



Afterschool Excellence During Pandemic Years

The field of afterschool program services has evolved quickly since March 2020, from the pressing of resources at hand into responses to urgent new needs. These new practices may spell out the future of afterschool services and new roles for afterschool teachers.

The new stuff can be broken into two chunks. First, there were new service models developed, new ways to support children and families, and these modes of service delivery could work in other times and circumstances. We'll talk about three models below and how they could represent an evolution of the basic afterschool model – to include an external focus on connecting with children and families together, often inside of their own homes.

The second chunk of new work is in the definition of high-quality practice. While new service models were reaching out beyond the afterschool setting, a new definition of high-quality practices has taken shape in afterschool classrooms and clubs. The new definition of quality can be explained in terms of the familiar Maslow's pyramid metaphor – the new stuff is all about improving supports at the bottom and top of the pyramid. In other fields, these additions are called “attachment-aware and trauma-informed.” These new practices are transforming our concepts about how adults work with children in the setting, particularly the increasing proportion of stressed children presenting signs of delay in both socio-emotional and academic skill domains.

The three blogs in this series will address this evolution of the afterschool service model in three parts: First, we'll talk about the new externally-focused service models that emerged rapidly between March 2020 and end of summer 2022. In a second blog post, we'll talk about the state of the children in fall 2023 and how afterschool practice is evolving to meet new needs that children are bringing to afterschool programs. In the final blog, we'll outline some of the best practices that align with the “attachment-aware and trauma-informed” way of seeing high-quality settings.

The Best We've Ever Seen

That's how I characterize the YouthQuest afterschool programs in fourteen Flint Community Schools and the ten Bridges to Success afterschool programs in seven different Genesee County school districts. Together, these 25 afterschool programs serve over 1,250 students each year and employ at least 150 staff. As the evaluator for these networks over the past four years, conducting evaluations and CQI cycles based on on-site observation and qualitative methods, we got up close and personal with every site. We were well positioned to describe how practices changed.

These schools also serve children that may have been affected by the Flint Water Emergency crisis – so it has been the rare bit of really good news to know that top-flight developmental programming is available to many school-age children and adolescents in the city of Flint and its near suburbs.

Pediatrician Mona Hanna-Attisha knew what to do for children who may have been exposed to lead. When Rachel Maddow asked: What should be done for children after the water pipes are fixed? The answer from Dr. Mona was: Give them top-flight cognitive-developmental programs (her example was Head Start). This is exactly what YouthQuest and Bridges to Success are delivering to school-age children in and around the City of Flint. This is no joke. Although contaminants like lead can damage the brain and change the performance of brain systems, powerful developmental experiences of the loving and engaging kind heal the brain and change the performance of brain systems in ways that compensate and transcend. And this logic applies to every other “insult” to children’s bodies and brains, i.e., ACES. This is the core assumption embedded in the idea of “attachment-aware, trauma-informed” practices.

The Flint region is a likely place to find professionals who know how to deliver very high-quality practice and be intentional about “positive youth development.” The city and region of Flint has a great 100 year history of community education and experiential learning – and, for the last 30 years, the Bridges and YouthQuest programs have been at the leading edge of positive youth development models for the children of Flint. Along with the Beacon’s programs in San Francisco and New York, these were networks where the positive youth development method was developed in practice in the late 1990s.



Aimee Phillips (bottom row, third from right), Project Director of the GISD Bridges to Success Programs, accompanied by the program site managers.



Willie Buford (center), associate program director of YouthQuest for Flint & Genesee Education & Talent LaQuanda Hammonds (right), Jimantra Grant (left), and Jeniffer Pocza (not pictured), site managers of YouthQuest for Flint & Genesee Education & Talent in Flint, Michigan.

As an evaluator and technical assistance provider who has now completed nearly 200 observations or professional development sessions with these 25 sites, I can report that there were maybe three cancellations, never a late meeting, and staff were always prepared. The average years of experience in teaching or afterschool across site managers was at least 12, and most worked in the same program for the past 5 years or more. These are both strong organizational cultures.

