Starting an Afterschool Program Toolkit

ACTNOW

Afterschool for Children & Teens

PROGRAM PLANNING TIMELINE

Year 1

September – December

LEARN conduct needs assessment
connect with other programs

January - August

FUND identify potential funding streams

February – March

PROGRAM DESIGN secure a location
establish program standards

April – June

PLAN hire and train staff
build community relationships

July – August

ENGAGE determine curricula
register youth and families

Year 2

September

START begin programming
plan continuous quality improvment

January - March

EVALUATE apply for additional funding
make any program adjustments

May - August

GROW plan for upcoming year
begin summer programming

Year 3+

September

ENGAGE prioritize staff development amd retention
connect with families and communities

January - March

EVALUATE make any program adjustments
sustain continuous quality improvment

May - August

GROW plan for upcoming year
begin summer programming

Who is ACT NOW?

ACT Now is a statewide **coalition** for **afterschool** and **community schools**. We strive to ensure that young people have access to quality, affordable out-of-school (OST) time programs. Our work includes advocacy campaigns; no-cost professional development resources; partnership opportunities; stewardship of the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards**, and technical assistance to grantees. While our work focuses on Illinois, we are a part of the **50 State Afterschool Network**, with national counterparts.

JOIN OUR COALITION

50 STATE AFTERSCHOOL NETWORK

Using This Toolkit

This guide is for organizations looking to start or strengthen afterschool programs. Sections begin with questions to ask yourself and your collaborators. Following these questions are information and resources to support your program development. We divided this guide into three parts:

- **LEARN** – know the basics before you start programming.
- **PLAN** – develop your program design and practices.
- **GROW** – take your program to the next level.

We encourage you to start at the beginning and work your way through this toolkit to design high-quality afterschool programs. The last section of this guide has the appendices and resources. It is best practice to read the guide first to understand how to use these resources.

Quality Standards

This toolkit is based on the **Illinois Afterschool Quality Standards**, comprised of several research-based benchmarks to promote high-quality programs. Find out more about the Standards on **page 26**.

Look for this icon to identify references to a **Standard**

Resources

This toolkit includes quality resources. Use the following icon next to each resource for a clickable link or QR code on **page 36**.

Look for this icon to find a **Resource**

Report broken links to ACT Now at **hello@actnowillinois.org**

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Contact Us

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ACT NOW
Afterschool for Children & Teens

LEARN

WHY AFTERSCHOOL?

Children spend 80% of their time outside the school day. Afterschool and community school programs take advantage of these hours. High-quality programs are places where youth can learn new things, explore interests, and have a safe space to be themselves. By starting an afterschool program embedded with community resources, you affect the mental, social, physical, and academic well-being of youth and their families.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Research allows you to understand the needs of your community and ensure that your program is responsive to those needs. By answering these questions first, you address needs and decide how to make a lasting impact.

COSNIDER

- What programs already exist in my community?
- What are the areas of high need in my community?
- What do other members of my community want from an afterschool program?

Conduct **community outreach** through surveys, focus groups, and listening sessions. Reach out to family members, youth, school staff, business leaders, and others. Your goal is to gather information about their need for, and interest in, afterschool programming.

Needs Assessments

The data you collect in community outreach is a key part of a **needs assessment**. Defined as a collection of data that shows both assets and gaps in community services; grant funding commonly requires a need assessment.

It is best to gather a variety of data early in the process to get the most complete picture possible. There are two types of data you will collect: **quantitative** and **qualitative**. See more about the data you may include during a needs assessment on the next page.

LEARN

Quantitative data are numbers, often collected by surveys or assessments. Examples include attendance, participant demographics, academic performance, and behavioral changes.

Qualitative data are anything captured without numbers such as observations, descriptions, or narratives. Examples include the experiences and stories of youth, parents, and staff involved in programming.

The structure of your needs assessment can take whatever form makes sense to you; however, it should clearly show the community you are working with, the areas of community need, and the data backing your observation. Use the chart below to explore what sources of data you might use in a needs assessment:

ASSESSMENT TEMPLATE

Check out a template of a needs assessment in the **Creating Afterschool Partnerships Toolkit**. 1A

Audience	Area of Need	Potential Data Sources
Youth & Families	Academic	Local high school graduation rates
	Social Emotional Support	State rank of mental health Feeling of school safety
	Physical	Food insecurity rates
Community Members	Academic	Local unemployment rates
	Social Emotional Support	Exposure to violence Community satisfaction rate
	Physical	Access to preventive healthcare

PARTNERSHIPS

When you conduct community outreach, you may want to find potential partners. Partnering with **schools** and other **community-based organizations** will help you build infrastructure and plan for your program's longevity. Developing robust Family and Community Partnerships is Core Area 5 of the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards**, recognizing the importance of partnership in high-quality afterschool.

COSNIDER

- Which community organizations or schools would be best to partner with?
- What is the difference between a partner, vendor, and funder?
- How do you set up a formal partnership with a school or community partner?

