
SUMMARY

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. Among these are the following:

- The percentage of parents at home when school lets out has steadily declined in the past several decades.
- A number of highly publicized violent incidents have occurred involving children and adolescents.
- A move toward academic accountability has increased attention to 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. As of the late 1990s, one of every six children aged six to twelve with employed mothers was participating in a before- or after-school program. Increased federal and state funding suggests that the number of such programs will increase in the coming years. In the case of the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, funding increased from \$1 million in 1997 to \$450 million in 2000, with \$1.5 billion proposed for 2002 (Afterschool Alliance, 2001).

Given the proliferation of after-school programs, a greater premium is bound to be placed on information that helps in the design, selection, and management of such programs. With the sponsorship of Stone Soup Child Care Programs and additional support from the RAND Child Policy Project and the Promising Practices Network, we

sought to provide information helpful for these purposes in two ways:

- We identified a set of good management practices that currently available evidence and expert judgment indicate should be associated with quality child care.
- As a case study, we assessed the degree to which Stone Soup’s programs adhered to these good practices.

IDENTIFYING 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 (e.g., educational attainment, emotional development, and health). 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 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.

We initially identified 20 good practices, grouped into three categories as follows:

Staff Management Practices

- Training staff
- Hiring and retaining educated staff
- Providing attractive compensation
- [Keeping turnover rate low]
- [Hiring and retaining experienced staff]

Program Management Practices

- Providing a sufficient variety of activities
- Ensuring that programming is flexible
- Establishing and maintaining a favorable emotional climate
- Maintaining a low child-to-staff ratio
- Keeping total enrollment low
- Having a mix of younger and older children
- Providing age-appropriate activities and materials
- Providing adequate space
- Maintaining a continuity and complementarity with regular day school
- Establishing clear goals and program evaluation
- Providing enough quality materials
- Paying adequate attention to safety and health

Community Contacts

- Involving families
- Using volunteers
- Using community-based organizations and facilities

We eliminated two practice standards (indicated in brackets) because we could find only limited support on their behalf in the literature. We judged three of the standards—the first three program management practices—to have stronger support in the literature than the other standards, because their relationship with positive outcomes was empirically tested in at least one study.

MEASURING ADHERENCE TO PRACTICES: A CASE STUDY

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.

The stated objective of Stone Soup is to ensure “quality child care for school-age children that is safe, dependable, and affordable through a managed program of shared resources and goals.” Stone Soup could satisfy itself through inspection that its programs met almost all these characteristics but believed that a judgment on quality would require external input. Stone Soup recognized that there were not widely accepted quality standards and sought through the current study to help establish some. The organization also sought RAND’s independent judgment regarding the extent to which it was meeting the standards and where it might improve.

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. On the basis of this information, we rated each program’s adherence to each of our good practices according to the paradigm used by the School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS), which has been extensively validated and widely used. That paradigm has four grades:

- **Excellent:** high-quality care that expands children’s experiences, extends their learning, and provides warm and caring support
- **Good:** developmentally appropriate care
- **Minimal:** custodial-level care
- **Inadequate:** lack of care, i.e., actions compromising children’s development

Clearly, this is not a scale on which the typical program will get the highest grade and lesser grades will indicate deficiencies of some sort. “Excellent” care is exceptional and “good” care is still good.

We averaged grades across the ten programs to derive an overall grade for Stone Soup on each practice standard. Stone Soup adhered to the highest standard of care for training staff. The programs were rated minimal on average for hiring and retaining educated staff, providing age-appropriate activities, and using volunteers. It is noteworthy, however, that close adherence to every good practice is not necessarily consistent with other important goals an organization may have. Choices have to be made. Stone Soup tries to hire from the low-income communities it serves, and it provides only part-time hours with modest wages. This choice is likely to constrain staff education to realize value from community participation.

Adherence to the other 14 retained standards was judged good. On 6 of these 14, the 10 program sites we evaluated exhibited substantial variation. Such variation suggested that some sites might not be performing nearly as well as others and that there was thus room for improvement. We offered recommendations for improvement specific to each standard (and also to the standards where adherence was judged minimal).

We recommended to Stone Soup two alternative paths for future reassessments of adherence to good practices, depending on the objective of the assessment:

- If Stone Soup wants to measure change overall in adherence to the 18 practices (or some subset thereof), it should replicate our study on a random sample of sites. However, this study would need to ensure confidentiality to the site supervisors.
- If Stone Soup wants to identify the sites needing the most improvement on specific practices, it should replicate the full study for all sites. This would obviously be a more expensive approach.