As to normative excellence: Twenty-two of 24 sites (98%) produced an instructional total score greater than 4.0 on the Youth and School Age PQA's in the 2022-2023 school year. According to our science [[Impact Evaluation for the Palm Beach County Quality Improvement System \(QIS\) using Fully Pattern-Centered Analytics – QTurn \(qturngroup.com\)](#)], the programs scoring over 4.0 are producing equity effects in two ways: Children who enter with lower skills exit with more socio-emotional skill growth compared to their higher-skill peers; and children who enter with higher socio-emotional skills do not regress.

I can say, without hesitation, these two organizations are among the best run afterschool programs I've ever encountered. We're writing these blogs because how these folks responded to the pandemic-years crisis is worth paying attention to. It tells us something about what is possible when families are experiencing crisis, and response is necessary.

[New Service Models](#)

The new service models emerged in three patterns: Crisis response, blended learning, and casework. These are described in greater detail in a report [In Review]. To summarize:

- A *crisis response* model delivers connection for families in duress by prioritizing connecting with families, communicating what afterschool programs can do for children and families in the moment, checking on the students' and families' wellbeing, and having a plan to connect afterschool services with school districts' and other emergency information and services. In several cases, Genesee County afterschool programs administered family outreach for their district in spring and summer 2020.

- A *blended learning* model that delivers an integrated schedule of live and on-line instruction (including materials kits to use with on-line) and makes it possible to maintain or even increase time with children when in-person attendance has to be intermittent. This capacity may be evermore important in situations where some children are in the classroom and some are at home, online, on a rotating basis. And again, in general, these afterschool programs were engaging families with programming online before many school districts.
- A *casework school support* model that delivers intensive person-centered supports through flexible calendars and content, SEL check-ins for individual students and families, active family engagement including home visits, and ongoing advocacy for the student and caregiver in connecting with the school district or other services, e.g., food, housing, transportation, mental health. More than being in a classroom, program attendance for these students and families meant continuing to innovate with school and afterschool staff to fit existing services to families' needs, particularly around helping parents keep children connected to school day learning.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was also a new practice in the pandemic years. We worked with these two networks to develop a set of indicators for use of personal protective equipment (PPE) inside the program. These are listed in Table 1. These PPE standards were applied during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years https://www.qturngroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2021-05-12_in-person-learning-safety-scale-v5.2.pdf.

Table 1. Personally protective practices on the COVID 19 Setting Quality Assessment.

| COVID SQA | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Personal Protections | Safe Environments | Screening Symptoms |
| Face masks | Sanitary Setting | Child and Teacher covid screening |
| Hand washing | Materials | Symptomatic student/teacher protocol |
| Social distance | Ventilation | Caregiver communication |
| Cohorts | Drinking water | |
| | Meal setting | |
| | Pick-up/drop-off | |
| SQA citation | | |

Because these PPE practices were implemented at high fidelity, we had some learnings: children in grades K-grade 8 were generally willing to wear masks, travelling in youth-adult cohorts through all aspects of the program improves relationships and community, and the online part of blended programming works well for some things (during a pandemic) like individual body movement, mindfulness, and including siblings and caregivers in programming.

Looking Forward

In one sense, looking forward is about what the afterschool field might evolve toward. The new service models imply that afterschool programs can engage families in a different way that exceeds positive youth development experiences delivered inside of program settings. In general, these new afterschool models (that no doubt developed independently, and more or less successfully, all over the US and world during the pandemic years) open the possibility that afterschool programs could have family engagement functions, multi-generational models that might be much more effective for some children

and families – and two-generation models have large effects. It may also be true that younger children are not automatically better off in a program after school is over – it may be that some kind of supported home-based service with their caregiver would be better for children under 3rd grade.

The other angle is climate response – we’re going to have more environmental catastrophes, and more refugees from environmental catastrophes, coming to our communities in the coming years. Program models that can check in with families quickly, deliver live or online positive youth development programs flexibly, and be able to help families in crisis seek basic services and keep their children connected to school will only be more important in the future.

In the next blog, we talk about the new needs that children were presenting with in fall of 2023...

<https://www.qturngroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Afterschool-Excellance-During-Pandemic-Years.pdf>