Partner with an Existing Program

Libraries	**Health Clinics**
Community Centers	**Afterschool Programs**
Faith Centers	**Schools or Universities**

PARTNERSHIP BUILDING 2A

Check out **Creating Afterschool Partnerships Toolkit** for guides on partnership building.

Early on, think about partnering with a local organization like those listed above. This might be easier than starting a new program, allowing you to grow your program organically and leverage community strengths. An established program may offer you:

Structure and resources	Local community partners will have administrative practices and operational structures in place. For example, you may find a partner to share building space or equipment.
Access to a diverse network	Your partners already have relationships with schools, families, and local leaders. From there, you can find new participants, volunteers, or funders. Partners can help connect your afterschool program with the community, increase its visibility, and help with collaboration.

LEARN

Program sustainability	Running an afterschool program requires ongoing funding, staffing, and support. Your partners may provide funding, grant opportunities, or in-kind services that help you operate.
Knowledge and experience	Partners may have staff who have worked in youth development, education, or program management. You can learn from their insights, guidance, and best practices.
Cultural history	Community partners can help to make your afterschool program culturally relevant and responsive. By collaborating with them, you ensure the program aligns with local values, desires, and traditions.

FIND LOCAL PARTNERS

ACT Now's self-reported **Afterschool Map and Database**, includes information on programs offered, and contact information. Once your program is up and running, you can add it to the map.

Types of Partnership

A variety of partnership structures exist when starting an afterschool program. Traditionally, a partner collaborates, a vendor provides services, and a funder provides financial support.

Partner	A partner collaborates with the program to provide resources, staff, services, or support that helps achieve shared goals. Partnerships may involve joint activities or shared staff and resources.	Local library partnering to provide reading resources or literacy workshops.

LEARN

Vendor	A vendor is a business or individual contracted to provide specific goods or services to the program, usually for a fee. Vendors typically have a transactional relationship with the program, providing things without a ongoing partnership.	Suppliers of items like snacks, equipment, educational supplies, or outsourced services.
Funder	A funder is an individual, organization, corporation or foundation that provides financial support to the program.	A foundation that awarded the program a grant.

MISSION & VISION

When developing an afterschool program, you will need a clear and concise mission to share with partners and community members who may support you. **Mission statements** lay the foundation for your work, defining your program's reason for existence, your purpose, intentions, and overall goals. **Vision statements** are far more inspirational and aspirational; they outline the problems you aim to address and how you will solve them. When drafting your mission and vision statements, in addition to referencing your completed needs assessment, consider these essential questions:

COSNIDER

- Who are we here to serve and why?
- What can I offer the field that is not already available?
- What are the goals and objectives of our program and why?
- What expertise and networks can I use to meet these goals?
- How will we measure success?

MISSION & VISION WORKSHEET

Use this worksheet from **DonorBox** to guide you through the process of writing a mission and vision statement.

3A

LEARN

PROGRESS CHECK

STOP! Have you completed the following steps to **learn** about your community before starting an afterschool program?

- ☐ Hosted a **listening session** about afterschool in your community?
- ☐ Written your **mission & values**?
- ☐ Checked the **ACT Now Map & Database** for other programs in your area?
- ☐ Met with potential **community partners** like schools or libraries?
- ☐ Completed a community **needs assessment**?

FUNDING

There are many local, state, federal, and private funding sources to help fuel afterschool programs. A successful program will use a funding approach often referred to as **braiding funding**. This means you use multiple funding sources to run your program. These sources can include local business sponsorships, public and private grants, fundraising activities, and fee-for-service.

WEBINAR SERIES: GRANT WRITING

Feeling lost in the grant application process? Check out the **Grant Writing Webinar Series** that walks you through each step in the public grant process, from writing to submission.

4A

FIND GRANTS

ACT Now created **SPEAR**, a regularly updated online tool to help you **find** and **secure grants,** sponsorships, and **private funding opportunities.**

4B

LEARN

Public Grant Funding in Illinois

Often, programs use **grants** as financial support. To receive a grant, organizations must compete for funds through an **application** and undergo an ongoing **evaluation** process. The two Illinois state agencies that manage common afterschool and community school funding are the **Illinois State Board of Education** (ISBE) and the **Illinois Department of Human Services** (IDHS).

Common Afterschool Funding from Illinois State Agencies	
ISBE	**IDHS**
21st Century Community Learning Centers	Teen REACH
After School Programs	Reimagine Public Safety Act (RPSA)
School District Title I	Child Care Assistance Program
Email notifications for ISBE grants	*Email notifications for IDHS grants*

GATA Prequalification

All organizations that apply for public grants in Illinois must register themselves in the Illinois Grant Accountability and Transparency Act (**GATA**) **Grantee Portal**. This is where all public grants will be submitted to state agencies for review. We recommend visiting the GATA website and becoming prequalified well in advance of your grant application to avoid any issues.

