



OST COMPETENCIES: Reconciling Local, State, and National Staff Competencies

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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 afterschool 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 highlights 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 Yet these Core Competencies often differ based on the city, state, or national organization that issues or publishes them. This brief memo will summarize how several cities across the nation (paying particular

NAA 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

Philadelphia Core 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

attention to Philadelphia) have attempted to reconcile their set of Core Competencies with that issued by the National AfterSchool Association. While there are some distinct differences between the various sets of Core Competencies, they fundamentally seek to highlight the necessary skills that staff need to provide high quality programming in the OST field

National Efforts to Reconcile OST Competencies

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. Since this guide was issued merely two years ago, it is understandable that several cities had already created their own sets of Core Competencies prior to its release.

In an attempt to ascertain how other locales around the nation are reconciling their previously published OST Core Competencies with the recently released NAA competencies, the Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC) contacted all fourteen locales referenced in the [*Youth Work Core Competencies*](#) report, published by School’s Out Washington. The OSTRC initially chose and reviewed the fourteen competency frameworks that informed the content and structure of the NAA Core Competencies. Given that these competencies were all published prior to the release of the NAA core competency, any efforts made towards reconciling their preexisting framework with the recently released NAA set can inform other localities grappling with the same concern. The OSTRC contacted each locale referenced in the [*Youth Work Core Competencies*](#) report; and from that sample of fourteen, five participants responded and were subsequently interviewed or provided supplemental information on the process through which their

city or organization reconciled their respective competencies. Representing locales in Arizona, Washington, New York, and the 4-H organization, these five participants described the impact of the publication of the NAA Core Competencies, and the role it currently has in their local OST landscape.

Findings

Overall, respondents reported that although they were aware of the recently released NAA Core Competencies, they mostly used their local OST staff competencies. One of the most common responses was that since there is currently no national mandate or credential associated with NAA Core Competencies, they saw no true incentive to adopt them. Furthermore, respondents explained that because OST staff frequently utilized their local competencies (for varied purposes such as interviewing, hiring, trainings, professional development, volunteer recruiting, and staff assessments) they were less inclined to adopt the NAA Core Competencies, of which they were less familiar. Another participant mentioned that upon conducting a rudimentary crosswalk analysis, she found that her local framework imbedded a lot more 'intentionality' around cultural competency and early learning, two areas towards which her state's priorities had recently shifted. Lastly, recalling that fourteen preexisting frameworks largely informed the NAA Core Competencies - and it was from these fourteen that the OSTRC solicited the five respondents - all the respondents acknowledged that while they had identified subtle differences between their set and the NAA Core Competencies, they ultimately remain closely aligned in terms of content, function, and scope.

Philadelphia's Efforts to Reconcile OST Competencies

To originally develop the [*Philadelphia OST Staff Competencies*](#), a coalition of citywide professional development practitioners reviewed existing research behind OST staff competencies, in addition to referencing: sixteen different published sets of competencies, five sets of youth worker curricula and coursework, additional literature specific to 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."⁷ As a result, the Philadelphia OST Staff Competencies are "broad

enough to accommodate a wide variety of skills, topics, and uses.”⁸ In addition, they cover multiple positions, job responsibilities, and levels of experience.

This extensive review of existing literature resulted in a list of nine OST staff competencies, nine competency definitions, and fifty content areas that reflect the characteristics and needs of the Philadelphia OST landscape. Like several other cities, a coalition of citywide professional development practitioners drafted Philadelphia’s OST staff competencies prior to the publication of the NAA Core Competencies. In an effort to reconcile these two competency frameworks, key stakeholders convened several exploratory meetings to discuss efforts to reconcile the Philadelphia OST staff competencies with the NAA Core Competencies. Following those initial meetings, the OSTRC administered a survey (with a 91% completion rate) to local OST professionals, explaining that “the ultimate goal is to have a set of Competencies that can be used for staff recruitment, observations, training and assessment – and thus enhance the quality of Philadelphia OST programs.”

