for the [*Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals*](#). This nationally recognized guide was created in an attempt to bridge the disparate competency frameworks developed by many states and localities, as well as to “identify consensus about core knowledge and competencies, and generate a unifying force for the professional development of a diverse field.”⁶ After coalescing existing frameworks, there was an extensive pilot and review process that tested the formulated competencies in various states and program sites. These steps resulted in a more concise framework that was nationally adopted on September 22, 2011, yet remains flexible enough to meet individual program needs.

Core Knowledge Content Areas

1. Child/Youth Growth and Development
2. Learning Environments and Curriculum
3. Child/Youth Observation and Assessment
4. Interactions with Children and Youth
5. Youth Engagement
6. Cultural Competency and Responsiveness
7. Family, School, and Community Relationships
8. Safety and wellness
9. Program Planning and Development
10. Professional Development and Leadership

Competencies

The core knowledge and competencies are grouped into 10 content areas that are based on research and applied in the field. For instance, the first content area of Child/Youth Growth and Development is based on research, which “indicates that the growth and development of a child or youth is optimized when afterschool and youth development professionals know and apply the fundamental principles of human development.”⁷ This particular content area was adapted from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and recognizes that a firm understanding of developmental milestones and individual developmental variations, enables the OST staff to not only cultivate a healthy relationship with each child, but to design activities that integrate current knowledge about development into their daily practice. In addition to explaining the rationale and empirical backing behind each content area, the NAA also provided levels of competencies that represent a pathway for staff to enter the OST field and continuously progress. These 5 levels of *entry*, *developing*, *proficient*, *advanced*, and *mastery* are not linked with particular positions of employment or levels of educational attainment; rather, they are based on skills that are obtained in various ways, and reflect the belief that professional practice develops over time with experience and continued training.

PA Keys Competencies

Development of Framework

The [Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality](#) initiative was created in July 2005 by the Office of Child Development, housed in the Department of Public Welfare. The vision of this initiative is that all Pennsylvania families “will have access to high-quality early childhood education and school-age child opportunities for their children that foster success in school and in life.”⁸ To address this vision, the Early Learning Keys to Quality created a quality improvement system that encourages all early learning programs and practitioners to improve programming through increased educational attainment among practitioners, increased capacity to support learning and development, and enhanced professional skills and competencies. Furthermore, an essential component of this initiative is a comprehensive professional development system that has clearly defined education and career pathways leading to qualifications and credentials for practitioners. In order to accomplish its vision and mission, this initiative emphasizes the need for “a highly skilled early childhood education and school-age professional work force that embraces a spirit of life-long learning and continuous quality improvement.”⁹

Competencies

The Early Learning Keys to Quality are categorized into 9 knowledge areas, with the first 7 predominately focusing on direct service staff, while the remaining 2 solely address the knowledge areas of administrators and home-based providers. Each knowledge area provides 3 competency levels “defined so that career advancement does not mean movement away from direct work with children.”¹⁰ Furthermore, each professional role has enough room and flexibility to develop from an entry level to the master level in knowledge base and competence, irrespective of educational attainment or employment position. Understandably, professionals and staff will apply the prescribed knowledge areas and levels of competency differently depending on their roles and their program’s needs. For instance, knowledge area 5 emphasizes the importance of effective communication. An entry-level, direct-service staff may incorporate this competency by carefully listening to others, responding appropriately, being aware of barriers to communication, and remaining willing to overcome those barriers; whereas an administrative staff may apply this competency when taking a leadership role in group discussions or by working to ensure a supportive environment that provides “daily opportunities to build and extend staff communication skills.”¹¹

Core Knowledge Content Areas

1. Child Growth and Development
2. The Environment, Curriculum, and Content
3. Families in Society
4. Child Assessment
5. Communication
6. Professionalism and Leadership
7. Health, Safety and Nutrition
8. Director’s/Administrator’s Knowledge
9. Home-Based Provider’s Knowledge

Philadelphia OST Staff Competencies

Core Staff Competencies

1. Activities, Content, and Curriculum
2. Child and Adolescent Development and Empowerment
3. Caring Relationships and Behavior Guidance
4. Health, Wellness, Safety, and Nutrition
5. Cultural, Competence and Inclusion
6. Engaging Families, Schools, and Communities
7. Professionalism and Professional Development
8. Research, Evaluation, and Quality Programming
9. Program Management and Administration

Development of Framework

To develop the Philadelphia OST Staff Competencies, a coalition of professional development practitioners in the city reviewed existing research behind OST staff competencies, in addition to: 16 different published sets of competencies, 5 sets of youth worker curricula and coursework, additional literature specific to the OST programming, and approximately 700 specific training titles. This extensive review of existing resources reflected the belief that “communities or organizations that are interested in developing a set of core competencies need not start from scratch.”¹² As a result, the Philadelphia OST Staff Competencies are “broad enough to accommodate a wide variety of skills, topics, and uses.”¹³ In addition, they cover multiple positions, job responsibilities, and levels of experience.

