



Calgary AfterSchool 2019–2025 strategic plan

In partnership with



Calgary AfterSchool

2019-2025 strategic plan

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Introduction

Calgary AfterSchool (CAS) was launched in 2009 to provide no cost after-school programming for children and youth. Coordinated by Calgary Neighbourhoods, CAS provides a framework for programming opportunities for school-aged children and youth during the “critical hours” between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays. At this point in the life of the initiative, a review of the CAS Framework is warranted.

CAS provides a framework for programming opportunities for school-aged children and youth during the “critical hours” between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays.

At inception, CAS identified its mission and several goals as it strives to address an identified gap in after-school programming. Aside from the outward facing program delivery elements, CAS also intended to serve as a means to develop a community of like-minded service providers who, collectively, would provide professional development opportunities, mentoring, networking as well as produce and share research. Evaluation and assessment tools were also to be developed.

Children benefit most from a range of high quality programs that include recreation, play, arts, civic engagement and learning.

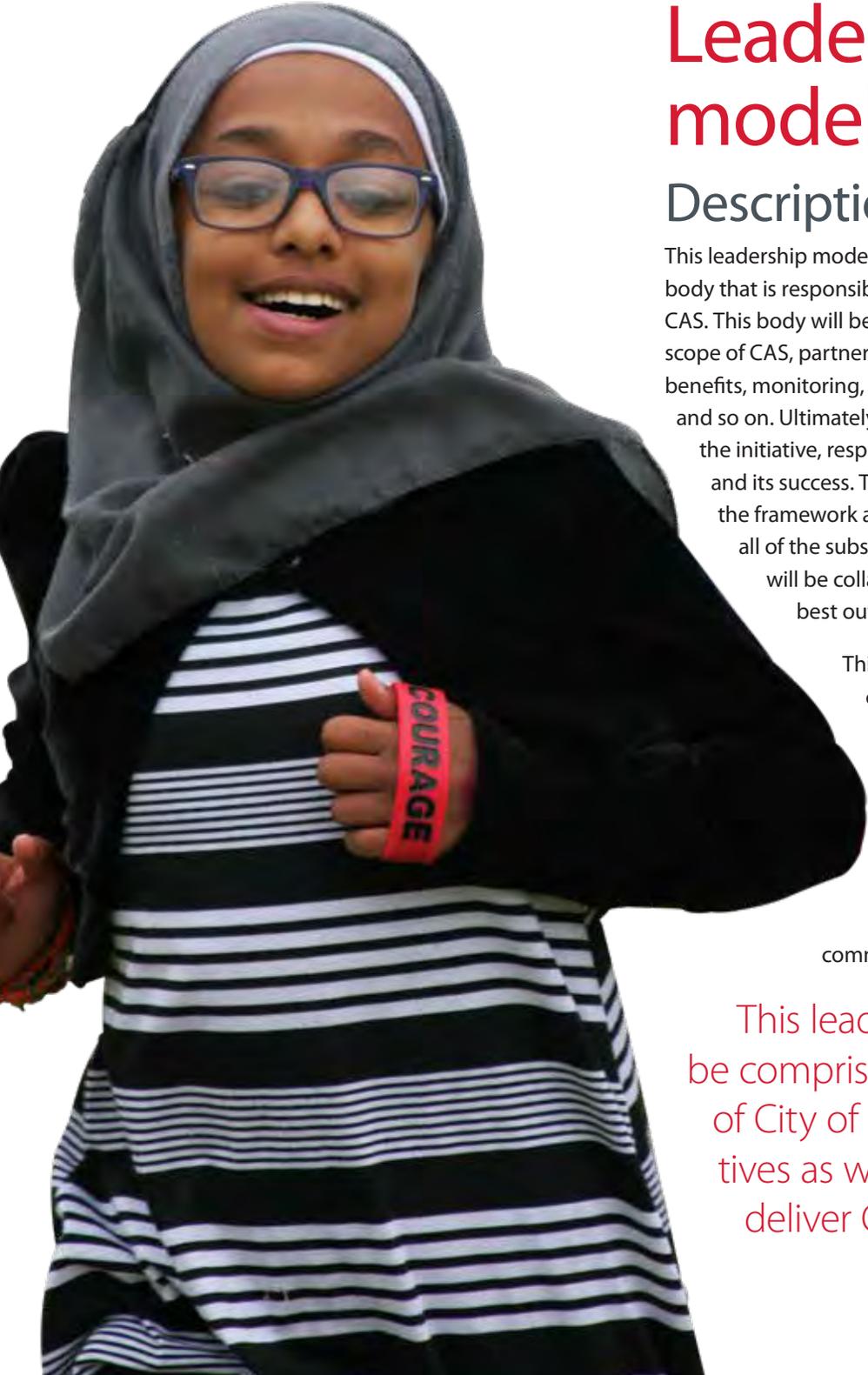
Through an examination of initiation documents, primary research conducted, as well as an environmental scan, a refreshed leadership model was discussed. Key CAS personnel were consulted as were several agencies directly delivering CAS programs. Based on this research (presented under a separate cover entitled “Current State”) and feedback from the Advisory Committee, a refreshed leadership model has been identified.

This Strategic Plan presents a renewed **Leadership Model** that describes how the program will function and how decisions will be made. It describes the role of The City and CAS agencies in this new framework and presents a future in which the collective knowledge and expertise of the parties will be leveraged to the benefit of Calgary’s children and youth.

