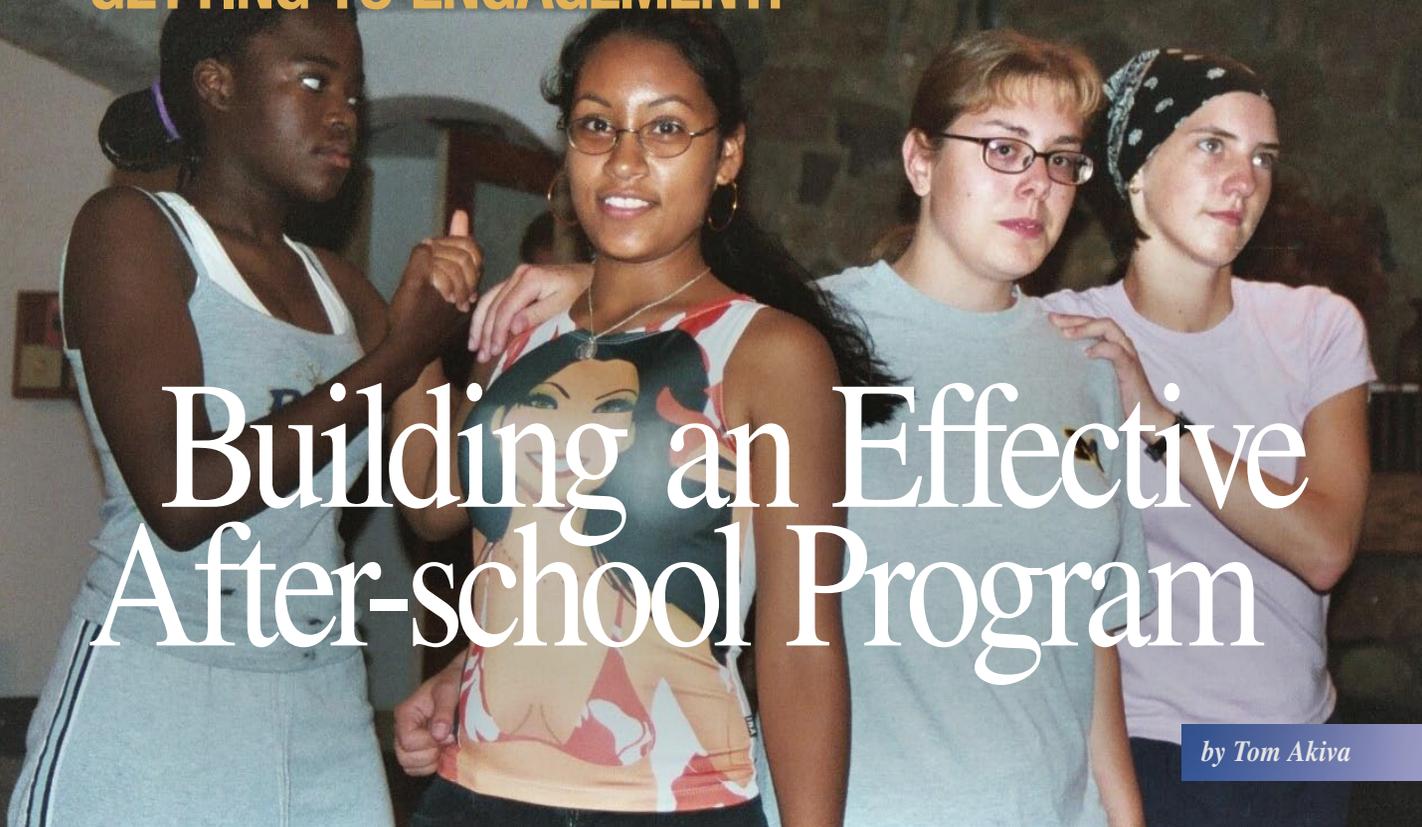# GETTING TO ENGAGEMENT:

Building an Effective After-school Program

by Tom Akiva

When it comes to designing an after-school program where young people feel safe and want to show up, and where genuine learning occurs, point-of-service (POS) quality matters most.

What is POS? Simply put, it is where youth, adults, and resources come together. It's the stuff you measure with the Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA), Form A (e.g., environment, policies and practices, interaction, and engagement). It has a little to do with the physical setting and organizational structures, and a lot to do with the interaction of adults and youth—with each other and with program resources.

