




BELIEVE IT.
BUILD IT.

Minnesota's Guide to
Effective Afterschool Practices

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BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT.

WE BELIEVE every young person can be successful. Those of us who work in afterschool come from many backgrounds. We call ourselves youth workers, librarians, artists, teachers, coaches, social workers, or maybe something else entirely. We share a belief that the work we do every day positively impacts young people's success.

It's this belief in what's possible for young people that drives us to do our best. It gets us out the door and off to work each morning (or late afternoons and weekends!) It's why we care deeply about young people and their futures. It's why we put so much energy and passion into our programs.

And now we have a blueprint to help us take what we believe and BUILD IT for — and with — the young people of Minnesota.

With BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT. the afterschool community in Minnesota has come together to define what makes our programs great and put together a hands-on guidebook to help us build research-based best practices into every step.

Our work is vital. Taking time to invest in that work, to continuously reflect, improve and strive to be the best we can be — that's vital too. It's a process that can be fulfilling, exciting and a cause for celebration.

We're a community of life-longer learners. This guidebook is meant to help us find inspiration for today, and aspirations for tomorrow. Each of our programs comes to this process from a different place. And each one can find something in these pages to strengthen our programs and make a positive difference for youth.

SAY WHAT?

Here are a few terms you'll see throughout **BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT.:**

Afterschool refers to organized activities and programs involving young people that take place outside the regular school day. Sometimes called OST (out-of-school time), summer programming or afterschool, it all means the same thing here.

Community includes all individuals and organizations that influence youth. This can be teachers and schools, families and community organizations, neighborhood leaders and local businesses, and more.

Culture is a set of beliefs, values, and norms that are shared within a community of people, and which shape a person's actions and sense of self.

Dosage refers to how much programming a young person experiences. It's generally measured in intensity — the amount of hours per day, days per week and weeks per year a young person attends; as well as duration — how long the young person participates in programs from start to finish (ideally, over a number of years); and breadth — the variety of activities a young person experiences either across multiple programs or within one program.

Family includes parents, siblings, relatives, caregivers, guardians, extended families, and embraces all individuals that a young person considers "family."

Identity is the conception people have of themselves, which is shaped by both social and biological characteristics, including age, socioeconomic class, nationality, language, religion, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical/developmental ability.

Professional Development includes trainings, workshops, coaching and ongoing opportunities for reflection and improvement.

Youth refers to elementary, middle and high-school-age young people (generally between the ages of 5 and 18.) Youth and young people are used interchangeably in this guide.

What other terms are part of your afterschool lexicon?

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT. guide was made to be used.

It's yours to mark up, photocopy, share, remove pages, add content from other seminars and sources...really, truly USE this book. This is an open-source workbook-style piece so you can pull apart and put together the pieces you need to help your program be the very best it can be.

The BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT. guide is divided into three main sections:

- 1. WE BELIEVE:** a shared set of principles and beliefs that guide our programs and Minnesota's afterschool community.
- 2. BUILDING BLOCKS:** six basic elements that build high-quality programs, with a list of research-based effective practices you can use to shape your program.
- 3. CONTINUOUS PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT (CPI):** an ongoing process to help your programs continuously raise the bar on quality.

Each section was carefully vetted and selected by the network, for the network. We came together as a statewide community of afterschool providers to review the research, determine the most effective, up-to-date practices in afterschool, and create this guide so we can improve the lives of the young people we serve. Whether you're part of a well-oiled machine, or a tiny new program that's just finding your footing, each section is meant to build upon the other in a continuous cycle of reflection and improvement.

Now we have a clearly articulated vision of quality programming, a shared language to clearly define each program element, and a guide to facilitate an ongoing improvement process — let's roll up our sleeves and get to work! The youth we serve are counting on us.



BRING IT TO LIFE

Throughout BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT., you'll find ways to act on the concepts in this book, such as:

- questions to guide reflection
- online resources for more information
- the key steps in a Continuous Program Improvement cycle.

ONLINE TOOLKIT:

Looking for more ways to strengthen each Building Block or integrate the CPI process into your work? New tips, tools and resources are added often!



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org/bibi

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Do you BELIEVE IT?

How are these ideas reflected in your program?

What are your organization's values?

Are any principles and beliefs missing from this list?

Every young person deserves opportunity to realize their fullest potential. We provide many different ways and places for young people to learn so they can develop their talents and ignite their passions.

Young people have many strengths, abilities and assets. We value youth voice, leadership, and the many meaningful contributions young people make to our community.

Afterschool programs are important and impactful. When we are intentional about quality, our work positively impacts young people's growth and development.