This Strategic Plan presents a renewed Leadership Model that describes how the program will function and how decisions will be made.

Also presented is a section on **Partnership Principles**. This principle-based approach identifies and describes principles that CAS agencies would adhere to as they relate to programming, quality and engagement within the initiative. Principles for others in the “system” but not directly part of CAS are identified, as are considerations related to the CAS brand. Discussion related to the **CAS Program Spectrum** is included as well. The current spectrum of programming is a strength of CAS and is reinforced. Finally, a discussion of **Retention Strategies** is presented that relates to retaining children and youth in CAS programs.





Leadership model

Description

This leadership model refers to the decision-making body that is responsible for the overall direction of CAS. This body will be entrusted with determining the scope of CAS, partnership opportunities, membership, benefits, monitoring, evaluation, funding, promotion and so on. Ultimately, this group will be at the helm of the initiative, responsible for its mission and vision and its success. This group will consider the scope of the framework and will make decisions related to all of the subsequent elements. Decision-making will be collaborative with consideration to the best outcomes for CAS.

This leadership body will be comprised of a combination of City of Calgary representatives as well as agencies who deliver CAS programming. While the final determination of overall size is required, it's anticipated the total body could be comprised of up to 10 representatives who commit to a two-year term.

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After-school programs help to close the achievement gap that exists between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers.

Back Bone Support

While the leadership group is responsible for overall decision-making and guidance, to be truly effective there needs to be dedicated staff resources to support the group and its decisions.

A staff position needs to be created which works for the leadership body. This person's workplan originates from the leadership group and the decisions they make. This staff position, tentatively entitled CAS Coordinator, will assume the responsibility of supporting the leadership's meeting and administrative requirements (e.g. logistics, agenda and minute production). The CAS Coordinator will ensure all initiatives and tactics are implemented — this work may be completed through CAS committees. It is expected the CAS Coordinator will be subject to direction from the leadership group. The Coordinator, however, is accountable to The City structure and is employed by The City as it is resourced internally.

Structures & Committees

While the leadership group sets the direction and the Coordinator works on implementation, there is a great resource available — all other CAS agencies. Some agencies will sit on the leadership group while all others will be part of the membership group. All agencies that adhere to the partnership principles (presented elsewhere) are considered members and will serve as part of the membership group. Member agencies serve as the resource for any committee work that needs to be done as the result of decisions made at the leadership group. A call of interest will be "tendered" to all agencies.

The CAS Coordinator (see Back Bone Support section) will serve as a staff resource for any committee to help ensure tasks are completed. While the specific committee structure will be determined by the leadership group, it's anticipated there may be committees formed to deal with the deliverables of the workplan.

Aside from the committee work, the entire membership will meet regularly to share learnings, bring member feedback to the leadership group, network and build relationships. Also during these member plenaries, updates on CAS Framework initiatives will be provided. Through this forum, discussion of significant issues can occur including the identification of gaps and opportunities. These member meetings will serve as a direct means of communications from the leadership table to members and vice versa. The membership will serve as a sounding board for the leadership group as initiatives and issues are addressed.

While the leadership group sets the direction and the Coordinator works on implementation, there is a great resource available — all other CAS agencies.

As this new model is implemented, there may be some consideration given to convening a conference beyond the CAS members to examine the entire community of agencies providing programming for children and youth, and those delivering social emotional learning. This can help share learnings and research, and can raise the profile of CAS itself.

Finances/Funding

Currently, City representatives on the leadership group serve as part of their assigned duties/workplan. Agency representatives on the leadership group and all members manage their in-kind support (professional time) as they do currently — this time is an expectation of all CAS members.

Funding associated with the direct programming as provided to agencies is similar to the current situation.

From an overall framework perspective, the leadership group may examine the potential for broader CAS funding from other entities that is not targeted towards a particular program but more broadly aimed at achieving the overarching goals as outlined by CAS.

Implications

With this blended leadership model, there are implications for both the member agencies as well as for The City of Calgary. There are some benefits and challenges associated with this model as well.

Implications for The City of Calgary

As is currently the case, CAS is not a funding source and each agency is required to secure program funding independent from the framework.

The City will hold a portion of the membership on the leadership group. However, with all the decisions coming from the leadership group, The City will not make decisions without consultation from the leadership group. The City maintains significant influence while fostering increased ownership and accountability from member agencies. This is critical to seeing this initiative succeed.

Implications for CAS Agencies

There is an expectation all CAS agencies will contribute towards the success of CAS. This new leadership model will require a commitment from the member agencies to participate in the membership group and the leadership group. For some agencies, there may be a greater demand on staff time serving in the membership group and working on committees.

The agencies will serve a more important role to the strength and success of CAS than the current role. This heightened role will serve to enrich the framework and bring greater commitment and benefit to all.

Anticipated Benefits

More purposeful engagement from agencies will help to address and improve some of the ongoing challenges experienced by CAS — including effective assessment and evaluation, communication challenges, engaged and invested members, professional development of members, gathering and sharing research, and facility access.

The perspectives and expertise of each agency will be more fully leveraged to the benefit of the entire framework. This will help elevate both the framework as well as the engagement of the agencies. The broader community governance model expands the reach and capacity of CAS as well.

The CAS Coordinator will help ensure sustained efforts are applied to challenges and tasks. This, in turn, will help maintain momentum within the leadership and membership.