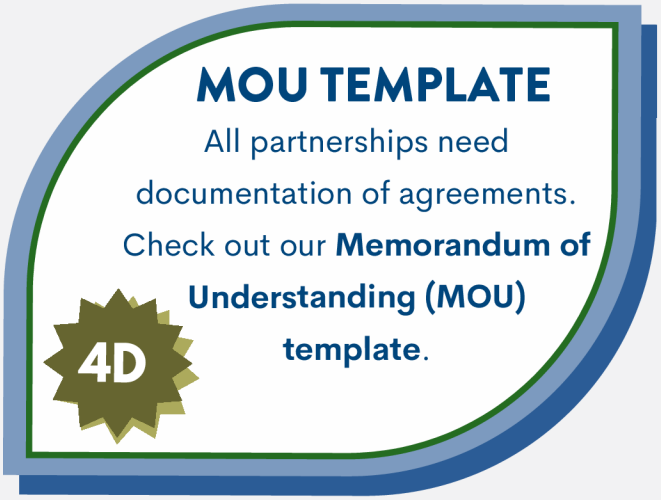
TRAINING: GATA

Visit the **Illinois GATA Learning Management System** for training and assistance in setting up your profile and applying for grants.

Fee-for-Service

Many afterschool programs use a **fee-for-service model**, where participating families or communities pay a set fee, either on a per-day, per-week, or monthly basis, for their youth to attend the program. Most pricing models cover the most basic operational costs while allowing for flexibility with other services like tutoring and special classes. A discount structure incentivizes long-term participation and accommodates families with multiple children. Review the following service types when considering a fee-for-service model:

Service	Description
Registration	Covers administrative setup, materials, and enrollment processing
Weekly, Daily, or Monthly	Options for full time, part time, or drop-in attendance
Day's Off	Runs when schools are not in session (summer, holidays, etc.)
Extended Services	Includes of extended hour care or special enrichment classes
Discounts	Suggestions include discounts for siblings, referrals, scholarships, or monthly or annual payments



Fiscal Sponsors

You can also consider a **fiscal sponsorship**, a partnership with an organization that provides financial oversight and management. By partnering with a fiscal sponsor, you receive help from their existing 501(c)3, which gives them a tax-exempt status. This saves you the time of waiting for your own status and lets you focus on getting to work. Additionally, fiscal sponsors can help with administrative tasks such as financial management, payroll processing, human resources, and grant management. It is important to carefully select a fiscal sponsor and set up a clear agreement that outlines the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of both parties.

FUNDRAISING

Individual, corporate, and foundation **fundraising** can provide other sources of financial support for your program. The **DonorBox** provides excellent recommendations to launch a fundraising campaign.

4E

FISCAL PLANNING

You for Youth (Y4Y) created a helpful **fiscal management planning checklist** which you can use as a model for your own fiscal management processes.

4F

LICENSING FLOWCHART

Illinois Afterschool Programs

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Youth Age
Will the program include any youth **under the age of three**?

NO

Do any of the following apply?

If so, you are eligible for a **license exemption**

YES

Public Schooling	provides service based in, and run by, a public school
Drop In Services	provides childcare while caregivers are in the same building
Religious Education	provides faith-based programs that do not receive federal funding
Special Education	provides service exclusively to youth with disabilities
Federal Property	provides service based on federal government property
Private Schooling	provides service based in and run by a private school
Part-Day Childcare	provides service at a part-day childcare facility. Find the restrictions by scaning or clicking the QR code
School-Age Only	provides service to school-age (5-13) youth outside of school hours. Find the restrictions by scanning or clicking the QR code

License Exemption

You must submit a request for license exemption

Find the License Exemption form by scaning or clicking the QR code

YES

License Required

Find out how to obtain a License by scaning or clicking the QR code

NO

Nothing Applies?

DISCLAIMER

This resource is to provide awareness about licensing regulations only. We encourage programs to connect with legal counsel or the Illinois Department of Human Services with any questions

PLAN

Next, you can start planning the day-to-day logistics of your afterschool program! This section will lead you through the key steps to develop your program's design, procedure, staffing requirements, safety measures, recruitment plans, and evaluation tools.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES & DESIGN

It is now time to apply what you have learned so far and begin designing your program **structure** and **schedule**. Developing culturally responsive program activities is Core Area 6 of the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards**, demonstrating the impact of youth-centered design in high-quality afterschool. Below, are a few key consider while designing your program.

Concept	Description
Structured vs Unstructured	Afterschool is an opportunity for youth to choose their activities, unwind, and explore. Be sure to have a balance of structured schedules and activities with unstructured flex time.
Youth Voice & Choice	If you offer youth the power to make decisions, they will be more invested in the program. Ask for their input on activity ideas. Let them design part of the space. Provide time for youth to choose.
Transitions	Moving from the school day to afterschool programming is a big transition. Youth will require different things to make that transition successful. Ideally, you can offer options to support all youth: • **Laps** – Youth need some sort of physical activity to spend energy. • **Snacks** – Youth need something to eat and drink. • **Raps** – Youth prefer to hang out and socialize with friends. • **Naps** – Youth in this group need quiet, relaxing time.
Safety & Supervision	What is your provider-to-youth ratio? Do you have access to your building at all times? Who will be welcoming youth and overseeing pick up? Do you have enough staff to run programs safely?

