

# Badging Practice Brief

## *Recommendations from Boston Beyond's 2015-16 Digital Badge Pilot*



## Executive Summary

Boston is home to a rich tapestry of opportunities for young people to acquire the skills, knowledge, and experiences that they need to succeed in school, college, and future careers. In response to growing demand from educators and employers for improved transparency of those learning outcomes for youth both in and out of school, Boston After School & Beyond (Boston Beyond) has piloted the use of digital badges<sup>1</sup> with summer and school-year partners.

Based on Boston Beyond's efforts over the past several years using common measures to assess the quality of learning opportunities throughout the city, each badge is powered by a set of criteria that is uniform across all of the youth development programs awarding the badge. These criteria, established in collaboration with Boston Beyond's research and program partners, are based on a student's program attendance and an educator assessment. Specifically, educators use the National Institute on Out-of-School Time's SAYO T survey<sup>2</sup> to record how often students demonstrate each of the following skills: communication, engagement in learning, perseverance, problem solving, and teamwork.

## Executive Summary (continued)

In each skill, students with an 80% attendance rate or better can earn badges in two ways. First, they can demonstrate overall achievement in the skill by “usually”<sup>3</sup> using or practicing it as rated by their educator. Second, the eligible student can demonstrate growth in that skill area over the course of the program, as measured by a substantial increase in the educator’s rating of how often they used the skill.<sup>4</sup> The attendance and SAYO T rating data are entered and stored in Boston Beyond’s YouthServices database, which also serves as the platform for awarding badges based on these data.

In the summer of 2015 and the 2015-16 school year, seven long-time partners of Boston Beyond with experience measuring program quality and skill outcomes for youth piloted this digital badging system. These programs predominantly served students in grades 6 through 8, with one program serving 4th and 5th graders. Based on interviews with the educators who piloted the digital badge system, this brief contains promising practices and recommendations for others looking to implement the system.

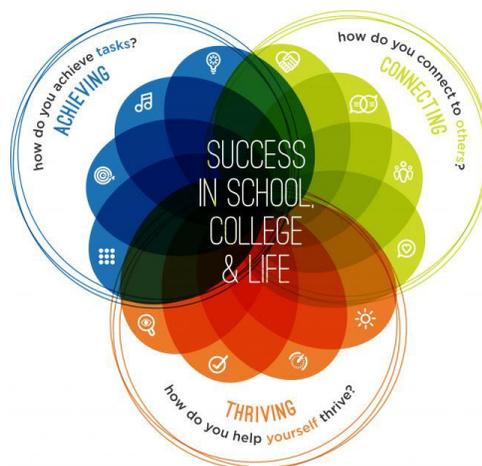
### Crosswalk of Social-Emotional Skills and Practices

ACT Skill	What do we measure?	Badge ?
Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking*, Problem Solving	Yes
Creativity		
Goal Focus		
Organization		
Relationships	Relationships*	
Communication	Communication	Yes
Teamwork	Teamwork	Yes
Respect		
Wellbeing		
Drive	Perseverance*	Yes
Efficacy		
Awareness of self & others	Self-regulation*	
Other Practices and Skills	What do we measure?	Badge ?
Engagement in Learning	Engagement in Learning	Yes
Youth Leadership & Responsibility	Youth Leadership & Responsibility	
Youth Choice & Autonomy	Youth Choice & Autonomy	

\* Power Skill

### Achieve, Connect, Thrive (ACT) Skills Framework

Boston After School & Beyond’s ACT Skills Framework helps schools, partners, and students focus their efforts on the skills that research links to success in college and careers.



ACHIEVING	critical thinking
	creativity
	goal focus
	organization
CONNECTING	relationships
	communication
	teamwork
	respect
THRIVING	wellbeing
	drive
	efficacy
	awareness of self & others

# Reinforcing Skills

## Train Staff to Talk About SE Skills

Programs began the summer by providing staff with context on how these skills fit in with existing skill frameworks and measurement activities (see image on page 2). One program found that having *“all the adult staff be really clear on the language and the specific skills...provided a lot of structure.”* In some programs’ training, staff worked as a team to determine what skill-building would look like in students and developed strategies to recognize them. Giving an academic context to social-emotional skills further bolstered staff understanding. For example, one program connected Common Core math standards<sup>5</sup> such as “students make sense of problems and persevere in solving them” to social-emotional skills like problem solving and perseverance.

## Keep SE Skills at the “Forefront of Adult Planning”

Programs found that focusing on students’ social-emotional learning when planning the daily lessons was a good strategy. In one program, coordinators asked instructors to be *“really explicit about which skills they were building into the lesson and where in the curriculum [students] could demonstrate the skills”* in their daily lesson plans. Another program encouraged staff to set goals around incorporating social-emotional skills into the curriculum, and scheduled a staff meeting to reflect on the outcome. Boston Beyond recommends programs review NIOST’s Assessment of Program Practices Tool (APT) for standards on activities that should be incorporated to build these skills in youth.