The renewed commitment by agencies and the directed focus of the Coordinator can help ensure progress is made.

Clarity can be established around the roles and responsibilities of each CAS agency. This clarity will be beneficial to the individuals themselves and can aid with accountability of efforts. The shared leadership, for example, provides a clear role for the agencies in decision-making.

The involvement of The City also ensures organizational memory will be preserved as the Coordinator gathers experience and understanding.

Other benefits will include the following:

- Improved planning and collaboration with school boards becomes possible.
- CAS members have more governance responsibility and legitimacy.
- Improved and expanded measurement tools will better demonstrate impact and tell the CAS story.
- The brand of CAS will have more meaning — particularly for partners and potential partners.
- The profile of out-of-school issues and social emotional learning will be enhanced.

There is an expectation
all CAS agencies will
contribute towards the
success of CAS.

There is an increasing body of knowledge that links positive development with quality child and youth programs during the middle childhood and adolescent years.





Anticipated Challenges

There are challenges with any form of leadership. With this blended leadership model, most agencies are expected to contribute (through time) more than they currently do. While the participation is more meaningful for many than is currently the situation, the new model holds agencies to a greater account for their time and participation than is the case currently (for many).

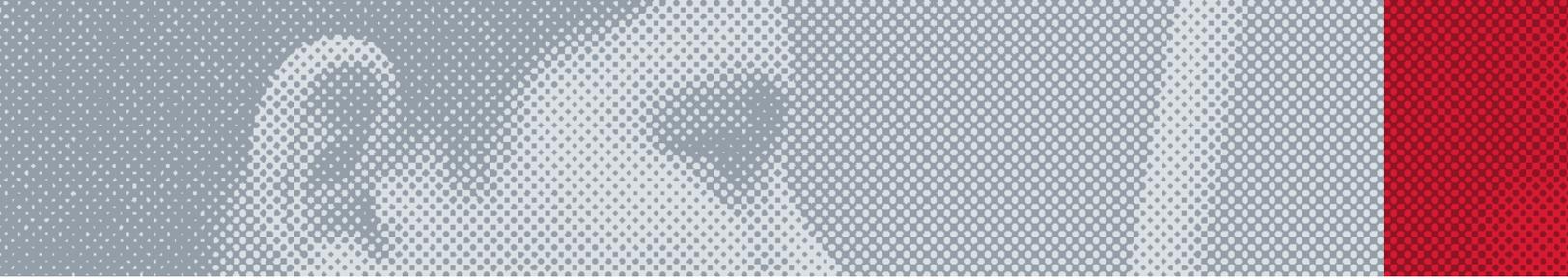
With the designation of the Coordinator, some City staff may see CAS responsibilities shift to the Coordinator position and a reorganization of workplans may be required.

Time will be needed by the leadership group to get “acclimatized.” The leadership group is tasked with addressing the big issues and ensuring the CAS Framework achieves high levels of success. Introducing a new leadership structure will take some time to become effectively functional.

Identifying and securing additional funding — to cover the backbone costs — will be challenging. Funding agencies are continually considering and evaluating requests and opportunities. To secure funding, it’s vital to present a compelling case that aligns with the funders’ interests.

Considering a change from after-school to out-of-school presents its own risks. The leadership group will need to carefully consider what this means. While there have been many calls for this shift, moving away from the framework’s original focal point is significant.

After-school programs provide safe, caring and healthy environments that inspire, challenge and support children to succeed.



Key CAS Issues/ Focal Areas

While the leadership group will set its own agenda and identify topics or areas of focus, there are several key issues that need to be addressed early on.

New Leadership Model

This new leadership model needs to be presented to major CAS stakeholders and partners. The model and its ramifications must be explained and understood by all, along with how the framework will be different. This modified approach requires endorsement by the agencies. Additionally, some discussion about goals and issues to be addressed by the leadership group should occur. Ultimately, the leadership group will set their agenda. The roles and responsibilities of the CAS members need to be articulated and endorsed by the agencies. (Refer to the “Refreshed CAS Program Spectrum and Optimal Program Alignment” section.)

Programming

CAS remains primarily focused on supporting safe and healthy activities in after-school programming that apply the SAFE principles (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit) and bring a focus on social and emotional learning. Flexibility around hours of service is needed particularly to attract youth participants who are more typically in need of programming after the critical hours.

The commitment to incorporate SAFE and SEL elements (Social, Emotional, Learning) into CAS programs is well understood and is known as good practice. The funding from FCSS, which covers most of the CAS programs, also encourages agency partners to focus on and capture self-reported changes among participants on indicators related to their social emotional well-being and sense of personal competencies.

Certainly, many of the (larger) community partners will include this kind of training (part of High Five certification) for their staff.

It’s important to be realistic about the nature of after-school programs and the capacity of staff to meaningfully engage children and youth immediately following a day in school, in carefully planned and organized activities. Nonetheless, the SAFE and SEL principles are an important focus and integral to a quality program.

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of service is needed particularly
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the critical hours.

Evaluation

The intent of the current tool (FSII) is to capture collective impact for the CAS agency programming — it is not an evaluation of the individual programs. Appropriate and reliable tools need to be identified.

An evaluation strategy needs to be created whereby the outcomes and benefits of program participation are captured through participant and parent storytelling and/or other qualitative methods.

A program assessment tool, mandatory for all CAS programs, also needs to be identified. These tools need to be developed collaboratively and agreed upon by CAS agencies and funders.



