

VERMONT GUIDELINES for AFTERSCHOOL, SUMMER, and YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS



These guidelines are intended to support program administrators, staff, parents/caregivers, children, and youth in understanding what quality looks like for all afterschool, summer, and youth programs in Vermont, and to set an aspirational vision for what we strive to achieve for Vermont's children and youth.

This document was developed in June 2023 through a partnership between Vermont Afterschool and the Vermont Interagency Afterschool Youth Task Force to support the work of programs in all stages of development.

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INTRODUCTION

Afterschool, summer, out-of-school time, youth, and third-space programs reimagine how, where, and when our young people learn. Decades of research show that afterschool, summer, and youth programs help kids learn, grow, and avoid risky behaviors. Programs spark interest in learning, so students attend school more often, get better grades, and demonstrate improved behavior in class. Through new learning experiences, young people discover what they love to do and gain the skills needed to succeed. Vermont believes that quality programs serving children and youth do the following:

- Foster positive relationships between program participants and staff
- Offer a blend of academic and developmental skill-building activities
- Rely on data-driven best practices and standards
- Promote high levels of student engagement
- Provide appropriate levels of structure as well as opportunities for autonomy and choice

The Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer, and Youth Programs (hereafter referred to as the “Guidelines”) have been created to support Vermont programs in achieving positive youth outcomes by providing staff with Guidelines for what quality looks like in a program setting. **The Guidelines are intended to be a clear and concise set of benchmarks that any program serving young people in the State of Vermont can strive to meet.** The Guidelines address core components that, when combined, create a high-quality program. They are also designed to act as a means against which programs can measure themselves and work toward continuous progress and improvement, and are meant to complement and support existing program requirements from partner agencies.

Vermont has prioritized the inclusion of guidelines on cultural competency and adult responsiveness and the overarching importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. These elements should be present in all aspects of the program’s work with children, youth, and families.

Vermont encourages all programs serving children and youth, including 21st Century Community Learning Center programs, programs licensed by the Child Development Division, summer camps, vacation camps, recreation programs, and other types of programs, to adopt these Guidelines and implement them to the fullest.



ROLE OF THE GUIDELINES

A guide to help **afterschool and youth program providers** assess what they are doing well and where they should make improvements.

A way for **parents/caregivers**, children, and young people to understand the key expectations of an afterschool and youth program in Vermont.

A set of Guidelines that, when adopted, can promote an understanding to **funders** that programs they support will provide quality practices.

A commitment by the **entire community** to give children and young people access to a wide range of enriching third-space experiences.

A means to help **educators and community partners** understand the key elements of quality programs and provide common language for partnership.

Designed to enhance and work in **partnership with Vermont Licensing regulations, STARS (Vermont's quality recognition improvement system), and the Afterschool Core Knowledge and Competencies.**



HOW TO USE THE GUIDELINES

Program Guidelines help educate the community about what quality programming for afterschool children and youth should include and how it can be achieved. The Guidelines outline what can be expected from a program that is dedicated to providing the best possible services to young people. These Guidelines were designed for afterschool and youth programs to use, both in planning programs and to improve quality beyond licensing requirements. Most importantly, they give everyone a common language for discussing Vermont's priorities for afterschool and youth programming and opportunities for growth.

These Guidelines do not replace the regulatory requirements for licensed programs. Instead, they are designed to help all afterschool and youth program staff hold themselves accountable for the programs they provide.

It is important to note that Guidelines alone cannot change the quality of programs or the skills of program staff and volunteers. They are designed for internal accountability, and assessment and improvement of best practices.

VERMONT QUALITY GUIDELINES





RELATIONSHIPS

Guiding Principle: Afterschool and youth programs develop, nurture, and maintain positive relationships and interactions among staff, families, school personnel, and children and youth participants. For children and youth to feel engaged and excited about the program and activities, staff and volunteers must work together to foster strong, respectful relationships with all program participants. Programs provide a welcoming and inclusive environment with opportunities for children, youth, and families to connect with each other in meaningful ways and build community.

- Program prioritizes collaboration with and engage each person in respectful ways to meet the needs of individual children and youth.
- Program models positive relationships and safe, healthy boundaries.
- Program provides support and mentoring to guide the behavior of children and youth in positive ways.
- Program builds and sustains relationships with all program participants that are positive, nurturing, and consistent.



HEALTH, SAFETY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Guiding Principle: Afterschool and youth programs provide healthy, safe, and developmentally appropriate environments for children and youth. Participants' physical and emotional safety and well-being is paramount.

