



Federal Alignment with Research-Based Practices on School-Age Development and Well-Being

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KEY POINTS

- Childhood development experts recommend specific practices for afterschool and youth development programs to promote well-being and healthy development, including positive relationships; rich learning experiences and knowledge development; environments filled with safety and belonging; the development of skills, habits, and mindsets; and integrated support systems.
- Federal programs often integrate these practices because they are developmentally appropriate and contribute to their program goals, even if they are not built into the law.
- Federal programs often promote these recommended practices through sub-regulatory guidance, including standards frameworks, dear colleague letters, and technical assistance materials.
- Different federal programs often use varying terminology to describe the recommended practices and more common terminology could help youth-serving systems better coordinate and access effective practices.
- Further research could focus on how to leverage the recommended practices within each federal program's unique context.

BACKGROUND

Human development research tends to focus on early childhood and adolescence, which are known to be stages of rapid brain development. Middle childhood is the period between these two stages (5-12 years old, for the purposes of this brief), when children are considered "school-aged." These years were once seen as a plateau, a period of latency meant to prepare young people for adolescence, but development continues fluidly across childhood and the school-age years have their own important milestones. During these years, we develop our identities as we move into formal education, and we build the foundational skills needed to do it: self-regulation, interpersonal skills, content knowledge, and a sense of agency.*

This brief examines the extent to which federal programs reflect research-based practices intended to promote achievement of these developmental milestones in afterschool and youth development programs. There are several notable research-based practice frameworks, including the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets Framework, the Weikart Center's Pyramid of Program Quality and supporting measurement tools, the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance Design

*Jenny Nagaoka, et al. "Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework." University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2015. <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/foundations-young-adult-success-developmental-framework>.

Principles for Community-Based Programs, and the 4-H Thriving Model. Each of these frameworks emphasizes how certain specific practices are essential to healthy development and well-being.

To determine the extent to which federal programs incorporate these research-based practices, we selected the SoLD Alliance Design Principles (Table 1) as a reference point because of their consistency with other youth development frameworks. The SoLD Alliance is a multidisciplinary group of experts examining how biological systems govern our development. They find that because brain development is malleable, our childhood experiences have lifelong effects on our development – both positive and negative.

Table 1: Practices Adapted from SoLD Design Principles for Community-Based Programs	
Positive Relationships	Relationships, specifically with caring adults, act as a buffer to stress and allow children to develop a sense of belonging, competence, and agency
Rich Learning Experiences and Knowledge Development	Children learn best when they are engaged in authentic activities and collaborate with peers to deepen their understanding and transfer of skills to different contexts and new problems
Environments Filled with Safety and Belonging	The brain is calm when things are orderly and gets anxious when things are chaotic or threatening. Settings that foster connection, safety, and agency create positive contexts
Development of Skills, Habits, and Mindsets	Learning is social, emotional, cognitive, and academic, and is integrated
Integrated Support Systems	To promote these practices, programs are well-positioned to connect children and families with local agencies that offer health, mental health, and social service supports

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We focused on afterschool and youth development programs – those that engage children in academic enrichment, social development, physical activity, and exploration of interests outside of school hours – because they are safe and supportive environments where these positive experiences can happen. Because there are many federal afterschool and youth development programs, each with their own goals, we sought to better understand **a) how deeply their policy is aligned with practices like the SoLD Design Principles** (referred to as “recommended practices”); and **b) the facilitators and barriers to alignment with the recommended practices**. To take a broad perspective, we selected 10 programs (Table 2) from six different federal agencies that use a variety of policy tools to achieve their goals, such as grant funding, technical assistance, sub-regulatory guidance, or quality standards and frameworks.

Table 2: Federal Programs Included	
Department of Health and Human Services	Child Care Development Block Grant
Department of Health and Human Services	School-Based Interventions to Promote Equity and Improve Health, Academic Achievement, and Well-Being of Students
Department of Education and AmeriCorps	National Partnership for Student Success
Department of Education	Title IV Part B (21st Century Community Learning Centers)
Department of Education	Education for Homeless Children and Youth
Department of Education	Title IV Part F (Promise Neighborhoods)
Department of the Interior	YMCA Partnership Program and Boys and Girls Clubs of America National Park Service Partnership Programs

Department of Health and Human Services	Community Services Block Grant
Department of Justice	Multistate Mentoring Programs Initiative
Department of Agriculture	Children, Youth, and Families at Risk

RESEARCH METHODS

We conducted an environmental scan of publicly available policy, including laws and statutes, regulatory reporting requirements, sub-regulatory guidance, rules, and technical assistance materials. We defined alignment with the recommended practices as low, moderate, or high. As part of the environmental scan, we then conducted key informant interviews with individuals representing the 10 federal programs to supplement the document review.

To highlight encouraging results and better understand facilitators and barriers to alignment with the recommended practices, we interviewed several service-level providers. They were mostly funded by one federal program. It could be helpful to add the perspectives of providers participating in other federal programs, though they were more difficult to identify, perhaps because of purpose or program design.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Most federal programs use guidance or other policy tools to promote well-being and healthy development in ways that meet their individual program goals

We found that five of the 10 federal programs have moderate or strong alignment with all five recommended practices. The laws that govern programs are a major factor in alignment: programs with laws that allocate funding based on local need or focus on emergent situations are less likely to align with the recommended practices, and programs with laws that advance child care or academic enrichment are more likely to align. And while most programs' laws do not explicitly promote well-being and development, most interviewees agreed that the recommended practices are developmentally appropriate and contribute to their program goals. Most programs therefore use sub-regulatory guidance, such as standards frameworks, dear colleague letters, and technical assistance materials, to align with the recommended practices.

We found that the strongest areas of alignment are positive relationships and environments filled with safety and belonging; seven programs have moderate or strong alignment with each of those principles. Below are two examples of how federal programs operationalize the practice related to positive relationships:

- One federal program's guidance recommends encouraging and modeling warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachment, and responsiveness.
- Another federal program's guidance recommends that mentoring programs are built on strong relationships among students, mentors, schools, and families.

There is significant variability in the terminology used by federal programs to define recommended practices

While we did see overall alignment with the recommended practices, the alignment comes with significant variability in terminology. For example, we saw references to “connectedness,” “welcoming,” and “belonging,” all of which we interpreted as relating to the practice of safety and belonging. Interviewees suggested that interagency agreement on terminology could help them work together on common outcomes, and indicated a preference for leveraging, rather than duplicating, existing work.

POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

- According to the Forum for Youth Investment, youth-serving systems do not consistently implement practices in a way that promotes coordination (Forum for Youth Investment, 2024). Further federal interagency collaboration on implementing common recommended practices could respond to this need. Interagency agreement on the terminology of practices could potentially reduce the burden for providers participating in multiple federal programs, offer clearer, more consistent guidance for professional development that supports the practices, and make it easier to measure their impact.
- Interviewees who are federal program staff agreed that the recommended practices are developmentally appropriate for school-aged children and help meet their program goals. Further research could focus on how to leverage research-based practices to work within each program’s unique context.

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