Communication/ Promotion

It's imperative to promote and communicate the importance of quality child and youth programming that have a focus on social and emotional learning and that apply the SAFE principles. Messaging needs to be directed at families, to agencies and to supporters and funders (including senior levels of government).

Messaging should include:

- Importance of the programming, its availability and costs.
- Partners involved.
- Partnership opportunities.
- Benefits of CAS to agencies and partners.

There are a variety of mechanisms through which communication can occur. Consideration by the leadership group should be given to an annual report and/or an annual report to the community.

Staffing Competencies

CAS has identified the core competencies required for staff to provide high quality after-school and recreational programs (see the CAS Training Matrix). All new City staff must either have, or acquire, the needed skills within a certain time frame.

Similarly, all FCSS funded agencies are required to report on staff training and qualifications as part of their funding renewal and so are well incented to ensure these standards are met. There may be a range of new and shared training opportunities that would benefit CAS members through increased participation of agencies. Training may be one of the committees set up by the leadership group and staffed by CAS members.

Partnership Principles

Partnership principles are designed to identify the important program characteristics of good quality after-school programs and the expectations of service providers who are — or become — part of Calgary AfterSchool. These principles help to define the brand of CAS, clarify the responsibilities of existing CAS providers and can be used as criteria to consider future programs and potential community partners. Ultimately, these principles are intended to ensure the success and quality of all programs but also to frame what it means to be participating as a partner in the CAS Framework.

Partnership principles are designed to identify important characteristics of good quality after-school programs.

While there is great value in a principle-based framework, it must be recognized, the many different challenges and unique circumstances facing organizations that want to provide community-based programming after school. In practice, some degree of flexibility around these principles will likely be required. This would include CAS Partners and other after-school providers that are members who want to participate in ways that are less onerous or may not be direct service providers (i.e. training partners).

It's critical the partnership principles outlined below are vetted by the leadership group and current CAS members.

A collective discussion about some of the limitations that come with these principles (especially age and hours) would be valuable. In significant measure, engagement — and compliance — will only come from an inclusive process where groups self-identify which expectations are reasonable and best describe the CAS brand.

Partners would be expected to adhere to the following principles and program expectations.

Programming Principles

Target Age Group. Members of CAS provide after-school programming for children and youth ages 6 to 18.

Demand. The provider must have clear evidence of a sustainable (eight month to a year) demand for after-school programming.

Hours. CAS partners provide programs Monday to Sunday during the school year when children and youth are not in school.

Readiness. The organization must be able to demonstrate it has trained (certified) staff available at an appropriate ratio for the number of participants, suitable facilities and rental or lease arrangements in place for the duration of the program, and evidence of support from the school administration or facility manager.

Frequency. Programs run a minimum of two days a week, Monday to Sunday during the school year.

CAS partners provide programs anytime after the school bell rings, seven days a week throughout the school year.



Accessibility. The organization must have a clearly articulated and publicly visible plan to ensure financial barriers to participating in CAS programs are minimized or eliminated. This may include some form of subsidy.

Financial Planning. The organization must be able to provide a balanced budget demonstrating adequate resources and income for the duration of the program.

Quality Principles

SEL/SAFE. CAS agency partners must be able to demonstrate how they incorporate the SAFE principles and core principles of social emotional learning in the planning and delivery of their programs. CAS partners will use appropriate measurement tools to capture indicators linked to good social emotional health.

Staff Training. At a minimum, agency staff providing a CAS program must have the requisite (legislated) safety training and a current security check (conducted by Calgary Police Service).

Inclusion. CAS partner agencies must have a written policy and a strategy in place to support the inclusion of all children and youth.

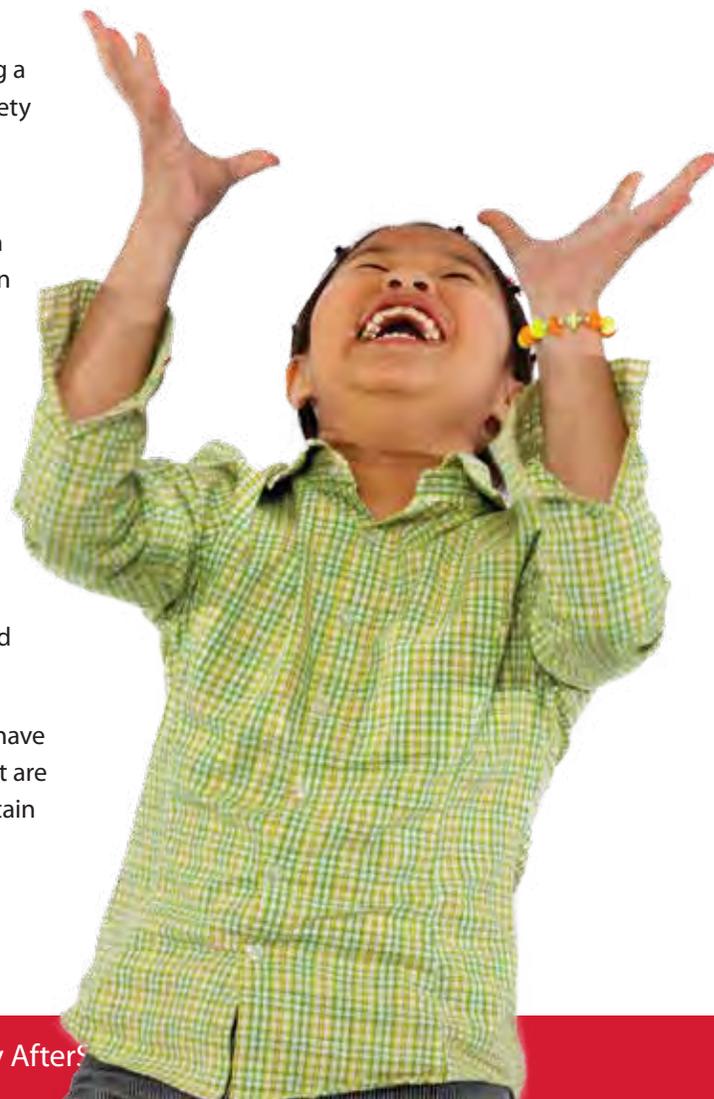
Data and Monitoring. All CAS organizations that receive funding will use the measurement tools, formats and timelines provided to them. All CAS agencies are expected to provide basic data on participation and participants as requested. Organizations may use other program evaluation tools and can elect to participate in other community-based research, data collection and evaluation strategies.