Findings

During the initial exploratory meetings with Philadelphia stakeholders, the majority of the discussion focused on the benefits and pitfalls of adopting the NAA Core Competencies. Some of the enumerated benefits of adopting the NAA Core Competencies were that: it would be more attractive to national funders; it offers consistency across different programs, cities, and states; and it professionalizes the OST field. Like other locales that grappled with this issue, several participants suggested that aside from being nationally recognized, the NAA Core Competencies represent a top-down governance approach and bear no tangible benefits or attached incentives. In fact, the *Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality* (which was created in July 2005 by the Office of Child Development, housed in the Department of Public Welfare) bears greater consequence for Philadelphia OST programs and staff because an essential component of its implementation is a comprehensive professional development system that has clearly defined education and career pathways leading to qualifications and credentials for practitioners. It is important to note that respondents also liked the detail and the fact that the Competencies were sorted into different staff levels.

As a result of the discussion from the exploratory meetings, the OSTRC posed the question “*Do you prefer one sorting strategy over the other? If so, why?*” in the administered survey. Of the eleven participants who responded to this question, three preferred the

Philadelphia OST staff competencies, another three preferred the NAA Core Competencies, and the remaining five participants indicated no preference, as depicted in Figures 1 and 2 below. The fact that 45% of participants indicated no preference for either competency set was further illustrated in how participants described the strengths of each framework. Surprisingly, *both* the NAA Core Competencies and the Philadelphia OST staff competencies were lauded by some respondents for their level of clarity, organizational structure, and content areas and simultaneously criticized by other respondents for the very same reasons.

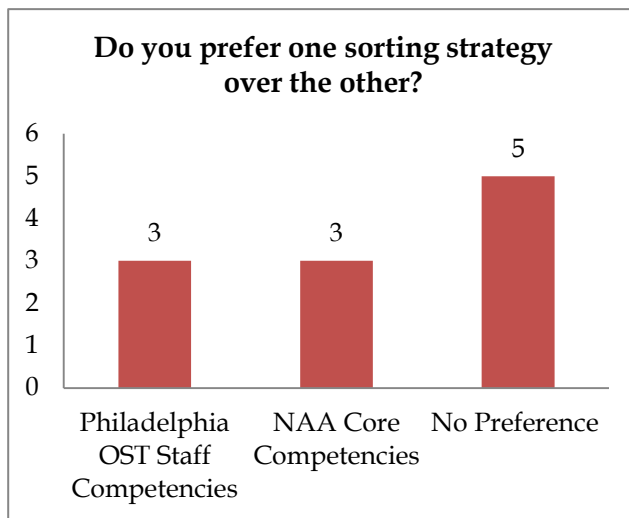


Figure 1: Respondents Preference for Competency Sorting Strategies

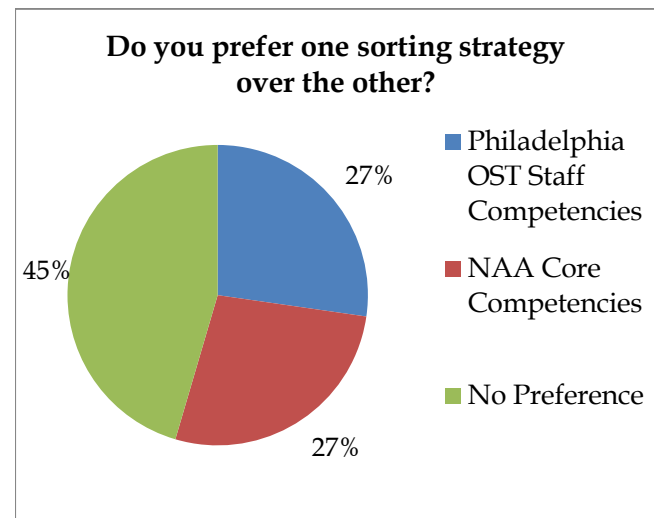


Figure 2: Respondents Preferences for Competency Sorting Strategies (in percentages)

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the NAA Core Knowledge and the Philadelphia OST Staff Competencies were drafted by coalitions and collaborations between different organizations and stakeholders, they both 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.”⁹ Even with this shared function, findings from the various interviews, meetings, and administered surveys indicate that respondents believe that there should be some added incentive or tangible advantage or benefit, in order for differing locales to adopt the NAA Core Knowledge. Ultimately, this exercise of attempting to reconcile preexisting local competency frameworks with the recently released NAA core competencies highlights the significance of personal preference in how these competencies are perceived and utilized by OST professionals.

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