Daily Schedule

Establishing **regular** and **reliable hours of operation** is key to building community trust and a quality program. There are a variety of models to consider below.

Model	Hours	Description
Traditional	School dismissal until 5:00 - 6:00 PM	Provides care and enrichment for youth after the school day ends, until families traditionally finish work.
Extended Hours	School dismissal until 7:00 - 9:00 PM	Offers longer hours for working families who may need care for their children beyond the typical afterschool time.
School's Out	8:00 AM - 5:00 PM on school non-attendance days	Operates when schools are closed, such as holidays, teacher workdays, or school breaks.
Before and After School Care	7:00 AM - 9:00 AM and 3:00 PM - 6:00 PM	Provides both before-school and after-school care. Ideal for families who need coverage at the beginning and end of the school day.
Drop-In or Flexible Hours	Varies based on community need	Allows families to drop children off as needed, without committing to a set schedule.
Seasonal or Break-Specific Programs	Operating during school breaks (spring, summer, winter)	Offers specialized activities during school breaks, such as art camps, sports camps, or STEM-based camps.

Required Hours

Some grants have requirements about when you offer program services. **Make sure you and your staff know the requirements of the grants that fund your program.** Check your contracts if you are unsure.

DESIGN ACTIVITIES

Check out this resource from **WNET Thirteen Education** to help you dive deep into your **program's design**.

5A

Curriculum & Activities

A high-quality afterschool program includes **diverse**, **age-appropriate**, and **accessible** curricula and activities. Choose a diversity of topics and subject matters that are **reflective of your students' interests**. Remember to practice the activity ahead of time with your staff before sharing the youth.

Curriculum Recommendations

Look for curriculums that include:	Sources:
Hands-on, minds-on activities	Mizzen Education 5B
Social-emotional learning competencies	CASEL 5C
Easily available materials and space	Curiosity Machine 5D
Culturally reflective of the community you serve	Cultural Responsiveness Webinar Series 5E
Age-appropriate and inclusive activities	BOOST Cafe 5F

Youth Voice

The program staff should work with youth to choose curricula and activities. **Authentic youth voice encourages ongoing engagement.** Consider using the following strategies to center youth voice at your program:

- Offer them two or three options that you have already vetted.
- At intake, ask about their interests and plan around those.
- Allow the youth to name a need in their community and encourage a service-based project addressing that need.
- Establish regular check-ins or circle time to allow the youth to share and speak.
- After completion of a curriculum or program, get feedback from the youth using a survey on their program experience and what topics interest them in the future.

YOUTH VOICE TOOLKIT

Check out Becko & Raven's **Youth Voice Toolkit & Handbook** to plan for successful youth engagement.

5G

INTEREST SURVEYS

5H

Need help collecting feedback from youth? Check ou **You for Youth**'s **Y4Y Interest Survey**.

POLICIES & PROCEDURES

Having firm and documented policies and procedures is essential to running a successful and impactful afterschool program. These policies are a **plan for program operations**: day-to-day and long-term. So, you should create them before starting any program. All afterschool programs should keep written policies and procedures including, but not limited to, the following topics:

Medical	Safety	Behavioral	Administrative
Dispensing Medication	Emergency Procedures	Discipline and Conflict Resolution	Staff & Volunteer Screening Policy
Asthma	Transportation Procedures	Following up with Late or Absent Youth	Background Check Policy
Head Lice	Youth Arrival and Departure		Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act
Handwashing	Visitor Sign-in and Out		Enrollment & Termination
Illness	Serving Snacks and Meals		Inventory Tracking
Injury	Internet Blocking Software		Secure Data Management

Funders and partners may also require you to keep other written policies and procedures. Check your contracts to find required policy deliverables.

PLAN

POLICY TEMPLATE

Customize our **Policy & Procedure Template** to fit your program.

6A

PARENT HANDBOOK

Customize the Iowa Afterschool Alliance's **Sample Parent Handbook** to fit your needs.

6B

ADMINISTRATION & STAFFING

Organizations must have **strong staffing practices** in place. This starts by designing thorough **job descriptions** for all positions, including volunteers. Additionally, all adults, including volunteers and interns, who work with youth aged 17 years or younger must complete a **background check**. Developing ethical and clear administrative practices is Core Area 3 of the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards**, recognizing the impact of successful administration in high-quality afterschool.

Background Checks

In Illinois, partial and comprehensive background checks for childcare providers like afterschool programs include:

- Child Abuse and Neglect Tracking System (CANTS) check
- Illinois and/or National Sex Offender Registries (SORS)
- Criminal Background Check (done through fingerprinting)

Complete all background checks before working with youth.

STATE STANDARDS

Illinois employers should review the **Illinois Personnel Record Review Act** to ensure alignment with state standards.