Participant Retention. CAS partner agencies must have a strategy in place to support children and youth that are facing barriers to participation including a plan to retain and encourage these participants.

Engagement Principles

Evidence and Evolving Best Practice. All the organizations involved with CAS, including funders, are expected to share a commitment to using good evidence and available data to align programs and services with evolving best practices. CAS members will actively share self-generated local research and data support to CAS members.

Training. CAS partners are expected to help identify the kinds of professional development opportunities that would be of value to them and their organizations. Agency staff should participate in at least one CAS specific training initiative annually.



Organizational Commitment. Within their staffing and budget limitations, CAS partner agency staff are expected to participate in, and contribute to, the work of the leadership group, CAS membership and other committees or task groups created to support the work of CAS.

Sharing Expertise. Agencies (or individuals) that have a particular focus, capacity or skill that is identified as a learning opportunity will be expected to share their knowledge with other CAS members when requested. This includes sharing best practice examples and materials provided to local agencies by National and/or Provincial Associations.

Wherever possible, the genuine voice of children, youth and parents should be given priority. CAS partner agencies are responsible for their own media or communications efforts.

Communications. When requested, CAS partner organizations have a responsibility to support efforts to communicate and promote the value and outcomes of after-school programming. This may include facilitating media visits, identifying stories, recruiting parents and youth, and providing information on the value and outcomes of their programs.

Wherever possible, the genuine voice of children, youth and parents should be given priority. CAS partner agencies are responsible for their own media or communications efforts and are not allowed or expected (unless designated) to speak on behalf of CAS.

The average child in their middle years (ages 6 to 12) has approximately 67 hours of discretionary time each week, which is more time than they spend in school.



System Partners

There are a number of important organizations and systems whose missions involve the health, well-being and success of children and youth that have important roles to play in the success of CAS, its members and after-school and out-of-school time programming. When these organizations are asked to formally support and align with CAS, they would agree to the following principles.

System Partners would do the following:

- Help communicate to their constituents, governments and communities, the value of CAS programs and efforts to engage children and youth in quality, constructive, healthy activities during the after-school period.
- Leverage opportunities and link CAS members to other funding, resources and supports, and help with coordinated efforts to mobilize funding for after-school and out-of-school time opportunities.
- Support efforts, using data and evidence, to identify priority areas and populations of children and youth where CAS should be targeting new programs or outreach efforts and facilitate efforts to measure and describe the collective impact of these programs.
- Encourage and support the development of system level approaches (e.g. shared services, staff training, common funding applications, etc.) among CAS members and partners.

Although every system level partner has a mandate that goes well beyond after-school programming, so too do the vast majority of agency and service providers. As such, these proposed principles offer a solid foundation for a discussion of the roles and responsibilities that system partners feel they can — and would like to — make to CAS and its members before any commitments are requested.

CAS Brand Considerations

CAS Designation. There should be some standard branding or acknowledgment by all partner agencies of their CAS membership that is publicly visible (e.g. signage, logo, acknowledgment on written materials, etc.) and recognizable. The use of the CAS branding and acknowledgment would be contingent on agency partners agreeing to support the commitments listed above.

Monitoring and Reporting. There needs to be a mechanism to ensure CAS member programs are being run by trained staff, in safe settings, with quality programming. Annually, five programs would be randomly selected for a review that would be done by a group of their peers from the CAS membership, using a standard format. These reviews may identify concerns but are primarily intended to support continuous quality improvement.

There should be some standard branding or acknowledgment by all partner agencies of their CAS membership that is publicly visible and recognizable.



CAS Program Spectrum

Calgary AfterSchool: Program Spectrum

Having evolved over several years, the current spectrum of CAS programming is quite broad. Working with a large network of community partner agencies, CAS programs are delivered across the entire city. Children and youth from 6 to 18 years of age are eligible to participate in a highly structured program or a more casual drop-in opportunity depending on their location, age, time and interests. This includes some traditional after-school programs (e.g. homework, food, active recreation, personal time), some new offerings (e.g. cooking), those that focus on higher risk children and communities or target specific sub-groups, and those that take a population health approach. This kind of program spectrum is arguably one of the real strengths of the CAS Framework.

The program spectrum includes “drop-in” programs which are less structured, allow participants greater flexibility in terms of what activities they might enjoy (e.g. self-directed recreation), and are generally intended to engage older youth (13–18).