Community, family and culture are fundamental to a young person's identity. We create welcoming, inclusive environments where young people of all backgrounds and abilities can feel safe, freely express and discover their identity, and belong to a supportive community of peers and adults.

We are stronger together. Whole communities must act together to provide the full range of resources and experiences young people need to be successful.

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BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT.



**Building
Blocks**

BUILDING BLOCKS

BUILDING BLOCK ONE

INTENTIONAL PROGRAM DESIGN

What it means:

Positive youth outcomes are too important to leave to chance. While each program is unique, the need for intentional program design is universal. Programs identify their desired youth outcomes and directly connect program activities to those goals.

Why it matters:

Programs are more likely to achieve desired youth outcomes if they use a deliberate process to design, implement and evaluate activities.

What Effective Practices look like:

- Program has clear, focused goals that align with the organization's mission.
- Program explicitly connects activities to its desired goals.
- Program activities build upon each other sequentially to support young people's ability to expand skills or gain new knowledge.
- Program supports engagement through multiple learning techniques, such as project-based, hands-on experiences that relate to everyday life.
- Program activities are flexible enough to meet the various needs and skills of youth, while still meeting the intended program goals.
- Program provides regular, ongoing sessions so youth can participate often enough to achieve positive outcomes associated with high dosage (duration, intensity and breadth).
- Programs have opportunities for young people to reflect on and make meaning from their experiences.

OVER

BUILDING BLOCK ONE**USE THIS BOOK!**

Put a ✖ next to your strongest effective practice. Circle the one that needs the most attention.

**NEED HELP?**

Check out this link for more on Intentional Program Design.

www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/bb1

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Reflect

BUILDING
BLOCK
ONE



INTENTIONAL PROGRAM DESIGN

What's the first step you will take to improve Intentional Program Design?

What's next after that?

BUILDING BLOCK TWO**SUPPORTIVE
RELATIONSHIPS
& ENVIRONMENT****What it means:**

Programs purposefully create a welcoming environment. It's an emotionally safe place that young people want to come back to again and again, a place where they feel a sense of security, belonging and ownership.

Why it matters:

A young person needs a time and a place to develop — a place to safely fail and try again, a place to explore their interests or discover new passions. A secure, welcoming, positive environment best supports learning and development.

What Effective Practices look like:

- Program structure provides opportunities for staff and youth to build trusting, appropriate relationships.
- Program fosters a sense of community. Staff are welcoming, and encourage youth to connect with one another.
- Staff and youth have shared high expectations and consistency of appropriate norms and behaviors.
- Staff uses positive guidance to direct youth behavior and model positive behaviors to youth and to each other.
- Staff engages with youth as individuals to help them learn and develop.

OVER

**BUILDING
BLOCK
TWO****2****USE THIS BOOK!**

Put a ✖ next to your strongest effective practice. Circle the one that needs the most attention.

NEED HELP?

Visit our website for resources on Supportive Relationships & Environment.

www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/bb2

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Reflect

BUILDING
BLOCK
TWO

2

SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS & ENVIRONMENT

Which of these effective practices are strong?

Which could use some attention?

Brainstorm three next steps.



BUILDING BLOCK THREE

YOUTH VOICE & LEADERSHIP

What it means:

Programs authentically partner with youth to build their leadership skills. Young people are involved in meaningful opportunities to plan, implement, and evaluate program activities.

Why it matters:

Young people are more likely to stay engaged in the program when their ideas and contributions are included. This places their interests at the center.

What Effective Practices look like:

- Staff value and encourage youth voice and expression. Youth have the opportunity to make significant choices about activities in the program.
- Youth serve as leaders and mentors to each other.
- Staff support youth's leadership development through appropriate skill-building opportunities (e.g. goals setting, planning).
- Youth input and contributions are encouraged in activity planning, implementation and evaluation. As young people gain experience, their input and contributions become increasingly sophisticated.
- Staff provide opportunities for reflection and for youth to showcase their work.

OVER

BUILDING BLOCK THREE

3

USE THIS BOOK!

Put a ✖ next to your strongest effective practice. Circle the one that needs the most attention.

NEED HELP?

More ideas about Youth Voice & Leadership are online here:

www.
igniteafterschool.
org/bibi/bb3 ←

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Reflect

BUILDING
BLOCK
THREE

3

YOUTH VOICE & LEADERSHIP

How do youth in your program give input and make choices in your program?

What else could you do to weave youth voice into the fabric of your program?

BUILDING BLOCK FOUR

RESPONSIVENESS TO CULTURE & IDENTITY

What it means:

Programs create a safe and adaptive environment which recognizes that culture, family and personal history is core to a young person's identity formation.

