



Introduction to the Tool Kit

After school and youth programs have a tremendous potential to help young people from all backgrounds and communities thrive, and to support them in developing the skills they need to grow and succeed in the diverse society that is our reality today. Along with providing learning opportunities, meaningful relationships and safe havens, programs have the power to create dynamic environments where diverse participants are encouraged to be themselves and to understand each other across differences. They can provide valuable and much-needed services to children and youth in neighborhoods with limited resources. And they have the ability to work with young people toward creating the conditions for full participation of all communities in our globally interconnected world.

Living up to this potential is an exciting, critical, and challenging task. For most programs, it involves individual learning by staff members, collective dialogue, program assessment, and some measure of change. California Tomorrow has developed the enclosed set of “tools,” or structured activities, to support providers in expanding their diversity and equity efforts and in finding ways to work ever more effectively with the children, youth, families and communities they serve.

The Importance of Equity and Diversity to After School and Youth Programs

These tools are based on the results of California Tomorrow’s three-year national study of equity and diversity in after school and youth programming. In this study, which we completed in 2003, we learned that there is enormous and increasing ethnic, economic, and linguistic diversity in program enrollments across the country. We also developed a deep understanding of how differences in young people’s backgrounds and experiences — their cultures, ethnic and racial identities, genders, class backgrounds, learning styles, sexual orientations, abilities or disabilities, family circumstances, and community contexts — affect what they need from the after school services we provide.

Our research suggests that there is great interest and concern for creating inclusive and equitable programs that are accessible to a wide range of participants and allow all children and youth to thrive. At the same time, many providers face important challenges and questions: How can they fully include and support children and families of many different backgrounds? How can they create safe spaces where differences lead to dialogue rather than tension, and where children learn to work with others in ways appropriate to our global society? What can programs do to help marginalized youth develop strong academic skills they may not otherwise be developing in school? How can they help young people maintain connections with their families and communities, and develop self-confidence, resilience, and leadership? How can they support youth in gaining the knowledge and ability they need to understand and address diversity-related challenges? And what can be done in the after school hours to help empower young people to stand up for what they believe, and to improve the neighborhoods and society in which they live?

As we looked at promising practices around the country, we found that five things really make a difference:

1. **Inclusive and culturally responsive programming.** Because children’s family and community backgrounds are core to who they are, how they learn, and what they may need from after school activities, successful programs are ones which are supportive, accessible, and responsive to the different aspects of their lives and identities. Such programs have staff who are sensitive to participants’ backgrounds; materials which reflect diverse cultures, languages and experiences; and ties to young people’s family and community resources. In addition, these programs recognize and respect diverse customs and traditions and do not tolerate bias or discrimination.
2. **Development of strong identities.** Strong, thriving youth need a sense of belonging in the world and a belief in their own competency. An important part of this is having a strong sense of self, which must often be forged in the face of pressures to fit unfamiliar norms of culture, class, gender, physical ability or sexual orientation. Programs can help by actively supporting the development of young people’s social and cultural identities, and by building their connections to family and community experience, history, heritage, and resources. In addition to providing an inclusive environment, this can be done through: direct cultural activities or instruction; home language development; providing community role models; creating space to discuss identity-related pressures; helping youth identify and challenge stereotypes; and supporting young people to feel fully comfortable in their home cultures and the dominant culture when the two differ.

3. Intergroup experiences and active development of cross cultural understanding.

Given our society's rich and increasing diversity, young people deeply benefit from developing a range of skills and attitudes related to cross cultural awareness and intergroup interaction. These skills and attitudes include: respect and appreciation for others, self awareness, comfort with differences, working with multiple perspectives, speaking two or more languages, conflict resolution, and knowing how to be an ally.

4. Recognizing and challenging inequities. Despite a history in the United States of movements toward greater inclusion, participation, and open access, educational and social disparities between racial, ethnic, economic, gender, and other groups persist. It can be extremely powerful when programs work toward alleviating such disparities by: targeting their own resources to those most in need; creating an internal climate that equally values all cultures and identities; reducing academic gaps; offering educational support that is culturally and linguistically appropriate and which encourages non-stereotypical skill development and career paths; and supporting young people in addressing community and social problems.