These kinds of opportunities are an important part of the CAS Framework providing youth a safe, positive social setting where they can interact on their own terms with their peers and friends and build their own “social capital.” This kind of strategy is well recognized in the realm of crime prevention, social development, and is particularly valuable for young people with fewer social and recreational resources of their own.

Most CAS programs are designed to be more structured with some level of prescribed program elements that give the program a specialized “focus.”

Although they are all based on the SAFE principles, these programs are intended to have a more targeted effect like learning specific skills, supporting school success, assisting with cultural integration, or building leadership capacities among the targeted participants.





Generally intended to address a perceived deficit or unrealized ability among children and youth in the area, there can be great value to these sorts of focused programs recognizing they may not have the broad appeal of less structured (e.g. come one, come all) types of after-school programs.

There are also programs in the CAS Framework that have more of a “therapeutic” focus and are often delivered by agency partners with specific skill sets (e.g. children’s mental health) or familiarity working with the types of children and youth the programs hope to engage (e.g. newcomer settlement). These sorts of programs spend more of their time working directly on building a specific capacity (e.g. social skills) or addressing an identified challenge like behaviour issues or anger management. These after-school programs can be particularly valuable when they are part of a larger effort to support at-risk children and youth (and their families) who are already involved with other social service organizations, providing real life opportunities to practice some of the skills or behaviours that will improve their outcomes.

Over time, CAS has grown to include some programs that are more specialized and focused on skill development like music or the arts. In fact, a substantial amount of new after-school programs include some kind of specialized learning opportunity (e.g. computer coding) or target a specific population (e.g. girls, Indigenous children and youth). Although these programs are somewhat exclusionary by nature, there are some good reasons to ensure these kinds of opportunities are publicly available as part of the CAS Framework.

As the majority of specialized skill building programs or training opportunities are provided by individuals or organizations in the private sector, there are significant barriers to participation including program fees, travel costs, supplies and equipment.

When CAS is able to include these sort of programs and partner with agencies that are able to provide accessible programs, they harness existing community capacity and help to address a significant issue of equity. Perhaps most importantly, any child or youth who develops a specialized skill and has a sense of their own capacity or ability is much more resilient and less likely to make poor choices in their adolescence.

Although the program spectrum of CAS does involve a wide range of offerings — from relatively unstructured drop-in to therapeutic programming — each of them provides a unique value to the communities and populations they serve.

Partners, Program Distribution and Participants

There is an array of agency partners delivering CAS programs including organizations focused on mental health, culturally specific agencies, and more traditional after-school partners. The program sites vary considerably from large high schools and recreation facilities to much smaller neighbourhoods, arts and senior centres.

Calgary’s Public and Catholic schools host and support just over half of all CAS sites which is significant but well below the national average¹ and may indicate a lack of system level engagement of these partners¹.

¹ While Calgary Public and Catholic school systems host the majority of CAS programs (53 per cent), a 2010 national study found that after-school programs are hosted in schools on average 72 per cent of the time. This percentage has likely increased with recent provincial initiatives to promote before- and after-school programming (e.g. all-day schooling in Ontario). (www.lin.ca)

Despite this diversity, there are some commonalities. All CAS programs provided by Calgary Neighbourhoods, Calgary Recreation and agency partners are delivered primarily in the “critical hours” of 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday. For the majority of CAS partners, these after-school programs represent only a portion of their budgets but are an important part of their broader missions to improve outcomes for children, youth and families. Most incorporate the SAFE principles in their programs, and have a shared interest in promoting and assessing changes to “social, emotional learning” and “social capital and connectedness.”

In terms of program distribution, there is a large proportion of programming offered in northeast Calgary which corresponds to the areas of the city with the highest prevalence of low-income households and children and youth. Central and downtown Calgary also have some concentration of programs given their corresponding levels of elevated risk and there are more programs in the southeast than the north or southwest quadrants. Funding priorities — intended to help higher risk and marginalized communities — account in large measure for the existing pattern of program distribution.

Refreshed and Optimal Program Alignment

When considering how to “refresh” the programs within CAS and/or identify an optimal alignment, there is the suggestion that the existing mix of offerings has not evolved and decisions related to which children and youth to serve, where and how, is not straight forward.

In terms of “refreshing” the mix of programs available through CAS, it’s important to recognize work is already underway to reflect new and evolving interests of children and youth including programs like cooking, music and arts. Current and important social priorities like empowering girls, building community leaders, and improving mental health and well-being are

similarly reflected in the current work of CAS agencies. It’s also important to recognize there is limited room to maneuver (as programs are seldom closed or moved) and with no additional (new) resources it will ultimately be up to existing CAS agencies to refresh their programming. While CAS can encourage and facilitate changes to program content through shared training and/or resources, it is likely appropriate the partner organization, who work most closely with their communities, plan and deliver new approaches to their after-school content.

Given after-school resources are limited, it’s important to consider broader community needs when priorities — either by area or population — are identified.

That said, there are ideas in the best practice literature worth exploring further including outdoor after-school programs, girls and technology, running programs to support good mental health, and new strategies to include and engage children and youth with special needs. Learning how to support and involve children and youth that identify as LGBTQ2+ has become an important focus for many agencies and there may be opportunities to create new and innovative programs for the higher risk youth who are involved in other programs (e.g. youth diversion).