When POS quality becomes the unifying focus for program leaders, it informs everything: hiring; staff roles, orientation, and development; what to offer; when to offer it; and how to build continuous program improvement.

Maslow and Program Quality

Our research suggests that POS quality tends to follow a pyramid shape.[1] The pyramid suggests two things. First, most youth programs tend to score high marks for safety

Figure 1
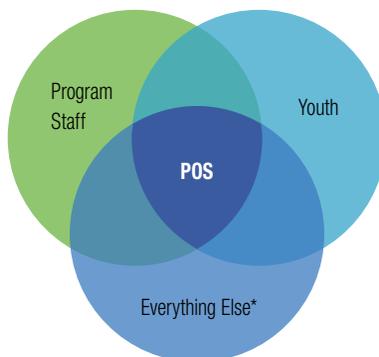
*(organizational leadership, physical space, materials, resources, staff culture, organizational policies, program culture, parents, community, public policy)
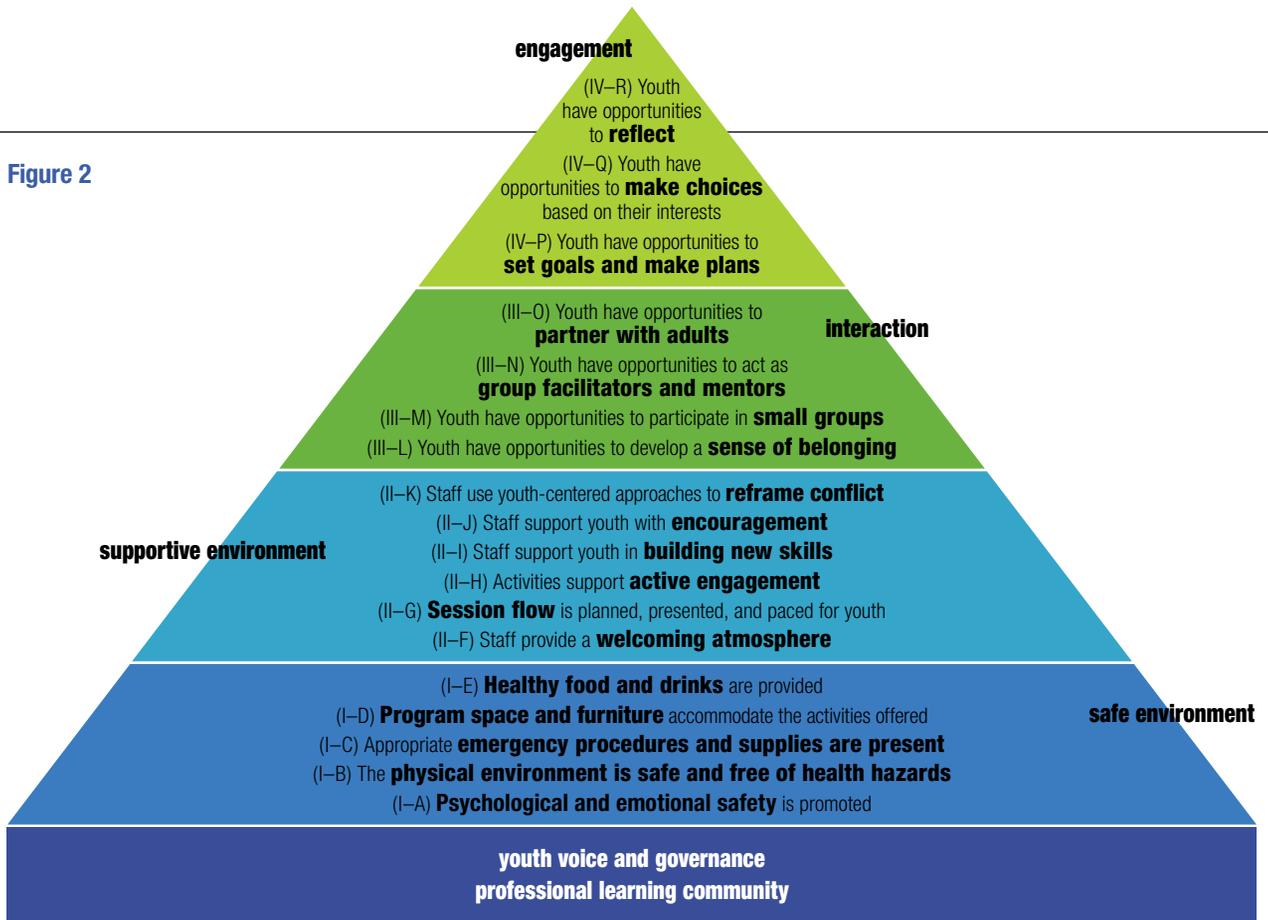
and achieve progressively lower scores as they move up the pyramid. Few programs score well in Engagement and Interaction. Second, *engagement* and *interaction* are the key indicators of high quality: the youth programs with high engagement and interaction scores are among the highest rated by youth (see the description of the subscales in fig. 2).