7A

TRAINING: WORKFORCE PLANNING

Check out the **3R Model of Workforce Planning Training Series**, exploring how to support employees during three major steps of the employee life cycle: **Reset, Recruit, and Retain**.

7B

Job Descriptions & Hiring

Well-written **job descriptions** are important for finding qualified staff. Job descriptions outline the **scope of the role**, from daily tasks and functions to reporting structures.

The time and effort agencies put into drafting high-quality job descriptions and planning salaries will all be for nothing if we are not able to **recruit, hire,** and **keep quality staff**. Staff turnover is one of the biggest challenges in the out-of-school time (OST) field and impacts program consistency and youth and family trust.

SAMPLE JOB POSTING

Check out our **Sample OST Specialist Job Description,** which you can customize to your organization.

7C

INDOOR & OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS

The indoor and outdoor environment should be conducive to all programmatic activities. It should also be inclusive of a variety of **physical**, **mental**, and **social abilities**. Regardless of your location, ensure that you are following all legal health and safety regulations that apply. Developing safe environments is Core Area 1 of the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards**, defining safety in high-quality afterschool.

COSNIDER

- Is your space wheelchair-accessible or compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?
- Is there a calm space for youth or people who are over-stimulated?
- Do you need to follow any external regulations from the building or partners?

SAFETY TRAINING

Check out dozens of **health and safety training webinars** available on ANCAL.

8A

PLAN

Recommended organizations to partner with for space		
Local schools	Museums	Community colleges
Faith centers	Park districts	Daycare facilities
Community centers	Libraries	Sports facilities

Accessibility & the Myth of Average

When designing your program environment, many providers try to plan for an "average" youth. This is a mistake, as **there is no such thing as an "average" youth**. Designing programming for the widest range of needs possible builds a program that can serve the true diversity of youth and families in a community. When taking this wide lens, you'll find that **all youth benefit from accommodations**, not just those that need them the most The following is a list of potential accommodations that programs can make to serve as many youth and families as possible.

NEURODIVERSITY TOOLKIT

Check out ACT Now's **Neurodiversity in OST** toolkit strategies for fostering inclusion and practical approaches to accommodations.

8B

Provide Earplugs & Headphones	Pair Youth with Peer Mentors	Offer Alternative Seating Options
Offer Remote Options	Use Soft Lights	Written & Verbal Instructions
Designate High & Low Energy Zones	Offer Quiet Fidget Items	Minimize Visual Clutter

SAFETY, HEALTH, & NUTRITION

Before you begin programming, you need to **create systems** and standards for addressing potential **emergencies** and **hazards**. Focusing on Safety, Health, and Nutrition is Core Area 2 of the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards**, recognizing the importance of health practices in high-quality afterschool.

COSNIDER

- How will you respond in a case of harm or violence?
- Are your staff trained in first aid, mental health first aid, and CPR?
- What are the dietary needs of your community?

Hunger & Meals

If youth are coming to your program after the school day, many will be hungry. If you are offering programming before school, they may need breakfast. If you are running summer programming, you need a plan for meals. In short, by providing meals and snacks, you are improving the quality of your program and lowering the barrier for youth participation.

FUNDING MEALS

Check out our guide for finding **funds** for **afterschool meals** and ways to address food scarcity.

9A

TRAINING: CULTURAL INCLUSIVE MEALS

Food varies widely by region, so you want to be inclusive of the youth in your program. Watch our **webinar** on **culturally inclusive meals**.

9B

TRANSPORTATION

A major barrier to many afterschool programs across urban, suburban, and rural areas is **transportation**. By providing transportation, it makes it easier for families to take part. Whatever options you choose, explore **safety practices**, including required car seats, licensure, and background checks.

COSNIDER

- Do youth have safe passage to your program?
- How will youth arrive home safely?
- What is your plan for late pick up or dismissal?

Options for Transportation	
Walking	Choose a location near enough that youth can walk. Staff can meet them and escort youth from that location to your program via a walking bus.
Public Transportation	Try getting a subsidy from your collaborators, city, or state government to help cover costs.
Yellow Bus	Coordinate with the school district you serve to take advantage of their bus system.
Family Carpool	Organize a family carpooling network and schedule.
Buy or Rent a Vehicle	Get creative! Can a local business donate vehicles? Can you share a vehicle with another community-based organization?

PLAN

Transportation Services for youth and families	
	HopSkipDrive
	Lyft Concierge
	Care.com After School

10A

10B

10C

RECRUITMENT

Getting enough youth to register for your program requires designing a **culturally responsive recruitment program**. Recruitment is a part of the yearly program cycle and the strategies you use should evolve based on feedback from your community.

COSNIDER

- What methods of communication are families most comfortable using?
- Are there trusted messengers in your community who can help with recruitment?
- Is registration easy for families to complete?

Strategies for Recruitment

Community Events	Host community events in your space for youth and families to attend.
In-School Events for Youth	Partner with schools to host in-school events,building interest among youth.
Flyers & Materials Sent to Homes	Use school partnerships to send materials home with youth for families.
Phone Call Campaign	Cold call families and community members to advertise your program.