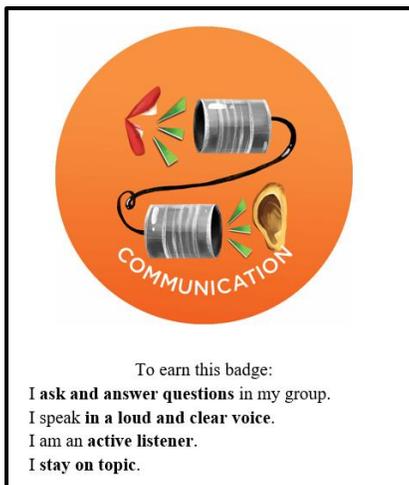
## Build SE Skill Language into Regular Activities

Incorporating social-emotional skill language daily, especially in regular activities like opening and closing circle, *provided “structure and consistency”* to programs’ learning environments. In addition, connecting regular activities to specific skills gave students an opportunity to learn and demonstrate skills on a consistent basis. For example, one program’s independent work block focused on self-regulation and perseverance, skills that were consistently reinforced during this activity.



## Post SE Skills on the Walls

Many programs used visual aids or posters describing each social-emotional skill to help communicate the skills to students. Program staff hung posters on the walls of classrooms or community centers, giving skills a central presence in the learning environment. In addition, one program found that visual aids were especially beneficial for students, commenting that *“for many different reasons, language is hard.”*



*Poster displayed by Hale Reservation staff*

### **HALE RESERVATION PRO-TIP:**

#### *Clear Skill Building Expectations*

After staff brainstormed how students could demonstrate social-emotional skills, they created reference posters (see sample to the left). The posters included badge logos for the skills and the ways in which students could demonstrate them. Acting as a resource for students, these posters helped set clear expectations for Hale’s program as a whole.

# Recognizing Skills

## Encourage Recognition Among Peers

Providing opportunities for peer-to-peer recognition was a common practice among interviewed programs. Some programs used a system of peer shout outs or nominations that not only strengthened relationships in students, but deepened students' understanding of social-emotional skill development. One program has continued this practice with their after-school program, and "[peer-to-peer recognition] is really helping the community, particularly with [student] relationships."



### **MATHPOWER PRO-TIP:**

#### *Peer-to-Peer Recognition*

During a daily end-of-class reflection, one instructor at MathPOWER's Summer Academy encouraged students to shout out if they had seen a peer demonstrating a social-emotional skill that day. **Students had to provide clear evidence supporting their decision to identify a peer.** Then, the students who received the shout out would see their name placed under the skill for which they had been recognized.

## Build Weekly Activities to Recognize Students

Several programs incorporated a system of weekly incentives or recognition activities that centered on the social-emotional skills. Often these activities were program-wide; students were recognized for skill achievements in front of the entire community. A weekly raffle held by one program drew from the names of students that showed exceptional social-emotional skill performance that week. Students could win gift cards or other rewards if their name was drawn. Another program held a peer nomination process. Nominees were recognized in front of the whole program community, and the winner was given a "secret dance party" after lunch that Friday. Programs found that having "*incentives along the way, throughout the summer*" was a way to keep youth engaged and motivated.

## Use Visual Cues to Reinforce Recognition

Programs also found that incorporating visual cues to student recognition, "*so kids were hearing and seeing acknowledgement, [was] encouraging.*" Writing recognized students' names on posters or achievement boards was one strategy that programs used to do this. In another program, winners of the weekly nomination process were given an achievement bandana to wear for the next week.



## Ask Students to Self-Assess and Reflect

Although none of the programs interviewed used this practice during the 2015 summer badging pilot, some programs felt they would have benefitted from building opportunities for student self-assessment and reflection. One interviewee spoke from experience at another program—"Every day we would have kids write their number score [for their performance]... 'How do you think you're doing?'" Students' scores were tallied up at the end of the week, and staff would choose which students would be recognized for their personal achievements. She found that this practice helped students "*become more aware [of their behavior].*"

# Recording Performance

## Incorporate SAYO T into Staff Training

Training staff in the SAYO T before they have to complete the survey about their own students is recommended in order to avoid preventable errors in survey administration. Programs that intentionally incorporated the SAYO T in their staff training were met with fewer technical issues and faster survey turnover. Staff also had a better understanding of the survey's purpose and design, and were able to better connect classroom behaviors to the survey's questions.