Most importantly, any effort to “refresh” the content, locations and focus of after-school programs needs to be driven and shaped by the ideas and inputs of all Calgary’s children and youth (and their families), not solely by the interest of existing participants and the best guess of local service providers.

Optimal Program Alignment

Given after-school resources are limited, it's important to consider broader community needs when priorities — either by area or population — are identified. The City of Calgary has community planning documents, census reports and statistical data that can help inform these decisions. Although a framework that provides data-informed priorities is quite valuable, it must be recognized there are many informal but critical considerations that impact where a successful CAS program can be launched and sustained. For example, finding an enthusiastic school principal with a suitable space will always be (and should likely remain) an important consideration.

As CAS prides itself on using evidence to inform its work, it's important to consider the data on children, youth and risk. While there are higher percentages of children and youth “at risk” in communities with lower socio-economic outcomes, the statistical majority of children and youth who would benefit from a helpful after-school program are found in the other two income brackets¹.

An evidence-informed approach does not frame priorities as a simple “either/or” but an “and/both,” and to a large extent this does reflect the current distribution of CAS programs. School systems understand this well and as a critical partner, they are interested in supporting programs that “are not continually focused on the northeast” — to the detriment of children and youth in other parts of the city.

¹. 'Early Years Study Three, Making Decisions Taking Action'; Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain, J. Fraser Mustard, Dr. Kerry McCuaig, 2011.



Structured, supervised and nurturing after-school environments have lasting, positive effects on children's emotional and physical well-being and their academic development.

Calgary AfterSchool

2019-2025 strategic plan

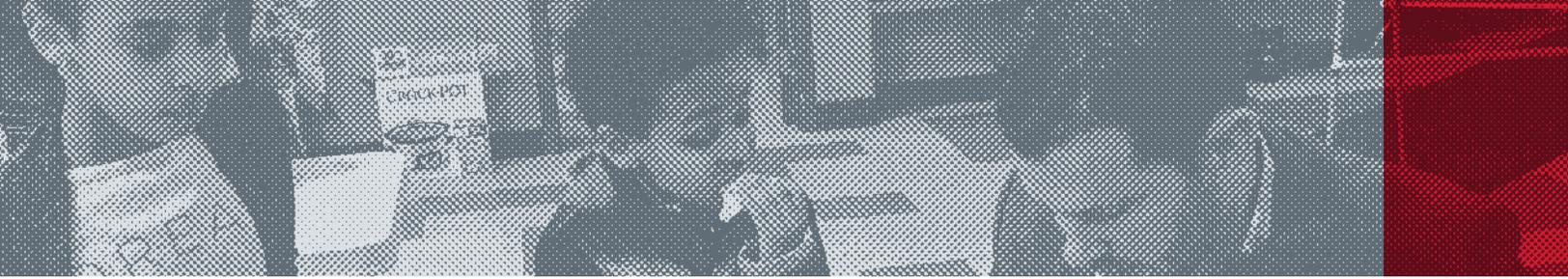


Establishing an optimal alignment for CAS program expansion (or reallocation) is a difficult exercise and a discussion that should take place among the leaders of CAS, the funders and agency partners. There is little value in prescribing an optimal “solution.” In fact, definitive rules or formulas may not be suitable, but a tool to consider “where best next” could be developed that incorporates data and other important considerations. CAS leaders may also want to establish their own priority — like better serving older youth — which would bring a whole new and different set of decision-making criteria.

Ultimately, successful after-school programs are dependent on many different community partners.

Ultimately, successful after-school programs are dependent on many different community partners, and while these organizations see the value, they have their own interests, mandates and accountabilities that extend well beyond providing programs for children and youth after school between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. After-school programs will always need to be pragmatic and, given their limited resources, are likely to be incremental in their approach. While there is considerable room for CAS to take a more planned approach and support more system level decision-making, what has evolved thus far reflects the evidence, embraces good practices and serves the community well.

After-school programs will always need to be pragmatic and, given their limited resources, are likely to be incremental in their approach.



Retention Strategies

Introduction

The level of professionalism and expertise in the CAS Framework suggests many of the good practices used to recruit and retain children and youth in after-school programs are already known. There is always value in providing some explicit suggestions based on the research and evidence, however.

While there is a range of specific strategies that focus on retaining or engaging certain sub-groups of children and youth (e.g. by age, gender, ethnicity, culture and sexual orientation), there are some overriding principles and approaches that support sustained involvement. In general terms, retention (and recruitment) strategies are aimed at slightly older-aged youth when participation in after-school programs becomes optional, other responsibilities grow, and the competition for time and attention increases dramatically.

Regardless of best efforts, there are three important challenges that will always impact retention:

- Children and youth will stop coming for reasons entirely unrelated to the program.
- The ability to know why children and youth do not come, or stop coming, is limited.
- Staff may be disinclined to make the extra efforts to support and retain a child who is very hard to manage or worse, is disruptive to the program and other participants.

Retention Strategies

There is value in each of the following approaches which are overlapping and mutually reinforcing in quality programs.

Program Quality. For parents, the primary reason they do not enroll their children in after-school programs (ASPs) is their concern about the quality and safety of the programs.¹ There is a strong relationship between the quality of ASPs, the retention of participants, and the likelihood that children and youth will measurably benefit from and sustain their participation.

Relationships with Staff. The importance of well-trained quality staff and the continuity required to build real and caring relationships with youth cannot be overstated.