RECRUITMENT TOOLKIT

Check out the **Summer Learning Recruitment Guide** with templates for recruitment and messaging.

11A

FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Partnerships with families and the larger community create a successful afterschool program. While **building trust** takes time, there are several strategies you can use to engage families successfully. Developing strong Family & Community Engagement practices is Core Area 5 of the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards**, recognizing the power of centering families and communities in high-quality afterschool.

COSNIDER

- How will you build and support relationships with families and community members?
- What activities or events are particularly accessible and fun for your community?
- Who can you ask for guidance when planning family engagement events?

Engagement Strategies

Start by creating a **family engagement plan**, including designing family nights to bring folks into your program and establishing regular lines of communication. This plan will map out the ways you **build relationships** with families, involve them in programming, and include them in decision-making. Consider the following strategies for serving whole families and community members:

Open Drop-In Hours	Family Dinner Nights	Cultural Celebrations	College or Career Readiness
Flexible Childcare	Adult Education Classes	Affinity-based Family Groups	Social Media Engagement

ENGAGEMENT TRACKER

12A

Keep track of your family and community engagement efforts with this **digital tracker**.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Check out our **Family Engagement Toolkit** for strategies to developing a robust family engagement plan.

12B

DATA, QUALITY & EVALUATION

Just as the school day has standards, so does afterschool. In Illinois, we use the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards** to set benchmarks for programs across the state. Created in 2016, the Standards provide a **common definition of quality** that leads to quality programs and positive outcomes for youth.

COSNIDER

- Which of the Standards best fit your program site?
- What do you use to evaluate your program? Which assessments are right for you?
- How will you figure out if your program meets these Standards?

Illinois Quality Standards Core Areas

Indoor and Outdoor Environments	Safety, Health, and Nutrition	Administration	Youth Development, Programming, and Activities
Professional Development and Qualifications	Family and Community Partnerships	Partnerships with Schools	

Continuous Quality Improvment

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is a consistent process that **evaluates all parts of your program** and **finds areas for growth**. These practices will encourage you to keep evaluating and improving your organization. It also helps to satisfy funders and collaborators by showing positive changes as you learn and grow.

Evaluations involve **gathering data** and **feedback** on a particular aspect of your program. You can gather this feedback from youth, families, staff, community members, and partners. On the next page, is a selection of activities and outcomes to track. You may not evaluate all these areas or use every method we shared. **Choose what makes the most sense depending on your goals and priorities.**

PLAN

Program Activity	Outcome	Methods to Track
Academic success	Track academic progress, social-emotional development, behavior metrics, engagement, or learning a skill	Academic progress Adult to youth ratio Advisory board participation Alumni participation rate Anonymous surveys Attendance rates College and career placements Content comprehension rate Event attendance Family testimonials Focus groups Legislator engagement Newsletter distribution Open ended surveys Program observations Satisfaction rates Staff feedback Social-media engagement Space availability Use of resources Youth interviews
Attendance and participation	Learn about the program's ability to engage and keep youth and families	
Partnership and collaboration	Evaluate the relationships you have with schools and other organizations	
Program implementation	Check back with your first program design versus practical application	
Staff performance	Find gaps in your staff's qualifications and performance	
Participant satisfaction	Ask about youth, family, staff and partners' experiences and suggestions	
Program sustainability	Look at strategies for finding resources and funding for future success	
Safety and well-being	Review your safety protocols and procedures	

PLAN

Illinois Quality Program Self-Assessment

ACT Now has a tool and an annual coaching process, which measures any or all the activities listed below, called the **Illinois Quality Program Self-Assessment** (IL-QPSA). After evaluating your program using the IL-QPSA, you can create an action plan. Using your data, this action plan will map out your next steps for improvment.

SELF ASSESSMENT

Check out the **Illinois Quality Program Self-Assessment** as a way to measure your program's success.

13B

STEM EVALUATION

Our partners at **PEAR** have developed a framework to define **quality STEM learning** in afterschool. Use **Dimensions of Success** to evaluate your STEM program!

13A

PROGRESS CHECK

STOP! Have you completed the following steps to **plan** your program before the first day?

- [ ] Determined the best **program design** for your community?
- [ ] Identified high-quality **staff members**?
- [ ] Secured a **safe location** for program and play?
- [ ] Written comprehensive **policies** and **procedures**?
- [ ] Developed a **recruitment strategy** for youth and families?
- [ ] Established an **evaluation** and **assessment plan** for your program?

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

No staff member will have all the skills and expertise you need. However, investment in organization-wide professional development is a proven method for **retaining high-quality staff** and building an effective program. By providing opportunities for high-quality professional development, you grow your team's abilities to respond to youth successfully. Offering quality Professional Development Opportunities is Core Area 4 of the **Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards** recognizing the importance of trained staff in high-quality afterschool.