- Program has clear policies and procedures in place to protect the safety of all children, youth, and staff, including abuse prevention and reporting training, background checks for staff and volunteers, and fingerprint authorizations when required.
- Program's participants are appropriately supervised during all program activities.
- Program provides all children and youth opportunities for dynamic physical activity daily.
- Program ensures all meals and snacks provided by the program are healthy, plentiful, and nutritious.
- Program ensures an emotionally safe, welcoming, and supportive environment free from aggression or bullying to protect and support the social and emotional health of all program participants.
- Program's indoor and outdoor spaces are safe, clean, and accessible to all children, youth, and families.



PROGRAMMING AND ACTIVITIES

Guiding Principle: Afterschool and youth programs offer a variety of activities that are engaging, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sensitive to enrich the physical, social, emotional, and creative development of all participants. Child and youth input and interests are incorporated into the program’s curriculum planning process.

- Program engages children and youth in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of the program.
- Program provides a variety of engaging opportunities for age-appropriate learning, physical activity, skill building, and social and emotional development.
- Program offers opportunities to children and youth to make authentic choices based on their interests.
- Program activities support active engagement through project-based and/or experiential learning in a real-world context.
- Program activities provide a balance of structured and unstructured time, as well as activities for individuals as well as small- and large-groups.
- Program activities enhance the positive development of children and youth.
- Program activities are well supplied with appropriate materials.



YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

Guiding Principle: Afterschool and youth programs promote a sense of purpose and individual empowerment in children and youth through opportunities to engage in a variety of experiences. Children and youth should engage in the planning process and exercise authentic choice and leadership in the program.

- Program includes children and youth input in activity planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- Program supports children and youth to develop skills in decision-making, planning, and goal setting at a level that is appropriate and considers individual strengths.
- Program provides children and youth with authentic opportunities to practice and develop leadership skills.
- Program provides children and youth opportunities to make meaningful content and process choices during activities.



FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Guiding Principle: Afterschool and youth programs establish and maintain strong working partnerships with families, schools, and community stakeholders to support children and youth in the program.

- Program supports families by providing opportunities to connect with each other through program events.
- Program engages families in program planning and improvement through regularly occurring evaluation.
- Program staff maintain two-way communication with relevant partners (e.g., school principals, maintenance staff, counselors, and teachers) in a variety of ways.
- Program seeks opportunities to align in-school and out-of-school learning, and implements activities that complement and enrich school-day activities.
- Program intentionally incorporates opportunities to help children and youth become engaged in the larger community.
- Program supports the development of real-world skills, including career awareness and exploration.
- Program incorporates community members, businesses, families, and caregivers into the program, when appropriate, to support real-world skills and learning.



CULTURAL COMPETENCY, RESPONSIVENESS, AND INCLUSION

Guiding Principle: Afterschool and youth programs respect and are responsive to the diversity of program participants, their families, and community to foster a sense of belonging.

- Program implements policies to ensure a safe atmosphere for children, youth, and staff to express their own identity (e.g., cultural beliefs and practices, gender, and sexual orientation).
- Program treats children and youth with respect and recognizes and embraces their range of abilities and talents.
- Program is aware of the various family structures and cultural dynamics that exist within the program and provides an inclusive, welcoming, and respectful environment for all children, youth, and families.
- Program provides children and youth intentional opportunities to explore, share, and celebrate each other's heritage and culture in the program.
- Program recognizes and understands cultures of participating children and youth in the program and is responsive to individual youth needs, recognizing their special interests, feelings, abilities, and cultures.
- Program recruits, hires, and develops qualified staff who reflect the diversity and culture(s) of the community served.
- Program provides all staff with ongoing training for cultural competency and promoting self-awareness about power, privilege, and equity issues that impact children and youth.



ASSESSMENT, PLANNING, AND PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

Guiding Principle: Afterschool and youth programs have policies and procedures in place that promote continuous improvement.

- Program conducts regular self-assessments of program strengths and weaknesses and implements planning and continuous improvement strategies involving staff, families, children, and youth.
- Program establishes measurable goals aligned with the mission and vision of the program and based on the self-assessment.
- Program regularly assesses its effectiveness through various formal and informal evaluation activities (e.g., surveys, focus groups).
- Program uses the self-assessment process and evaluation activities to track results and data to drive decision-making and continuous quality improvement over time.



STAFF AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Guiding Principle: Afterschool and youth programs support the development of competent and motivated program staff by providing ongoing resources, support, and training so they can offer high-quality programming and have a meaningful impact on children and youth.

- Program provides all new staff with a comprehensive orientation to the program philosophy, routines, and practices.
- Program ensures each staff member builds an individual professional development plan that reflects their professional goals. Staff and supervisor revisit the plan and update continuously throughout each school year.
- Program staff receive relevant training and attend ongoing professional development activities that support their own growth and build more-effective program practice.
- Program provides program directors and administrators with program management and staff supervision training, as well as ongoing professional development.
- Program provides all staff with ongoing opportunities to receive and give formal and informal feedback.
- Program ensures that all staff understand the accessibility needs of students and families, and how to seek out other professionals with this expertise if needed.
- Program ensures all staff receive annual reviews to improve their skills and progress toward individual professional development goals.



