

Out-of-School Time: Evidence Synthesis, Best Practices and Environmental Scan

Executive Summary and Key Recommendations

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Executive Summary

Background:

Out-of-school time (OST) approaches and systems for children and youth can increase engagement and equity across the life-course through development of life and technical skills, including problem-solving and communication. Furthermore, engagement in OST activities provides children and youth opportunities for mentorship, leadership, development of responsibility, and building connections.

In general, the purpose of most OST approaches is to provide one or more of the following:

- constructive, supervised activities for children and youth
- caring relationships with adults and other children and youth
- accessible, safe places for children and youth



OST activities are often structured programs, and many have been evaluated, although rigorous process and outcome evaluation remain a challenge for many programs. Structured programs often require resources, limiting accessibility. Unstructured out-of-school time approaches are less well documented; however, application of the elements of successful structured programs may be appropriate and evaluation is necessary. This report will provide suggestions for consideration.

The present report appraised and synthesized contemporary evidence from diverse sources related to best practices for quality OST approaches. Consistent practices and innovative approaches were identified, and these practices were aligned with diverse frameworks, as well as the ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) environmental scan and the Natural Supports work to further highlight

innovative practices, ascertain gaps, and recommend next steps. We also described results from a snapshot environmental scan using key informant interviews on Albertan OST approaches to provide local data on existing practices. Opportunities for OST initiatives were presented.

The Current Project:

Three work streams composed the study methodology of the current project:

1. Evidence appraisal and synthesis to identify best consistent and innovative practices in OST approaches serving children and youth aged 6-12 years
2. Alignment of identified best practices with key elements from gold standard frameworks as well as the ACEs and Natural Supports literature
3. A snapshot environmental scan of current OST approaches in the province to provide local data and context

For the purpose of this report, **innovation** refers to the process of building upon, refining or enhancing a pre-existing idea or process, and adapting to the context. Evidence can be used to inform innovation.

Results:

- The research team identified a total of 31 evidence sources related to OST for this project; 5 of these were gold standard frameworks that were used to facilitate interpretation of the findings
- Following quality appraisal of the evidence sources, the following key themes to organize the best practices emerged: **partnerships, access and participation, inclusion, evaluation, leadership characteristics, and approach characteristics**
- Alignment of best practices with gold standard frameworks resulted in support of several innovative and emerging best practices that were generally related to two main topics. The first captured considerations for **specific sub-populations, cultures, genders and identities**. The second was **regarding evaluation, quality improvement, and knowledge mobilization**. From these findings, more considerations in OST approaches and planning are needed related to consideration of specific groups, and enhancing current evaluation and knowledge mobilization processes
- The opportunities that we identified in this project mostly related to the theme, **communities and youth working together**, including service-learning and promotion of natural supports. These are opportunities to explore in future OST approaches and planning, enhancing current practice. Adoption of some or all aspects of these strategies in OST approaches may lead to more holistic initiatives. Evaluation of these strategies specific to OST are encouraged
- Based on the environmental scan, Alberta Agencies are interested in sharing approaches
- Recommendations for next steps were informed by the findings, expertise of the research team, the ACEs and Natural Supports literature, and stakeholder input

Next Steps and Key Recommendations:

1. **Intentional adoption of innovative practices that engage communities and children/youth into OST approaches.** These can enhance what is currently working and include:



- a. using volunteers,
- b. promoting service-learning activities,
- c. using creative/less-structured practices,
- d. using blended supervision contexts (e.g., indirect supervision for recreational activities, direct supervision for homework)
- e. providing opportunities to children and youth for meaningful work,
- f. providing opportunities for children/youth to make meaningful connections with non-parental adults and peers,
- g. providing tailored support for those who are potentially vulnerable,
- h. involving participants and members of the community in planning, decision-making, and evaluation

2. **Evidence on characteristics of quality OST approaches can inform innovation:**

- a. Information and research on the influence of unstructured, volunteer, ad-hoc OST approaches are seriously lacking
- b. Implementation and testing of innovative approaches mentioned above in (1) in real-world settings are essential
- c. There is a great need for rigorous and methodologically sound evaluation approaches appropriate to the community setting
- d. Multiple levels of evaluation, (e.g. outcome evaluation, such as child and youth skill development; and process evaluation, such as intended implementation) are important considerations. A population health approach to evaluation is recommended
- e. A better understanding on dosage of activities (e.g., frequency, intensity) is required
- f. A better understanding on the format of the program/approach beyond the critical hours (e.g., summer, Professional Development days, weekends) is required
- g. A better understanding on the role of technology and social media in OST approaches is required; examples include Growing Up Digital, and Alliance Afterschool
- h. Information on how implementation and fidelity influence outcomes is required

For more information, please see full report, or email research team:

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