COSNIDER

- What skills do your team members need to grow professionally or personally?
- Are you providing appropriate salary and benefits to program staff?
- How will you determine which professional development opportunities are
- high-quality?

ACT Now Center for Afterschool Learning: ANCAL

Many resources referenced in this guide are hosted on the **ACT Now Center for Afterschool Learning** (ANCAL), our online learning management system. With upcoming events and over **650 recorded trainings**, ANCAL is a free platform accessible to all Illinois afterschool professionals and advocates seeking continued education credits (CEUs), staff orientation, and professional development.

Click or scan here to explore ANCAL!

The following organizations also provide ongoing professional development and adult learning opportunities in the afterschool field:

- Illinois Collaboration on Youth
- Illinois AfterschoolNetwork
- The Afterschool Alliance
- The National AfterSchool Association

Salary & Benefits

During the process of developing job descriptions, employers will need to decide the salary ranges that go with each position. Additionally, employers need to assess the type of benefits they can offer their employees. Be sure to research what benefits are standard and realistic to offer your employees.

PAY RANGES

Check **Indeed**'s How-To-Guide for **building pay grades** and salary ranges. 14A

Employee Records

Maintaining accurate employee records is crucial for afterschool programs to ensure legal compliance, manage safety and liability, and streamline operations. It ensures accurate payroll and benefits administration, supports efficient performance tracking and staff management, and demonstrates professionalism to employees and stakeholders.

PROFESSIONAL SURVEY

14B ACT Now has developed a **Professional Development Survey**, for managers to administer with their employees.

PLANNING TOOL

Help individuals track their goals and progress in their career with the ACT Now **Professional Development Planning Tool**. 14C

ADVOCACY

We believe that afterschool is an essential part of the network of support for youth in Illinois. To that end, ACT Now designed resources to increase the quality and availability of afterschool programming and address outreach and advocacy. Through advocacy, we connect with change-makers to do the following:

- Highlight the increasing demand for quality afterschool programs in Illinois
- Share the stories of youth and communities your programs support statewide
- Educate on the connection between enrollment in afterschool and increased youth health and safety outcomes

Power in Advocacy

Policies created at both the state and federal levels affect afterschool programs. This means that local representatives of your state and federal government could be champions of afterschool in your community by directing public funding and resources to afterschool. By engaging directly with lawmakers through advocacy, we keep the *Lights On for Afterschool*, a national advocacy effort by the Afterschool Alliance.

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Ready to write a letter, make a call, connect on social media, or invite a legislator to your program? ACT Now develops an annual **Advocacy Toolkit**, including tips and best practices for providers.

15A

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is how organizations prepare for their programs and activities to be **successful long term**. A strategic plan should be developed over time, with input from across your community.

CONSIDER

- What do we want to achieve as an organization in the next several years?
- How will we reach these goals?
- What support do we need from outside collaborators?

Organizations often lean heavily on the '**why'** captured in their **mission statement** when addressing these questions. According to the evaluation experts at **PIE ORG**, strategic plans "are ways of thinking, acting, and pivoting over time in a desired direction so we can better serve our clients, build our organizations, and support one another."

S.W.O.T. Analysis

By focusing on the **Strengths**, **Weaknesses**, **Opportunities**, and **Threats** an organization or group experiences, a *S.W.O.T. Analysis* creates an effective strategic plan. PIE ORG offers some questions to consider as you complete your analysis.

S.W.O.T	Guiding Questions
Strengths	What are we good at? What positions us to excel? What should we be capitalizing on to make progress?
Weaknesses	What are the gaps in programs, operations, or funding? What could slow down or stall our progress?
Opportunities	What are we not taking advantage of that could support our growth?
Threats	What are risks that could derail progress?

As you begin working on your analysis, you will find questions that align with your organization and community.

SWOT TEMPLATE

ACT Now has created this basic **S.W.O.T Analysis template** to support you in this process. 16A

Strategic Planning Teams

It is best practice to establish a strategic plan with a team of a wide variety of collaborators. Consider returning to your community collaborators and encourage youth input when creating a strategic plan.

The **Illinois Quality Program Self-Assessment** (IL-QPSA) is another strategic planning tool that brings together a variety of voices and provides templates for collaborator surveys. These features allow assessment teams to collect and analyze data in a central system, already connected to the Illinois Statewide Afterschool Quality Standards.

SHARED LEADERSHIP

By this point, you know that collaboration is a focal point in any strong afterschool program. By engaging a wide variety of collaborators, like program staff, community members, youth, families, and more, in decision-making, you practice **shared leadership**. This practice centers diverse voices and experiences and addresses the needs of young people to amplify your agency's mission.

CONSIDER

- Who has been a close collaborator to our organization?
- When do we consider the feedback of youth in our choices?
- What advice are we looking for from our community?

Advisory Boards

A common way to engage multiple collaborators in your **decision-making processes** is to set up an Advisory Board. This is different from a Board of Directors, as advisory boards often include **various voices from within the community** to support the program's success, but do not provide management or fiscal oversight to the organization.