Competencies

This extensive review of existing literature resulted in a [list of 9 OST Staff Competencies](#), 9 competency definitions, and 50 content areas that reflect the characteristics and needs of the Philadelphia OST landscape. Although the competencies are listed separately, it is important to note that there are no clear demarcation lines that separate each individual competency, so the content areas often overlap with one another, due to the collaborative nature of the OST field. It is because of this unique characteristic that competencies “span multiple job responsibilities and levels of experience.”¹⁴ For instance, the second competency of Child and Adolescent Development and Empowerment has the five content areas of: Adolescents and Youth Culture, Child Development, Personal Development and Life Skills, Positive Youth Development, and Youth Leadership and Governance. These research-based content areas are evinced when staff understand child development stages and apply this knowledge to programs and participants; when staff understand teenagers, adolescents, and positive youth development and apply this knowledge to programs and participants; and lastly when staff recognize the importance of youth leadership and empowerment, and provide an environment that cultivates and fosters these attributes. Such indicators are provided for all 9 competencies in the conclusive list of OST Staff Competencies.

Similarities

Despite the fact that the NAA Core Knowledge, Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality initiative, and the Philadelphia OST Staff Competencies were drafted by coalitions and collaborations between different organizations and stakeholders, they all essentially share the same function; namely, each set of competencies was created as a way to “articulate what it is that adults working with children and youth need to know and do in order to deliver high quality, developmental programming.”¹⁵ Unlike standards which focus on what programs need in order to be effective, competencies represent *standards of practice* that focus on staff needs. Table 1 below illustrates the various shared competencies that were articulated, in some form, in the three aforementioned lists.

Competency Area	Frequency	Framework
Child Development	3 of 3	NAA, PA Keys, Philly OST
Curriculum	3 of 3	NAA, PA Keys, Philly OST
Safety	3 of 3	NAA, PA Keys, Philly OST
Families	3 of 3	NAA, PA Keys, Philly OST
Professional Development	3 of 3	NAA, PA Keys, Philly OST
Cultural Competence	2 of 3	NAA, Philly OST
The (Learning) Environment	2 of 3	NAA, Philly OST
Wellness	2 of 3	NAA, Philly OST
School & Community	2 of 3	NAA, Philly OST
Child Assessment	2 of 3	NAA, PA Keys
Program Management/ Development	2 of 3	NAA, Philly OST
Leadership	2 of 3	NAA, PA Keys
Professionalism	2 of 3	PA Keys, Philly OST
Health & Nutrition	2 of 3	PA Keys, Philly OST

Table 1: Cross-Cutting Analysis of Shared Competencies

Differences

While one could argue that the overarching purpose and shared similarities among the aforementioned sets of competencies outweigh the few differences, it is important to note these differences. The most telling difference is the level at which these competencies were adopted; this seemingly insignificant fact is important because the resulting competencies essentially reflect “the unique opinions and perspectives of the individuals who created” them, and ultimately capture the needs and characteristics of their particular OST landscape.¹⁶ For instance, the competencies of Empowerment or Behavior Guidance were only explicitly stated in the Philadelphia Staff OST list, while the NAA and PA Keys did not mention these competencies; this difference alludes to some contextual disparities between the city, state, and national OST landscape. Although the other sets had complementary competencies like Youth Engagement and Communication, this difference illustrates how competencies ultimately reflect the setting in which they are adopted and implemented.

Competency Area	Frequency	Framework
Youth Engagement	1 of 3	NAA
Interactions with Children/Youth	1 of 3	NAA
Responsiveness	1 of 3	NAA
Communication	1 of 3	PA Keys
Home-based Provider Knowledge	1 of 3	PA Keys
Director’s/Administrator’s Knowledge	1 of 3	PA Keys
Behavior Guidance	1 of 3	Philly OST
Research, Evaluation, Quality Programming	1 of 3	Philly OST
Child Empowerment	1 of 3	Philly OST

Table 2: Cross-Cutting Analysis of Distinct Competencies

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