## Who Should Fill Out the Survey?

Programs must be at least 110 hours in duration for students to receive sufficient dosage for effects to appear in their social-emotional skill development as rated on the SAYO T. The SAYO T can be completed by any program educator, teacher, or staff member who has spent enough time with and knows the young person well enough to confidently assess their social-emotional skill growth.<sup>6</sup>

The pre- and post- surveys must be completed by the same individual. Some programs may have two or more instructors interacting with students equally. One program had instructors split the students they shared, but recognized that *“the morning teacher may see something very different out of a [student] than the afternoon teacher.”* Next year, they are considering having both instructors collaborate to complete the SAYO T for each student, a model used by Providence After School Alliance in Rhode Island to provide a variety of perspectives on the SAYO T ratings for an individual student.

## Make Time to Compare Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Programs interviewed occasionally found that the quantitative information taken from the SAYO T and a student's attendance records did not adequately reflect the student's social-emotional skill development. In these cases, programs had the option to award or withhold a badge if their perceptions of the student's growth and achievement did not match the data. Although frequent use of this “override” option is not recommended, programs felt that having the option to leverage their own impressions was advantageous. One program facilitator wished she had a staff meeting before awarding the badges to get instructor input on any discrepancies between the quantitative data and their personal experience with the students.

## Technical Support

Due to the time sensitive nature of awarding badges, technical issues with the SAYO T and the YouthServices database must be resolved quickly. In addition to user guides for the YouthServices database and video tutorials posted on its website, <http://bostonbeyond.org/youthservices/>, Boston Beyond provides ongoing technical support throughout the badging process, and should be notified as soon as errors or other technical issues arise.

# Awarding Badges

## Incorporate Badges Into Existing Recognition Rituals

All programs interviewed integrated the awarding of badges into an existing ritual or celebration. In summer programs, this was typically the end-of-season family dinner and award ceremony. Programs found that awarding badges during existing closing events provided an opportunity to "organically" integrate badging into program culture, so that returning students would know what to expect in future years. This activity can also be worked into school year culture-building events such as spring cookouts and field days. If applicable, Boston Beyond recommends that programs plan such events in advance.

## Students Appreciate Physical Awards

Each program used a physical object to represent the badge(s) that they awarded to students. In 2015, Boston Beyond made 1 ½" button pins bearing the logo for each badge, which programs awarded to their badge earners during their award ceremonies. Program staff were "pleasantly surprised" that students were excited about the badge pins. "When [students] get [badges]...they can remember...I know what this means and now I have a little piece of it. I have a physical manifestation [of my skills] in this badge."



Badge logos and pins designed by Artists for Humanity

## Connections Between Skills and Badges Must Be Strong

In some cases, the connection between a student's behavior over the course of the program and whether they were awarded a badge was weak or absent. Programs that had incidents of these cases observed a negative effect among some of their students who did not earn badges. "Kids [came] up and asked why they didn't get any because...[the program] hadn't reinforced...what they were for, so they assumed everybody got them." Therefore, Boston Beyond recommends that programs only award badges for demonstration of skills that they have deliberately discussed and practiced with their students. For example, if a program does not actively promote Engagement in Learning in its approach, that program might decide not to award badges for that skill even though a subset of their students have met the criteria to earn them.

## Engaging Audiences Beyond the Students

Programs also found badges to be an effective tool to engage parents in discussion about their child's progress or behavior in the program. Some programs also invited the principals of the schools from which they recruit students to their award ceremony so that they were aware of students' accomplishments over the summer. Teachers at students' schools can be informed of students' badges by placing a letter in their mailboxes alerting them to look out for badges on students backpacks and jackets and to ask students how they earned them.



## References

1. <http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2012/06/13/03badges.h05.html>
2. The Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes Teacher Version (SAYO T) is a pre-post survey which allows educators to assess students' social-emotional skills. For each social-emotional skill, the educator responds to a set of questions asking how frequently the student demonstrates behaviors related to that particular skill. The scale for question responses is: 1 - Never, 2 - Rarely, 3 - Sometimes, 4 - Usually, 5 - Always.
3. Corresponds to a rating of at least a 4 on the SAYO T.
4. Corresponds to a difference of at least 1 point between the pre and post SAYO T. For example, a student who sometimes (3) demonstrates the skill by the program's end, and had only rarely (2) demonstrated the skill at the beginning of the program, has met the threshold for skill growth ( $3-2 = 1$ ).
5. [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)
6. McLaughlin, B. & Pitcock, S. (2009). Building quality in summer learning programs: Approaches and recommendations. NY: The Wallace Foundation; Boston Summer Learning Program Year Two Evaluation Report. (January 2012). NIOST, Wellesley College.

### Photography Credit

Casey Atkins: front cover, pp 3, 4 (top), 5, 6, back cover  
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## Acknowledgements

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