For those of you familiar with psychological studies, this pyramid may look familiar.

It is, in fact, quite similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.[2] In Maslow's theory, a person only focuses on meeting higher needs when basic needs like safety have already been met. The program quality pyramid works just like Maslow's; the basic need for a safe environment must be met for learning or positive experience to occur — you can't learn if you don't feel safe — but interaction and engagement are the keys to learning and participation. Safety and support are building blocks for the higher order indicators of interaction and engagement. To give young people a fantastic after-school experience, we must maintain safety, but set sights on engagement.

Building a youth organization centered on high-quality POS requires leading youth *and* staff to engagement. At the core of the pyramid concept is the assumption that people ultimately want to engage fully in their lives and experiences. In Maslow's terms, this process is called actualization, the idea that people ultimately want to meet their potential but that obstacles and unmet needs get in their way. The job of the youth program director is to embrace a vision for an interactive, engaging program environment

Figure 2

engagement

(IV–R) Youth have opportunities to **reflect**

(IV–Q) Youth have opportunities to **make choices** based on their interests

(IV–P) Youth have opportunities to **set goals and make plans**

interaction

(III–O) Youth have opportunities to **partner with adults**

(III–N) Youth have opportunities to act as **group facilitators and mentors**

(III–M) Youth have opportunities to participate in **small groups**

(III–L) Youth have opportunities to develop a **sense of belonging**

supportive environment

(II–K) Staff use youth-centered approaches to **reframe conflict**

(II–J) Staff support youth with **encouragement**

(II–I) Staff support youth in **building new skills**

(II–H) Activities support **active engagement**

(II–G) **Session flow** is planned, presented, and paced for youth

(II–F) Staff provide a **welcoming atmosphere**

safe environment

(I–E) **Healthy food and drinks** are provided

(I–D) **Program space and furniture** accommodate the activities offered

(I–C) Appropriate **emergency procedures and supplies are present**

(I–B) The **physical environment is safe and free of health hazards**

(I–A) **Psychological and emotional safety** is promoted

youth voice and governance
professional learning community

that will improve the professional experience for staff, which in turn will support better experiences for youth and greater staff retention in a field plagued by premature turnover.

Participatory Leadership

It doesn't quite work to mandate engagement. You can no more force staff to engage than you can force engagement from youth. You can't force your staff to embrace a particular youth development philosophy, no matter how great you think it is. Instead, you need to use *participatory leadership* tech-

niques to build conditions for your program staff to move in that direction.

Management guru Jim Collins calls this concept *legislative* leadership — an alternative to authoritative or *executive* leadership. He states, "Legislative leadership relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen."[3] Sharing important decision-making with staff, providing clear goals, support, and avenues for feedback, promoting collaboration — all

these things allow staff to engage and do their jobs better. Sound like good youth development? The basic tenets of good practices for working with youth are parallel to those of working with staff.

Proponents in the business sector suggest that participatory leadership is the way organizations must survive in an accelerated world. In *The World is Flat,* Thomas Friedman argues that the top-down hierarchal model is not optimal and that the secret to success in the 21st century is the idea of *horizontal value creation.*[4] Friedman argues that the new world brought about by technology, geopolitical changes, and globalization, "naturally fostered and demanded new business practices, which were less about command and control and more about connecting and collaborating horizontally."[5] Since engagement can't be "managed," and bottom-up change initiatives also often fail in youth organizations, building horizontal partnerships with youth and staff is all that makes sense. Directors must build environments in which it is likely for everyone to reach engagement.