ADMINISTRATION AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Guiding Principle: Effective programs have a strong mission, well-developed organizational supports, and sound fiscal management to maintain and enhance quality programming and activities for all participants.

- Program has a clear mission and vision statement and written philosophy that is widely understood and shared among staff, parents, and the community.
- Program administrators and program leaders establish strong communication strategies for staff and families so that policies are clear and known (e.g., staff and family handbooks).
- Program has strong fiscal management that supports program goals and continuous improvement.
- Program has administrators and program leaders who are accessible to staff and families.
- Program ensures staff-to-participant ratios and group size to enable the staff to meet the needs of participants.
- Program has policies and procedures that are responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families in the community.
- Program administration has a system in place—with input from staff, children, youth, and families—to support continuous program improvement.
- Program seeks expertise from appropriate entities as needed to prevent the expulsion of children who may need additional support.



NEXT STEPS

Where do we go from here? These guidelines are a first step in supporting quality in afterschool and summer youth programs. By themselves, they articulate the overall objectives that Vermont programs strive to achieve. Naturally, not every program will achieve the highest level of quality in every area right from the start. We know from extensive research that even the best programs are constantly striving to make their programs even better.

The process of programmatic change and continuous quality improvement takes time and commitment. Vermont Afterschool can support you with next steps through **professional development opportunities and customized coaching**. For guidance and additional support with resources and implementation of these guidelines, please contact Vermont Afterschool.

[VERMONTAFTERSCHOOL.ORG](https://vermontafterschool.org)



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Here are our working definitions for some of the key terms found in this document:

Active Engagement: Active engagement will look differently depending on the age, lesson, and content. Active engagement includes anything students do to actively participate or interact with their learning and/or materials.

Adult-Child/Youth Interactions: Mutual or reciprocal action or influence between an adult and child. This reciprocal action is characterized by communication as adults and children/youth work or spend time together. Nurturing, supportive, and reciprocal adult-child/youth interactions are foundational to the learning process.

Age-Appropriate: Age-appropriate learning is all about adapting to a child's level of understanding, identifying the readiness of a child to learn, and then following the best-suited method of teaching.

Authentic Opportunities: Authentic choices refer to real, meaningful choices, as opposed to token or false choices (e.g., children/youth get to choose what they build; children can choose whether to paint, draw, or use markers; children get to choose how to carry out an activity).

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI): The concept of making steady, intentional changes to program practices with the goal of improving overall program operation and practices to increase positive outcomes for children. Typically, the continuous improvement process employs a steady stream of small changes.

Developmentally Appropriate: Practices grounded in research on how young children develop and learn. It means providing activities and interactions suitable to children's age and developmental status, as individuals and as a group, and providing support for each child in attaining challenging yet achievable goals that contribute to his/her unique, ongoing development and learning. Such practice is responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which children live.

Individual Professional Development Plan: An Individual Professional Development Plan (IPDP) is a personalized plan for increasing one's knowledge and improving skills in the field of early childhood and afterschool or afterschool services. It includes assessing

current knowledge and skills in each of the core knowledge areas required to work in the field; identifying areas for growth and learning; stating specific measurable professional goals based on these areas of growth, with related strategies, resources, and a timeline to meet each goal.

Professional Development: Learning and supporting activities designed in accordance with adult learning principles that prepare and enhance individuals in their work with children and families and lead to improvements in practitioner knowledge, skills, and practices.

Program Assessment: A process using observation and a program assessment tool to determine program strengths, opportunities for growth, and progress toward identified goals.

Ratios and Group Size: Licensed programs have regulatory requirements around appropriate staff-to-child ratios. Please refer to the licensing regulations. Other programs should have ratios that are appropriate for the

age and group size of the children/youth they are working with. Activities that are deemed more dangerous should have a much smaller staff-to-child ratio (e.g., woodworking, biking).

Self-assessment: The process by which a program or staff person monitors and evaluates the quality of their own teacher-child interactions or family engagement to identify strategies that improve their understanding and skills.

Stakeholders: A person (or entity) who can affect and/or be affected by your organization. Stakeholders (such as volunteers, donors, and vendors) influence your ability to fulfill your mission; they are also the people (such as beneficiaries, partner organizations, and the community) who experience the consequences of your choices and actions.

Youth Engagement: Reaching out to youth to ensure youth voice and participation in program planning and reflection on all programmatic aspects.