



Strengthening Young People's Life Skills

Practical Guidance and Resources for Intermediaries Supporting Out-of-School-Time Programs— Key Takeaways

JENNIFER T. LESCHITZ, ALICE HUGUET, CATHERINE H. AUGUSTINE,
KATIE TOSH, AND LAURA S. HAMILTON

Out-of-school-time (OST) programs play a critical role in positive youth development, and the work of intermediaries is vital in strengthening these programs. OST programs can help young people develop such life skills as self-management, setting goals, working in teams, and problem-solving.¹ Young people who have well-developed life skills tend to do better in school, have better health and relationships, and enjoy greater overall well-being than those who do not.²

The guide, *Strengthening Young People's Life Skills: Practical Guidance and Resources for Intermediaries Supporting Out-of-School-Time Programs*, underscores the important and multifaceted role that intermediaries can play in helping OST providers effectively foster life skills in the young people they serve. This summary of key takeaways from the guide can help you, as *intermediaries* (the organizations that coordinate and support OST programs), think about how to support life skills work among providers in your network. The full guide is available at www.rand.org/t/TLA4416-1.

We derived the lessons in the guide from our study of more than 100 afterschool programs that participated in The Wallace Foundation's Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) across six communities: Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. PSELI explored whether and how young people benefit when schools and OST programs partner to improve and coordinate life skills programming,

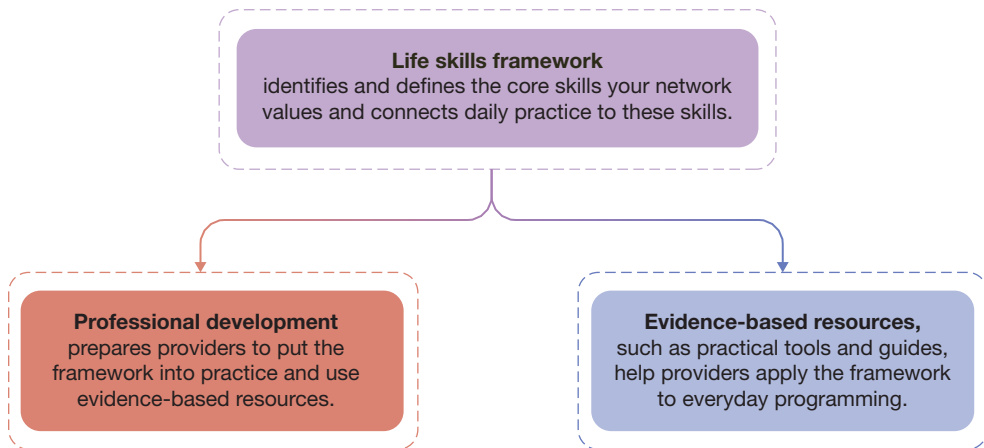
as well as what it takes to do this work. A companion resource with five editable planning templates is available at www.rand.org/t/TLA4416-1.

We organized the guide and key takeaways around three common ways that you can help OST providers build young people’s life skills:

- **Establish a life skills framework** to guide programming and practice.
- **Connect providers to evidence-based resources** that support effective skill development.
- **Offer opportunities for professional development (PD)** to build staff capacity and confidence.

As Figure 1 shows, these three supports work together: The framework provides the foundation, guiding both PD and the selection of evidence-based resources; PD prepares OST providers to apply the framework in their practice; and evidence-based resources, such as practical tools and guides, support this application in everyday programming.

FIGURE 1
Three Interconnected Supports to Bring Life Skills into OST Programming



Establish a Life Skills Framework

A clear, shared framework can help coordinate life skills efforts across your network. A life skills framework identifies and defines your network's priority life skills, providing an overarching vision or purpose for the work. It can give your network a common language, help align daily practice with long-term goals, and support more-focused training and measurement. The following points can help guide your thinking about establishing a life skills framework, involving stakeholders in the process, and ensuring the framework's applicability to various types of programs (for more details, see Chapter 2 of the guide):