Why it matters:

Programs that provide young people with an opportunity to explore their identity within the context of their own culture as well as others deepen young people's sense of self-esteem and increase their openness and understanding toward all people.

What Effective Practices look like:

- Program cultivates an inclusive environment where all youth and families are welcomed and respected.
- Staff create a safe atmosphere for children and youth to explore their own identity, including cultural beliefs and practices.
- Youth are encouraged to be their whole selves, honoring their culture, sense of self and life experiences.
- Program makes a genuine effort to ensure staff reflect the diverse race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, language and special needs of the young people being served.
- Staff meet youth "where they're at" and respond to their unique interests, needs and abilities. Young people's cultures are recognized and understood.

OVER

**BUILDING
BLOCK
FOUR**

4

USE THIS BOOK!

Put a ✖ next to your strongest effective practice. Circle the one that needs the most attention.

NEED HELP?

We've got more tools to improve Responsiveness to Culture & Identity online:

www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/bb4

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Reflect

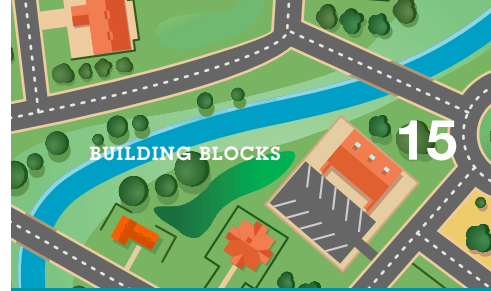
BUILDING
BLOCK
FOUR



RESPONSIVENESS TO CULTURE & IDENTITY

Is there an easy first step you can take to increase Responsiveness to Culture & Identity?

What's more challenging?



BUILDING BLOCK FIVE

COMMUNITY & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

What it means:

Programs communicate their value to and connect with the wider community. Staff builds positive relationships and meaningful interactions with families and community partners.

Why it matters:

A young person's development is strengthened when positive reinforcement comes from many partners working together — from parents, families and caregivers who feel valued by the program and can better support their children at home to communities that are strengthened by a positive image of youth making valuable contributions to our world. Young people are exposed to new ideas, experiences and/or supports that the program alone can't provide.

What Effective Practices look like:

- Program proactively builds meaningful community partnerships that have a logical fit and bring mutual value to each partner.
- Program actively embraces the culture(s) of young people, their families and their communities.
- Program encourages and welcomes family and community involvement (as volunteers, presenters, partners, etc.)
- Programs and families regularly communicate with each other about things like the youth's progress, opportunities to get involved, and feedback on the program.
- Program encourages and acknowledges young people's contributions to the community.
- Program communicates with and is visible in their local community.
- Communication takes place in multiple languages (when appropriate) and through multiple channels.

OVER

BUILDING
BLOCK
FIVE

5

USE THIS BOOK!

Put a ✖ next to your strongest effective practice. Circle the one that needs the most attention.

NEED HELP?

Additional Community & Family Engagement resources can be found here:



www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/bb5

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Reflect

BUILDING
BLOCK
FIVE

5

COMMUNITY & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Which of these effective practices are going well?

Which need some TLC?

Brainstorm three next steps.

BUILDING BLOCK SIX**ORGANIZATIONAL
MANAGEMENT, STAFF
SUPPORT & YOUTH SAFETY****BUILDING
BLOCK
SIX****6****What it means:**

Programs are safe and stable. They are part of a sustainable, well-run organization that values high-quality staff and supports them through professional development and training.

Why it matters:

An afterschool program is only as good as the people who run it and as solid as the foundation upon which it is built. Research shows that programs must be high-quality and have a sturdy infrastructure in order to positively impact youth success.

What Effective Practices look like:

- Program mission is understood by staff, board, youth and families and is aligned with the goals of the broader organization (if applicable).
- Program has written policies, systems and documentation in place to ensure a safe, appropriate environment and a response for day-to-day needs as well as emergencies.
- Program has solid oversight: a clearly defined decision-making process, set policies that are understood and followed, and competent supervision of staff/volunteers.
- Organization respects and supports the culture and identity of youth workers, and values them as individuals and professionals.
- Organization provides a clear path for staff to develop and advance, and ensures access to multiple staff professional development opportunities, including research-based best practices and cultural responsiveness.
- Program budget is tied to program goals and supported by solid financial management.
- Program has a system for collecting and evaluating data to support the program's continuous growth and improvement.

USE THIS BOOK!

Put a ✖ next to your strongest effective practice. Circle the one that needs the most attention.

NEED HELP?