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Recruiting and supporting staff who are genuinely interested in working alongside and building positive relationships with youth is critical. Ideally, programs should try and recruit staff from the local school or community, past participants and people who reflect the ethno-cultural characteristics of the community. Engaging those who share an interest in the well-being of the youth (e.g. extended family, school staff) in some capacity (volunteer, field trips, etc.) also encourages sustained participation.

¹ Concerns about quality was the most frequently cited reason provided by parents that do not enroll their children in after-school and recreational activities. Building Healthy Child Development: The Experiences of Parents in Peel; Peel Children and Youth Initiative, 2012.

Addressing Common Barriers. It's important for service providers to have strategies or subsidies in place to address the most common barriers to sustained participation including program fees, travel costs (and complexity), and sibling care.

These subsidies and supports need to be well publicized and available to families and their children without stigma.

Whenever programs are located off site, a safe travel plan from school is required. It can be challenging, but strategies to provide activities or care for siblings will address a significant barrier for many families and especially older youth¹.

Youth Direction and Choice. Authentic representation and participation of youth is crucial to any successful recruitment and retention efforts. While true of all ages, older youth are looking to have a greater role in determining how they spend their time. Giving them regular opportunities to provide direction and to demonstrate leadership is valuable. Although structure and some routine are important, youth want the ability to create their own activities and feel some autonomy within the program (e.g. self-directed recreation). In fact, open recreation drop-in programs for older youth are often the most well and consistently attended type of program.

Evolving Interests. Sustaining youth participation requires opportunities and activities that interest them. For high school aged youth, this would include programs that help to improve grades, earn credits for volunteer time, and explore potential career and educational options. Incorporating vocational and apprenticeship activities into programs or hiring teenage participants as leaders allows youth to gain valuable skills and earn some money. As noted previously, the best way to align programming content to the evolving interests of children and youth (e.g. cooking, community engagement, arts, coding, etc.) is to ask them and then work with them to put together new opportunities.

Friends and Social Time. There is a benefit of having children and youth join (any) program with a friend. This impacts both their enjoyment and longevity in the program. Girls in particular are much more likely to participate when a friend is involved². Providing program opportunities where friends are invited to participate (or attend without registering) and hosting special events where friends are welcome can help sustain interest and engagement.

Family Engagement. Wherever possible, program staff need to build relationships with parents and extended families. This may include seeking their feedback regularly, giving them opportunities to volunteer or share a skill, and holding meetings and events where family are invited. As youth get older, however, these types of strategies may not be very effective and could be counterproductive.

Skill Development. Not unique to after-school programs, children and youth that develop any specific capacity and a degree of skill — at something — are much more likely to succeed. Finding and facilitating ways for individual youth to experience some unique sense of accomplishment in any area is a powerful resiliency factor.

School and Community Partners. There are many staff in schools who may share an interest in having children and youth attend the after-school program regularly, especially where the programs align with school interests (e.g. homework, active recreation). Guidance and administrative staff may also help to identify and engage hard to serve youth, some of whom may also be involved with other community outreach and youth workers. Accessing the support of these individuals (when youth stop coming) can be very helpful.

¹ The study demonstrates that over 30 per cent of high school aged boys and 38 per cent of girls are providing sibling care after school. *Voices: A Study of Youth in Peel*; Peel Children and Youth Initiative, 2014.

² *Voices: A Study of Youth in Peel*; Peel Children and Youth Initiative, 2014.





For children from low-income families, "consistent participation in high-quality after-school programs has been shown to help students improve their work habits and demonstrate higher levels of persistence."

"Cool" Factor. The ability to decide what to do after school is a rite of passage for all young people.

Typically, after-school programs are not usually thought of as a "cool" first choice. Often, completely unstructured time and a safe space to socialize with friends is more important than participating in planned activities. Minimizing the perception that there is adult supervision can help but again, only the youth themselves can help you make a program "cool."

Follow-Up Policies. Having a rule established about following up with children and youth (and/or their families) who stop attending programs is often the best approach. Organizations should establish a target or goal for retention depending on the site. As above, soliciting the support of school and community partners can help to meet these targets.

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Skills and Resources

It's important to recognize retention strategies can involve a significant amount of time and effort particularly when staff ratios are tight. Staff are often working with children and youth who have complex issues and are difficult to support. As such, securing time for non-program delivery activities is difficult. Building in time to engage families and others in the child's sustained participation is too often beyond the scope and resources of the program staff. CAS could create linkages and contacts for local program staff who are looking for support with a child (or family) of some concern.

If retention is a priority outcome and indicator of success for members of CAS, there is value in gathering to share their best strategies — the ones that are working locally with specific groups of children and youth. With some allowable variance, all CAS programs may want to set targets for retention (by age) and measure their collective success year over year.

Recruiting and supporting staff who are genuinely interested in working alongside and building positive relationships with youth is critical.

Retention strategies can only help keep children and youth engaged but do not address the substantial percentages of children and youth (and their families) that might benefit but who elect not to participate. At the same time, information about the interests of children and youth who attend a program can be determined. It is much more difficult to gather the perspectives of children and youth who do not participate. There would be enormous value in CAS generating population level data about the evolving interests, abilities and activities of children and youth in Calgary during the after-school and out-of-school time.

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Calgary AfterSchool 2019-2025 strategic plan

Thank you to the partnering agencies who participated in the Calgary AfterSchool Steering and Advisory Committees to make this plan possible.

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