5. Healing the wounds of social distress, exclusion and discrimination. Many young people come to youth programs battered by living in a political, economic and social climate that undermines and devalues them. In addition to building strong identities and supporting challenge to inequities, programs can support participants in this context by recognizing and helping to heal the emotional wounds they carry. Some of the ways this can be done include: creating safe spaces to talk about difficult social realities; providing culturally appropriate counseling services and building supportive relationships; offering creative outlets to express what young people are feeling; incorporating cultural and/or spiritual healing elements; and building collective skills for community change.

Defining Equity and Diversity

Diversity—Diversity refers to the wide range of dimensions around which people in our society differ. These dimensions include race, culture, language, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability/disability.

Honoring diversity in our programs means seeing differences as opportunities, not as problems. It involves understanding, respecting and incorporating the wide range of experiences young people bring to their after school activities. And it means creating inclusive environments where people of all backgrounds feel welcome and valued.

Equity—Equity means each person or group is treated fairly and has equal access to economic, social, and educational opportunity. For members of groups that have been excluded from resources, equity may involve providing greater resources to compensate for past exclusion and discrimination.

In the after school and youth development arenas, providing equitable access means young people and their families can fully participate in programs without facing physical, financial, emotional, cultural or other barriers. Equity also involves offering programming which:

- Includes and reflects the communities served
- Seeks to reduce social and academic disparities between groups
- Challenges stereotypes and inequities
- Draws upon the input and decision-making of participants and their families and communities

What you can do

The Addressing Equity and Diversity Tool Kit has been designed to help programs expand their equity and diversity efforts. California Tomorrow's experience suggests that this involves: personal learning and staff development on equity and diversity issues; enhancing programming goals, strategies and activities related to equity and diversity; and looking at ways to more deeply align the organization's climate and culture with its equity and diversity goals.

The enclosed tools can assist program directors and staff in addressing all these areas by:

- Exploring their own experiences and sharing these with each other;
- Collectively examining their programs and organizations;
- Setting goals for further learning and program development; and
- Planning strategically for program improvement.

As you begin your work with the Tool Kit, we suggest clarifying what you hope to accomplish and setting out a basic timeline. Is the goal to raise people's level of awareness about equity and diversity dynamics? To evaluate your current programming? To generate new ideas? To address known concerns or problems? This is also a time to clarify the process your team will use, and to create a climate of safety for discussing issues which may be challenging and emotionally charged. For maximum benefit, we suggest using the tools in the order in which they are listed below. We also encourage you to personalize your reflection and assessment efforts to fit your own program's needs, goals and circumstances.

Tools for Programs

Starting the process: Pathways to Opening Dialogue A set of warm-up activities and sample ground rules designed to open staff conversation about the concepts of equity and diversity in a safe and comfortable way.

Self Reflection: Who Are We In This Work? A series of personal reflection questions and a process for group sharing and dialogue about staff members' own experiences and hopes related to equity and diversity.

Community Mapping and Reflection An interactive activity staff members can use to get a better picture of participants' day-to-day environments and the equity and diversity dynamics common in these young people's lives.

Who Are We Serving? Who Are We Not Serving? A guided worksheet for collecting and comparing demographic information about program participants, neighborhood populations, and program staff. This tool can help providers focus their programming priorities, identify neighborhood groups they may not be reaching, and assess the mix of program staff in relation to youth.

Listen to the Youth A set of activities and questions staff members can use to learn directly from youth about their experiences, communities, perspectives and needs.

New Eyes on Your Program An observation guide to help staff take a detailed look at the program environment — space, materials, and interactions — through an equity and diversity lens.

Program Assessment on Equity and Diversity A checklist and set of indicators designed to help staff members comprehensively assess the program's diversity and equity strengths, challenges and needs in the areas of: vision, staff, training, curriculum, environment, family and community connections, outreach, governance, organizational culture, and evaluation.

Taking Note: Can We Talk About This? A second, complementary assessment focusing on the strengths and challenges program staff have in openly discussing topics related to equity and diversity. This tool also offers some suggestions for enhancing a program's capacity to engage issues which may be unfamiliar or otherwise challenging.

Creating Your Action Plan A planning worksheet that draws together lessons learned from other tools in the Tool Kit and helps staff identify priority issues and action steps for personal and program development.

Acknowledgements

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