Georgia Afterschool & Youth Development Toolbox

A Unified Vision to Serve Georgia's Youth

Georgia Afterschool & Youth Development Initiative
A collaboration between GSAN & GUIDE, Inc.

Quality Element 3: Environment and Climate

Creating Inspiring Environments

The physical and social environment influences the behavior of children and youth in afterschool programs.

All of us, including young people, respond differently across different settings. The environment is always influencing us, working for us or against us to some degree. Behavior is often attributed to personality, not environment, but when afterschool programs tweak their environments, there are often significant changes in young people's behavior.

What is an Environment?

An environment includes all the external conditions and factors potentially capable of influencing both individuals and the group as a whole. This includes:

How time is structured and how this structure is communicated	Roles given to individuals in the group	Expectations of acceptable behaviors	The physical space a group is in	Components of the space including furniture, set up, materials, light, sounds and smells

The Power of the Environment

Environments communicate values. If an afterschool program values youth, this can be seen in their environment. By extending the "Broken Window Theory" (Kelling & Wilson, 1982) to afterschool programs, we get the picture that when programs don't pay attention to their environment, it will be reflected in the behaviors they see in their programs. For example, if materials are all worn, outdated and in a state of disrepair, it is likely that youth in the program may not treat the materials with the same respect as they would if the materials were newer and in better condition.

Elements of an Inspiring Environment

Not every program can engage every aspect of an inspiring environment, but all programs can find a few ways to tweak their environment for greater youth outcomes. Inspiring afterschool environments include:

INTENTIONAL DESIGN
- Each room offers multiple settings or arrangements from which youth select
- Multiple enrichment activities are available to youth
- The space was created thoughtfully – for example, there isn't a loud activity next to the space where youth would be working on homework

VARIETY OF SETTINGS AND GROUP SIZES
- Aim for three distinct spaces in every room
- Options include individual and small groups at tables and/or on the floor (beanbags, pillows, rugs, couch, reading nook)
- Various seating arrangements and various settings to suit different needs and abilities
- When possible, space does not resemble a classroom

MATERIALS
- Age appropriate materials are readily available
- Organized and labeled
- Use rolling carts, rolling suitcases or storage bins if you do not have permanent shelves

YOUTH VOICE
- Youth self-select the space to work in
- Youth see themselves represented in the environment
- Youth work, photos, and expectations are posted
- Youth are a part of the design and decoration of the environment

BRING THE OUTSIDE IN
- Use of natural lighting, plants, tree stumps
- Consider having a fish tank or other living creatures in the space
- Utilize outdoor projects like nature scavenger hunts to create nature art

MEANINGFUL WALLS
- Quotes on the wall – refer to them, make them a motto, use them, memorize them, let them inspire
- Posters with poems, images or activities that reinforce values, themes or academic tie-ins
- Youth art, writings or other projects showcased
- Schedule of Activities clearly posted

The 50 State Afterschool Network

RENEW, REUSE, AND REVISE!

Don't let things get stale or stagnant. Change the environment frequently and involve young people in making those changes.