- **Engage key stakeholders:** Consider involving a variety of voices (providers, young people, schools, community leaders) to help shape the work while carefully considering the group's size, purpose, and time commitment. Gathering input at key points can help refine the framework so it reflects local priorities and gains community support.
- **Explore existing frameworks:** You might explore widely used life skills frameworks (including those designed for schools) to help you determine which skills you want to focus on (e.g., critical thinking, self-regulation, leadership) and identify models that may be relevant or adaptable to your context. You can find examples of life skills–relevant frameworks in Appendix A of the guide.
- **Choose an approach that fits your conditions:** Reflect on whether available frameworks fit your community's needs and whether you and your stakeholders can dedicate the time and resources required to develop a framework. While creating your own framework can build strong ownership, adapting an existing model may be a more feasible option.
- **Develop supporting materials and practical tools:** User-friendly templates, guides, and training can help providers intentionally connect priority life skills to program activities (e.g., offering opportunities for young people to practice leadership during a music activity). This may include refocusing data collection efforts based on the framework or providing tools or lesson plans that help OST providers see how the framework connects with their existing priorities.
- **Plan your framework launch:** Consider hosting a convening or summit to introduce the framework, share examples of how it works in different types of programs, and inspire providers to try integrating it into their programs.

Connect OST Providers to Evidence-Based Resources

Your framework can come to life through the resources you share and the practices you spotlight. As intermediaries, you can help bridge the gap between vision and practice by distributing evidence-based resources and highlighting innovative provider practices. Research recommends dedicated time for skill development and

opportunities for youth to practice. Providers in our study used three approaches to build life skills: climate-building routines, connecting life skills content to program activities, and direct instruction. All three approaches encourage skill building and practice in different ways. Here are some ways to support providers in using each of these approaches (for more details, see Chapter 3 of the guide):

- **Help providers put climate-building routines into action:** Climate-building routines—such as welcoming activities, sharing circles, and closures—are simple, consistent practices that can help to create positive environments and strengthen connections. You can support providers in using these routines by sharing examples and clear, written guidance that outlines the purpose and timing of each routine, as well as the specific life skill it targets. For some examples, see Appendix B of the guide.
- **Show providers how life skills connect to program activities:** Providers can make explicit connections to life skills (e.g., discussing conflict resolution strategies) and use instructional strategies to build life skills (e.g., offering opportunities for choice or goal setting). Consider sharing activity planning templates and written guidance to help providers *intentionally* connect life skills to their regular program activities. For planning tool options and strategies, see Appendix B of the guide.
- **Offer direct instruction resources designed for the OST setting:** Delivering direct instruction on life skills takes dedicated program time. Consider sharing life skills curricula and lessons designed for OST programs, along with guidance on adapting them as needed. See examples of OST life skills curricula and a provider settings worksheet in Appendix A of the guide.
- **Share tools to measure progress:** Consider sharing tools that measure both life skills and program practices. Data from such measures can help providers see their progress, identify PD needs, and refine their approaches (e.g., use of routines or strategies to encourage skill practice). Selecting tools to share, along with identifying data needs, can be challenging; find guidance on assessment and data planning, as well as measurement options, in Appendix A of the guide.

Offer Opportunities for Professional Development

Professional learning is key to helping providers put frameworks and resources into practice. Your PD offerings can be designed as a year-long arc that starts with shared foundations, moves into hands-on practice, and may also cover how to use data for continuous program improvement. For a PD plan example, see Appendix B of the guide. The following options can help you develop your own PD plan (for more details, see Chapter 4 of the guide):

- **Create a purposeful PD sequence:** A year-long PD calendar with sequenced, role-specific learning opportunities can help OST staff build skills progressively

and support coherent professional growth throughout the year. It can be helpful to start with foundational concepts, such as introducing your life skills framework, and progress to targeted skills, adult life skills, program practices and strategies, curricula (if applicable), and data use.

- **Train on different approaches to building life skills:** Providers in our study valued trainings that included modeling and opportunities for hands-on practice of the routines and strategies they would use with young people. After introducing a focal skill or strategy, it may also help to allow time during the training for staff planning and review of materials or tools related to the training topics. You might also consider training providers on how to use data for continuous improvement.
- **Attend to adults' life skills development, as well as that of young people:** PD that helps staff strengthen their own intra- and interpersonal skills can benefit both adults and young people. Creating opportunities for adults to reflect on their own growth can deepen their understanding and practice. This might include peer learning opportunities, simple breathing exercises at the start of meetings, weekly check-ins about successes and challenges, and coaching support.
- **Offer PD in various formats:** Providing PD through varied approaches (workshops, micro-trainings, virtual sessions, learning communities) can help accommodate different staff schedules and individual learning styles. Offering varied formats can help make provider attendance more feasible and less time-intensive for facilitators.
- **Differentiate training by staff role and experience level:** Tailoring training for different staff roles (e.g., directors, managers, instructors) and experience levels (e.g., new versus seasoned staff) can help ensure relevance—for example, by using onboarding materials for newcomers and offering advanced sessions for experienced providers.
- **Ensure strong facilitation:** Working with internal staff or coaches, technical assistance providers, or local partners who understand life skills content and different OST contexts can strengthen your PD. You might also consider a train-the-trainer model, in which one team member attends a training and then shares key learning with colleagues. Pairing this model with mentoring or observation can support quality and consistency.

