

Several long-term trends have led to increased interest on the part of the American public in how and where children spend their time after school: (1) a decline in the percentage of parents who stay at home, (2) recent highly publicized incidents of violence involving children and adolescents, and (3) a nationwide move toward academic accountability and increasing the role of after-school programs as a means of improving school performance. In response to these concerns, the number of after-school programs has steadily risen over the past decade. Increased federal and state funding suggests that the number of such programs will increase in the coming years.

With the sponsorship of Stone Soup Child Care Programs and additional support from the RAND Child Policy Project and the Promising Practices Network, we undertook an effort to (1) identify good after-school care management practices that available evidence and expert judgment indicate should be associated with quality care, and (2) carry out a case study to assess the degree to which Stone Soup’s programs adhered to these good practices.

In accomplishing the first task, we assessed the research literature on after-school care in an effort to define good practices. By “good practices,” we mean program or process elements that have been shown or upheld by experts in the field to be associated with high-quality after-school programs or with positive child outcomes (educational attainment, emotional development, health, etc.). Unfortunately, while the stronger empirical work we identified showed

an association between practices and desirable outcomes, it failed to establish causal relationships. Most of the publications available for review are not empirical at all but summarize recommendations provided by expert panels, government agencies, advocacy groups, and individuals. Thus, judgment has played a strong role in our definition of good practices, and our list must be considered preliminary and subject to change in light of new research.

Our synthesis of the literature highlights the almost total lack of solid evidence available about what management practices matter in the provision of quality after-school care. In order to ensure that after-school care programs are structured such that they provide quality care (i.e., care that is linked to desirable outcomes), research needs to be undertaken that identifies management practices that matter.

In accomplishing our second task, we developed a measurement methodology and instruments to measure adherence to our list of practice standards and applied them to Stone Soup's child care programs. Stone Soup Child Care Programs is a nonprofit organization that administers school-based after-school programs in collaboration with local school districts, communities, and parents throughout California. The organization is supported by contributions from foundations, corporations and local businesses, government, and individuals.

We concluded that, on average, Stone Soup's programs do a solid job of adhering to good practices. To arrive at this conclusion, we collected administrative data from Stone Soup's central office, surveyed ten randomly chosen site supervisors, and visited those sites to supplement the information collected by survey. Based on this information, we rated each program's adherence to each of our good practices using scales that we derived or borrowed from existing instruments. This report provides the instruments we developed and the rating scales we used.

We present examples of the recommendations offered to Stone Soup for improvement specific to each standard (and to the standards where adherence was judged minimal). We also describe the limitations we encountered in our use of the instrument and scales and provide caveats for their potential users.

We hope that this application will prove useful for others seeking to measure adherence to after-school care management practices by providing a methodology and instruments that can be adopted as is or adapted to suit other applications.