For more tools to help guide Organizational Management, Staff Support & Youth Safety, check out:

**www.
igniteafterschool.
org/bibi/bb6**

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Reflect

BUILDING
BLOCK
SIX

6

ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT,
STAFF SUPPORT & YOUTH SAFETY

Is your mission statement widely understood and embraced?

Are your safety policies up-to-date?

Try going through these effective practices as a checklist at your next staff meeting. Develop a list of next steps for improvement.

BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT.

Continuous Program Improvement

CONTINUOUS PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

WHY CPI?

CONTINUOUS PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

**We want great outcomes for youth.
And great outcomes result from program quality.**

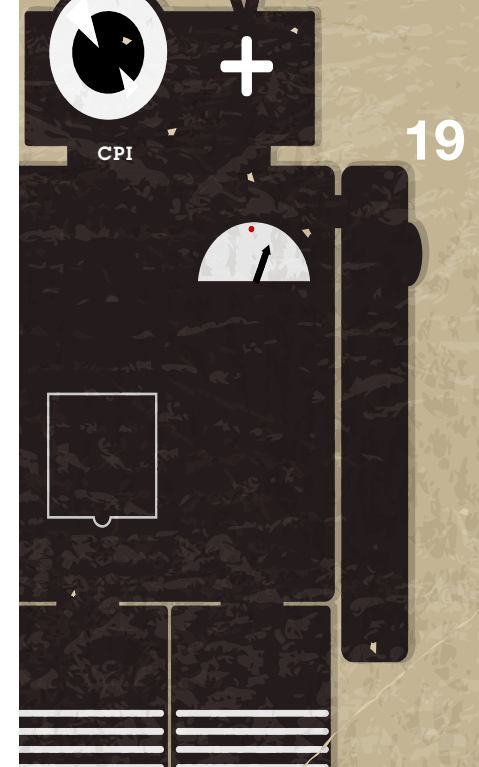
There's good news: It is possible to identify quality. Both research and practice have a lot of agreement about what makes a high quality program. The Building Blocks section of this guide helps define common hallmarks of quality that work across a broad array of programs.

But knowing what goes into quality programs is not enough. We must also be intentional about continuously improving our practices to ensure our programs are of the highest quality.

The Continuous Program Improvement cycle isn't meant to imply that our programs will never be "good enough." Rather it recognizes that program quality is not an end goal that we can check off our to-do list and set aside. Just as a garden needs continual tending to flourish, we need to continually nurture quality. CPI is a process to help us do this tending.

When programs commit to CPI, they systematically and intentionally evaluate and improve their program practices. They recognize that just as the needs of the young people they serve are always changing, so must programs change in order to best meet those needs. Programs engaged in CPI proactively make modifications and are guided by the belief that there is always room for improvement to increase quality.

The best reason for CPI is simple: better programs mean better outcomes for youth. By following the ongoing four-step cycle of **PLAN-DO-CHECK-ADJUST**, we can keep our programs dynamic, relevant, and — best of all — high quality.



IMPROVEMENT TIP >

Try doing a CPI cycle with each Building Block individually or pull specific elements from across multiple building blocks. **What you learn might surprise you!**



NEED HELP?

We've got more tools to guide your CPI process online:

www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/cpi

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CPI STEP ONE: **PLAN**

WHY PLAN?

In order for young people to be positively impacted by your program, you must first identify goals and outcomes. The easier your program plan and goals are to understand, the better.

HOW TO PLAN:

- Identify strategies and activities to meet program goals (use the Building Blocks!)
- Identify measurement benchmarks and tools — what will success in each area look like?
- Determine the resources needed to support the plan (e.g. professional development, financial)

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF PLANNING!

There's your **program plan**, and your **CPI plan**. Try one round of CPI over the course of one program cycle (you decide if that's one semester, one school year, one school year plus summer, etc.) Follow the natural timeline of your program, but don't be afraid to do "mini-reflections" and make adjustments on the go. It could be as simple as adding feedback loops and reflection to regularly scheduled staff meetings!

PLANNING TIP >

Select a few effective practices from the Building Blocks that you want to work on over the course of your program. Which Building Blocks will most help you meet your goals? If you're not sure, use the Intentional Design Building Block to create a program plan that ties program goals to youth needs and interests as a first step.

NEED HELP?

We've got more tools to guide your CPI process online:

www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/cpi

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CPI STEP TWO: DO

WHY DO?

Now you have a clear vision for positively impacting young people, it's time to implement the plan and give it your best shot! Be sure to monitor and record your progress along the way. Collect data and feedback that will help with the next step.