Figure 3

What program staff need

| Subject area expertise | + | Facilitation skills | = | **Ability to facilitate engaging content** | + | Youth Input | = | **Engaging learning opportunities** |

How you decide what to offer

Hiring and Staff Development

As any director or manager knows, your professional relationship with a staff member begins at his or her interview. So you must focus on POS from the start. A new staff member should know that your program values interaction, engagement, and point-of-service quality.

> **Learning can happen during all parts of the day (including homework help/mentoring), but primarily occurs during structured activity time.**

In order for a program staff member to facilitate safe activities high in interaction and engagement, two types of competency are important: subject area expertise and facilitation skills. Subject area expertise is particularly important if your program serves older (middle- and high-school) youth. As figure 3 shows, staff ability to facilitate engaging content, coupled with youth input, leads to engaging learning opportunities.

When hiring program staff for an after-school program, subject area expertise and facilitation skills are key things to look for in candidates. Facilitation skills give staff members the ability to construct engaging learning environments and build productive and supportive relationships with youth. Subject area expertise can enrich any program experience for youth, but depth of knowledge also shows something about a person. The potential staff member with subject area expertise is more likely to be committed to creating engaging experiences for youth.

Once you have good staff, it's critical to offer them ongoing opportunities to grow and interact. And staff development is not just (or even primarily) about training opportunities. One clear message from our recent work validating the Youth PQA was that programs that maintain a regular staff meeting schedule tend to have higher quality than those that do not. Staff members who meet to talk and make decisions about program operations tend to offer better programs. As is the case with youth, setting up mechanisms for staff to interact and make decisions lead to staff engagement, which ultimately leads to youth engagement.

Your Program Schedule

Though there are some differences, the basic structural elements are the same for younger and older youth programs (see fig. 4). Opportunities to steer the program content and activities are key for older youth, but not as important for those who are younger. As young people enter adolescence and acquire greater abstract and logical thinking skills, they thrive when offered real, substantial opportunities to make decisions that matter. The highest-quality programs for older youth use the program itself as an opportunity for youth to make meaningful decisions.
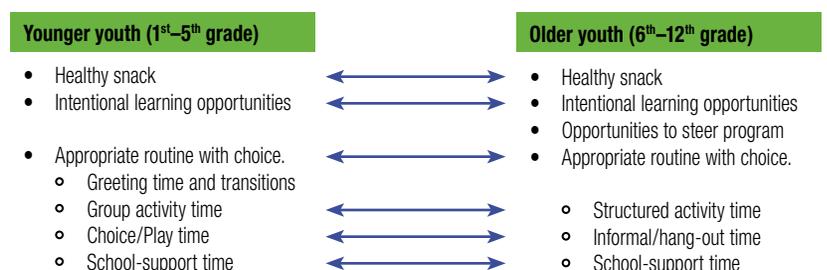
Special attention to greeting time and other transition times is important for younger youth, but not as critical for older ones.

Healthy snack is critical for younger and older youth alike—taking care of physical needs comes even before safety in Maslow's pyramid of needs.[6] Youth are growing! At the end of the school day, young people need nutrition for health and energy. Providing young people with a healthy snack can go a long way toward building a healthy, engaging environment. Intentional learning opportunities are critical no matter what your program focus. Successful after-school programs provide experiences that meet youth interests, give them chances to experience success, and push them to the learning edge. This does not mean after-school programs need to explicitly extend academic learning. Rather, after-school provides the opportunity for learning to occur in games and activities that young people find fun and challenging. Learning can happen during all parts of the day (including homework help/mentoring), but primarily occurs during structured activity time. High-quality programs offer engaging and interesting learning workshops and regularly get feedback from youth in what to offer, when to offer it, and how to improve program offerings.