Anticipate Barriers to Implementation

Each chapter in the guide describes barriers to carrying out life skills development work and offers practical suggestions for addressing them. While the strategies are not exhaustive, they may help you think of other ideas for navigating your own challenges. This section highlights some issues that emerged across framework development, sharing evidence-based resources, and PD planning—along with ways to address them.

- **Navigate limited capacity:** Many intermediaries are supporting life skills work while navigating limited time, staffing, and funding. Rather than building your life skills supports from scratch, you might adapt existing materials and right-size your efforts to fit your capacity. For example, when establishing a framework, consider adapting existing models and gathering stakeholder input to refine it. When putting together a set of evidence-based resources, no-cost tools that work as-is or with minor modifications can be especially helpful (see Appendix A of the guide for featured resources). If you are planning PD, reusable virtual training content (e.g., recorded videos) may be more sustainable than delivering the same material in person multiple times.
- **Encourage stakeholder and staff engagement:** Everyone involved in this work is balancing multiple priorities, which can make sustained engagement challenging. Providers come with different levels of capacity, interest, and availability for framework development, resource adoption, and PD. Highlighting what participants will gain—such as practical tools, peer learning opportunities, or resources they can use right away—can help make the value clear and encourage participation. When inviting stakeholders and staff into such processes as framework development, it helps to be clear about what their role involves and the time commitment. Pairing resources with some guidance on their practical use can also make them easier to adopt. For PD, compensating staff for training time demonstrates that you value their participation. When payment is not possible, other forms of recognition, such as certificates of completion, can show appreciation as well.
- **Make supports usable for various types of programs:** Programs in your network likely vary in their goals and instructional styles. Supports that are flexible and accessible tend to work better across program types. For instance, resources that give providers options in terms of time needed, skill focus, age group, and format (e.g., games, videos, projects) can fit more contexts. Similarly, distributing resources through multiple channels, such as email, training sessions, professional learning communities, or coaching can help reach providers in ways that work best for them. Offering PD in different formats—in person, recorded, or self-paced—also allows staff to participate in ways that work with their schedules.
- **Balance network-wide consistency while respecting different approaches:** You likely work with programs that have different practices and priorities already in place. Building consistency without disrupting what is working can be challenging. Developing a shared language around life skills and offering flexible tools that complement providers' existing work can help. Showing providers how your framework connects to their existing priorities, offering adaptable templates and examples, and including a mix of foundational and tailored PD can also support this balance.

- **Work with staff schedules and turnover in OST programs:** Ongoing turnover and coordinating varied schedules across organizations are common realities in the OST setting. When possible, think about developing self-paced onboarding materials for new staff, offering asynchronous training formats that work with different schedules, and integrating PD into existing routines (e.g., a brief 15-minute training during a provider’s standing meetings).

Supporting OST programs in building young people’s life skills is important and complex. These takeaways draw on lessons from six intermediaries who worked to establish life skills frameworks, connected providers to evidence-based resources, and provided PD. These intermediaries also navigated challenges common to OST settings: limited capacity, different program approaches, and varying schedules. Whether you are just beginning to think about a framework or looking to strengthen existing supports, we hope the strategies highlighted here prove useful. You can revisit and adapt them as your network’s needs evolve.

NOTES

¹ Noelle Hurd and Nancy Deutsch, “SEL-Focused After-School Programs,” *Future of Children*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 2017.

² Shereen El Mallah, “Toward Equity-Oriented Assessment of Social and Emotional Learning: Examining Equivalence of Concepts and Measures,” *Urban Education*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 2022.

ABOUT THESE KEY TAKEAWAYS

This summary of the key takeaways from the guide *Strengthening Young People's Life Skills: Practical Guidance and Resources for Intermediaries Supporting Out-of-School-Time Programs* can help intermediaries—organizations that support out-of-school-time (OST) providers—think about how to strengthen young people's life skills through OST programming. The full guide and its companion resource with five editable planning templates are available at www.rand.org/t/TLA4416-1.

RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure

RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure, a division of RAND that aims to improve educational opportunity, economic prosperity, and civic life for all, conducted this study in its Education and Employment Program. For more information, visit www.rand.org/eei or email EEI@rand.org.

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