HOW TO DO:

- Implement Plan
 - Collect data about program that aligns with measurement benchmarks
 - Invite feedback throughout implementation
-

THE MORE YOU DO, THE BETTER YOU GET:

As CPI becomes more and more embedded in the culture of your program, you start to develop a shared understanding and recognition of quality. And once you know what quality looks like, it becomes easier and more natural to **do it well!**

DOING TIP >

When first starting out, implementation may be mostly staff driven. Prepare staff to celebrate and embrace change. Some program elements that are staff favorites may need to be adjusted if the CPI suggests they're not working. Keep focused on the big picture — making positive program changes makes a direct positive impact on youth!

NEED HELP?

We've got more tools to guide your CPI process online:

www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/cpi

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CPI STEP THREE: CHECK

WHY CHECK?

Quite simply, to see if your plan is working. This is the step where you compare results against goals to identify program improvements and adjustments.

HOW TO CHECK:

- Compare what is happening against your plan — what's working? What's not?
- Analyze and interpret data against plan
- Take time to reflect...and to celebrate your success!

HOW OFTEN TO CHECK?

How often should you check your progress against plan? Back in CPI Step One, PLAN, you determined if your CPI timeline is one semester, one school year, etc. The first CHECK should occur about half way through that timeline. Make sure your data sources — attendance data, pre/post assessments, etc. — fit this timeline. You have time to adjust before your program is done! Then, CHECK again at the end of your timeline. Now you'll have "results" from a full CPI cycle that you can use to inform your next program plan and CPI plan.

CHECKING TIP >

Use the Guided Reflection Questions on page 29 of this guide to help spark meaningful and productive conversations with staff, partners and other stakeholders.

NEED HELP?

We've got more tools to guide your CPI process online:

www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/cpi

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CPI STEP FOUR: **ADJUST**

WHY ADJUST?

It's time to adopt new practices and eliminate those that aren't working. It's all about making programs the best they can be for the young people you serve. Then, start the cycle again, with a new round of **PLAN-DO-CHECK-ADJUST**.

HOW TO ADJUST:

- Identify causes for what is/isn't working well
- Identify trainings, professional development and supports needed
- Make an improvement plan and then implement changes

BE REALISTIC AND ASPIRATIONAL:

Be sure adjustments are realistic, both what you hope to change and the number of changes you plan to make. Do you have the resources to tackle these adjustments? This might be a great time to engage additional stakeholders like youth and board members to help you prioritize. Think in terms of "easy wins and stretch goals". Note which changes can be made over the short term and which will need more time.



ADJUSTING TIP >

After every CPI, **reflect**: What did you learn about the CPI process and how can that inform your next CPI? Will you try a different timeline? Examine different building blocks? Engage different stakeholders?

NEED HELP?

We've got more tools to guide your CPI process online:

www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi/cpi

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BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT.

**Guided
Reflection**

GUIDED REFLECTION

Guided Reflection

Each Building Block is designed to help spark questions, ideas and conversations that will lead to program tweaks, recalibrations and ultimately, improvement. This Guided Reflection is just one more tool to help your team take the next step in the Continuous Program Improvement process.

For each Building Block, consider:

What are we currently doing?

Is it what we want to be doing?

What could/should we be doing but we're not?

Who else should we talk to about this? (for partnership, input, support, etc.)

OVER

Notes

Guided Reflection

For each Building Block, consider:

What surprised you most about how your program is connecting to a Building Block?

Did you find any areas where you aren't aligned with a Building Block?
Did that surprise you?

What are the barriers to what we want to accomplish?

What are our strengths in the areas that are working well?

Notes



Guided Reflection

For each Building Block, consider:

What are the easy first steps we can take to improve our program?

What are some of the more difficult changes that we need to consider?

Do we need additional (or different) resources from what we have now to make these changes?

What new questions do we have now that we didn't have before?

OVER

Notes

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Acknowledgments & Resources

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & RESOURCES

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A whole lot of research

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And inspiration from our peers

The ideas in the BELIEVE IT. BUILD IT. guide were inspired by the work of other statewide afterschool networks and program providers that have gone before us in creating a shared set of beliefs and best practices for their stakeholders. We are grateful for the inspiration that we found in the following guidebooks:

- A Field Guide to Best Practices and Indicators for Out-of-School Time Programs in the District of Columbia
- Georgia Afterschool Quality Standards
- Minnesota School Age Core Competencies First Edition, February 2006
- Quality Guidelines for Ohio's Afterschool Programs
- Quality Standards for Afterschool and Youth Development Programs: Washington State
- Utah Afterschool Quality Standards
- YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities Youth Programs Quality Infrastructure Tool

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