Steps to Build an Advisory Board

Step	Consider	Resource	
Find Members	Who would you like to join your Advisory Board? Prioritize program staff, families, and youth members.	Use a matrix to think through what additional expertise you would like at the table.	17A
Invite Members	Invitations should be personal and speak to the specific reasons you are asking them to join.	Use this worksheet to explore the questions members will have.	17B
Create Community	It is important to foster a sense of community to encourage a space for learning, idea sharing, and progress.	Use the Creating and Engaging Environment Tool as you cultivate the culture of your Advisory Board.	17C

Spaces like an Advisory Board or other meeting environments may feel familiar to the adults at the table however, this type of situation may be new to youth who have agreed to join. Incorporating and amplifying **youth voice** is incredibly important in all aspects of afterschool programming, but it is particularly important here.

YOUTH VOICE

Check out the Afterschool Alliance on **incorporating youth voice** as you build out your Advisory Board team.

17D

CONGRATULATIONS

If you made it this far, **congratulations**! Your passion and dedication for high-quality afterschool programming can transform your community. You have all the necessary tools and resources to create a space for youth to **learn**, **plan**, and **grow**. While creating a program takes time and effort, you can do it and ACT Now is here to help support you every step of the way.

LOOKING FOR MORE?

Put Your Program on the Map

ACT Now created a self-reported map of afterschool programs across the state, services offered, and contact information. Once your program is up and running, you please add it to the map!

Join Our Coalition

Be a voice for Illinois youth and the afterschool programs serving them and their families. It's easy to join the Coalition, simply **sign up for our free weekly newsletter** to stay up to date on the latest tools to access professional development opportunities, engage in networking events, and access resources for running strong programs. Join today!

Meet with ACT Now

If you are looking for more personal help, **please reach out to us!** Schedule a 1-on-1 meeting to learn more about your goals and help point you in the right direction. We look forward to watching your program and your professional career grow into a sustainable afterschool program for the youth in Illinois.

RESOURCES

Number	Resource	Section	Click or Scan QR Code
1A	Needs Assessment Template	Community Outreach	
2A	Creating Afterschool Partnerships Toolkit	Partnerships	
2B	Afterschool Map and Database		
3A	Misson & Vision Worksheet	Mission & Vision	
4A	Webinar Series: Grant Writing	Funding	
4B	Finding Grants with SPEAR Tool		
4C	Training: GATA Learning Management		
4D	Memorandum of Understanding Template		
4E	Fundraising Recommendations		
4F	Fiscal Planning Checklist		

All resources available at www.actnowillinois.org/START

RESOURCES

Number	Resource	Section	Click or Scan QR Code
5A	Designing Program Activities Guide	Program Activities & Design	
5B	Curriculum: Mizzen Education		
5C	CASEL: SEL Competencies		
5D	Curriculum: Curiosity Machine		
5E	Webinar Series: Cultural Responsiveness		
5F	Curriculum: BOOST Cafe		
5G	Youth Voice Toolkit		
5H	You4Youth Interest Survey		
6A	Policy Templates	Policies & Procedures	
6B	Sample Parent Handbook		

All resources available at www.actnowillinois.org/START

RESOURCES

Number	Resource	Section	Click or Scan QR Code
7A	Illinois State Employer Standards	Administration & Staffing	
7B	Webinar Series: 3Rs of Workforce Planning		
7C	Sample OST Job Posting		
8A	Webinar Series: Safety & Health at Workplace	Indoor & Outdoor Environments	
8B	Neurodiversity in OST Toolkit		
9A	Finding Funding for Afterschool Meals	Safety, Health, & Nutrition	
9B	Webinar: Culturally Inclusive Meals		
10A	HopSkipDrive	Transportation	
10B	Lyft Concierge		
10C	Care.com After School		

RESOURCES

Number	Resource	Section	Click or Scan QR Code
11A	Recruitment Toolkit	Recruitment	
12A	Digital Engagement Tracker	Family & Community Engagement	
12B	Family Engagement Toolkit		
13A	Dimensions of Success STEM Evaluation	Data, Quality & Evaluation	
13B	ILQPSA: Illinois Quality Program Self Assessment		
14A	Determining Pay Ranges	Professional Development	
14B	Employee PD Survey		
14C	PD Planning Tool		
15A	Advocacy Toolkit	Advocacy	
16A	S.W.O.T. Template	Strategic Planning	

All resources available at
www.actnowillinois.org/START

RESOURCES

Number	Resource	Section	Click or Scan QR Code
17A	Identify Members Matrix	Shared Leadership	
17B	Inviting Members Worksheet		
17C	Creating an Engaging Environment Tool		
17D	Youth Voice on Advisory Boards		
Your Program on the Map		Afterschool Map & Database	
Join Our Coalition		Newsletter Sign Up	
Meet with ACT Now		Schedule 1-on-1	
Register for ANCAL		Online Learning Database	

All resources available at www.actnowillinois.org/START

Resource		Click or Scan QR Code
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