It is clear from High/Scope Youth PQA research and several other studies[7] that involving youth in meaningful decision-making relating to operation of the program is a key aspect of high quality. Decision making becomes more important as youth become older and closer to making their own life direction decisions. The operation of the youth program itself offers an extraor-

Figure 4

Younger youth (1st–5th grade)		**Older youth (6th–12th grade)**
• Healthy snack	⟷	• Healthy snack
• Intentional learning opportunities	⟷	• Intentional learning opportunities
		• Opportunities to steer program
• Appropriate routine with choice.	⟷	• Appropriate routine with choice.
○ Greeting time and transitions		
○ Group activity time		
○ Choice/Play time	⟷	○ Structured activity time
		○ Informal/hang-out time
○ School-support time	⟷	○ School-support time

dinary opportunity for youth to make or help make substantial, meaningful decisions relating to daily routine, program content offerings, and field trips, for example. They can also participate in operational tasks, such as assessing program quality, hiring staff, and designing or altering physical program space. Asking youth for feedback is the first step — actually involving them in important organizational and programmatic decision making is the high bar of quality.

> **High-quality programs build choice into activities and program routine. Youth make decisions about how they want to spend their time.**

A key detail in figure 4 is that appropriate routine must include choice. Successful after-school programs provide a structure that allows youth to decide how they spend their time. Youth may exercise choice, for example, by signing up for workshops and deciding which activities to participate in. High-quality programs also build choice into activities and program routine. Some offer "choice time," others offer "clubs" that youth can sign up for or select from. Whether engaged in structured time, informal time, or school support time, youth in high-quality programs get to make decisions about how they spend their time as a regular part of the routine. When youth are regularly asked to make plans and choose how to spend time, they get better at mak-

After-school provides the opportunity for learning to occur in games and activities that young people find fun and challenging.

ing those decisions, and that experience ultimately has lifelong effects.

Figure 5 shows a sample program schedule for middle-school age youth. This schedule begins with informal time (when snack is served); then young people choose how to spend the remaining chunks of time. Academic support (homework help) is always available, as are intentional, structured learning opportunities.

Continuous Program Improvement

So, you've got a great staff and you're offering a great program for youth: how do you keep the momentum going? The first step is establishing shared standards of quality. For any improvements to stick, you need systems for monitoring, accountability, and ongoing improvement. Building these systems will improve quality not only for youth, but for staff.

Results-based accountability is good for everyone (despite the nail-biting and gut-tightening the terminology may evoke). Helping staff set clear, measurable goals for improvement and then acknowledging successes helps make job roles clear and staff engagement and success more likely. It's important to distinguish results-based accountability from compliance-based accountability. You don't want to demand

compliance with your vision — you want to help staff clearly see their role and path for improvement. A self-assessment methodology is best for avoiding defensiveness and for empowering your staff to be effective.[8] We have found that self-assessment, combined with outside assessment, can provide the strongest assessment-based improvement model.

Getting to Engagement

Building an engaging youth program is not easy, but it is possible. It starts with a focus on the point of service. It requires vision, participatory leadership, and strong, qualified staff. Add in a healthy dose of youth voice and you're on your way!

End Notes

[1] For more information about the Youth PQA and the pyramid of program quality, visit *youth.highscope.org* and click on the link for Youth Program Quality Assessment.

[2] Maslow originally published his hierarchy of needs in Maslow, A. H., "A theory of human motivation." *Psychological Review, 50,* 370–396. He then spent a distinguished career exploring and continuing to develop a psychology with this pyramid as a basis. The original article can be found online at *http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm*. For a quick, easy read, however, visit the Wikipedia entry at *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs*

[3] Collins, Jim. (2005). *Good to great and the social sectors: Why business thinking is not the answer* (p. 11). Boulder, CO: Collins.

[4] Friedman, Thomas L. (2005). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

[5] Ibid, 179.

[6] Maslow's hierarchy progresses as follows: physiological needs, safety needs, love/belonging needs, esteem needs, and at the top is actualization.

[7] For a review of research on the value of choice in setting for youth, see Denton, P. (2005). *Learning through academic choice.* Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children. 207–212.

[8] For more information about the Self-Assessment Method, visit *youth.highscope.org* and click on the link for Youth Program Quality Assessment. ▪

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Figure 5: Sample Program Schedule (middle-school building after-school program)

	Media Center	Room A	Room B	Gym
3:00–3:30	Snack & hang-out	—	—	—
3:30–4:15	Homework Help	Step/Dance	Photo workshop	Basketball (informal)
4:15–5:00	Homework Help	—	Journalism workshop	Basketball workshop
5:00–6:00	Homework Help	Young engineers (building club)	Song writing	World Games