

Increasing Professionalism of the Afterschool Staff

As afterschool programs develop and mature, site directors find themselves challenged to develop a workforce that often lacks an understanding or tradition of professionalism. This article highlights common issues related to complacency and presents practical job-imbedded strategies (as gathered from program site directors) that work to mold an inexperienced staff with diverse backgrounds into a cohesive, professional unit.

Afterschool program directors face many challenges. That is part of being a leader. Among their foremost challenges are the expectations related to casting a vision of quality programming and leading children, youth, and adults in ways similar to what school administrators do with highly trained veteran educators. To succeed, afterschool program leaders must hire good people who are willing to work hard with a realization that their efforts will result in minimal earnings. Often, these frontline¹ staff members are expected to engage and teach challenging students. Their ability to learn while on the job is an essential skill. They must possess capacity, patience, compassion, and love of children and youth. But because frontline positions are typically hourly, part-time jobs, they are often filled with college students, second wage earners, or others seeking work during the hours after school. Turnover in these positions is frequent. Job stability is unlikely. As a result, site directors are faced with motivating a staff that is young, untrained, and with few experienced role models. They must teach and inspire an understanding of a work ethic. Where intrinsic motivation is lacking, staff members often show a complacent attitude, which is a minimalist satisfaction level with their work in relation to their compensation. Without support and practical “how-to” strategies for addressing

challenges and learning how to lead, continuous progress is difficult. Standards of program quality become unattainable.

The Common Issues of Complacency

There are many indicators of staff complacency. Site directors cite it as a key barrier to attaining a high level of afterschool outcomes. Program leaders often state that their employees view frontline teaching positions as “not a real job”. Further, they lament that many employees are unfamiliar with the professional field, lack general knowledge, and cannot see the bigger picture of what they can become a part of.

Many younger workers view frontline staff positions as temporary work to offset the cost of schooling, a second income, or a supplement to make ends meet. They bring experience working in fast food establishments or low paying service positions where expectations were often very minimal. As they look for career paths, they have difficulties finding satisfaction and security in afterschool like they did in other ‘student’ jobs. Many lack an understanding of the concept of purpose.

Older afterschool employees sometimes bring a level of cynicism to their work, another indicator of complacency, which can become infectious. Without support and a sense of security, their stress can negatively affect an afterschool program. Unfortunately, time and funds for pre-service training are often lacking, so frontline staff often are forced to learn while on the job, not an ideal situation for a cynic. With so much

¹ Frontline afterschool staff members are those in direct contact with children and youth.

to teach and so little time to do it, site leaders often experience frustration with employees who lack the prerequisite knowledge or intrinsic desire to be successful.

Perceptions strongly influence attitudes. The perceptions about work that frontline staff members bring to their afterschool positions often impact their attitude and desire to put forth effort. Additionally, their attitudes have been shaped in work environments where attention to interpersonal relationships was often not emphasized and communication was lacking. If an employee perceives afterschool as unimportant, or to be less valuable learning time than the regular school day, a self-defeating attitude is likely to impact their quality of work.

Challenges Working with Part-time Staff

Many frontline staff members work multiple, part-time jobs to make ends meet. As a result, fatigue is a common issue, sometimes mistakenly perceived to be complacency by program leaders. Some are simply physically exhausted while at work. But to survive, workers feel they must jump from job to job to increase earnings, schedule college classes, or leave for more steady employment opportunities.

Many young workers lack experience. Those in their 20s and 30s frequently can find themselves in conflict with older workers because of unrecognized or acknowledged generational characteristics. What appear to be characteristics of indifference or complacency are really divergent attitudes and approaches to balancing work and personal time. Regardless, it is a challenge to a 'Baby boomer' program leader to adapt and accommodate the needs of a 'Millennial' worker.

Because of a recognized lack of experience, training and professional development for the afterschool staff is essential. Yet, the challenge is that time and resources often prevent program directors from providing what they know is needed. In many areas, accessibility to trainings of the highest caliber is limited. After meeting the minimal and required compliance requirements for licensing and regulatory

trainings, budgets are often depleted for higher level onsite, local, regional, state, or national professional development opportunities. As a result, training for afterschool professionals remains a limited, parochial activity rather than a professional endeavor with an interconnected, unified, and broad scope.

Strategies to Increase Professionalism

Despite numerous challenges and obstacles to developing high quality afterschool programming, effective afterschool program leaders possess an entrepreneurial attitude and approach to attaining progress and success. Many share their strategies at professional conferences, in print, or via networking forums. What follows are brief descriptions of evidence-based practices to increase professionalism that work:

- Dress first class, think first class, and act first class.
- Connect with the school day. Build relationships with school personnel and community stakeholders in order to demonstrate a value-added impact of afterschool involvement.
- Align the school and afterschool vision and mission statements, goals, expectations, and protocols.
- Share staff, resources, and training opportunities with schools. Pooling resources maximizes what exists within communities and produces an increased value for dollars spent.
- Develop a collaborative relationship with school district officials and establish goals of sharing job applicants and providing hours of service that the district may not be able to fill for their own prospective employees.
- Sponsor joint training sessions that offer professional development credits for school and afterschool employees on topics aligned with the school's mission.
- Contribute to the newsletter and/or website of your program's school(s) with engaging content about what is happening in afterschool.
- Connect with other providers and program leaders at the community level. Reduce

working in ‘silos’ and strive to develop a unified voice. Address issues of professionalism collectively rather than in isolation.

- Partner with area providers to share staff and/or pool benefit offerings that would make jobs more attractive to qualified candidates. Develop a regional/citywide services and programming approach.
- Schedule regular staff meetings focused on teaching expectations, addressing issues, and supporting professional growth of each individual.
- Attend school support team meetings, particularly for students attending the afterschool program.
- When appropriate, ask to be part of the agenda for a “Principal’s Tea”, Open House, or other gathering with teachers and parents.
- Establish an employee wellness committee designed to allow staff members to share ideas, discuss work-related concerns, and create ways to develop a better workplace.
- Adopt a sophisticated and well-planned system for interviewing candidates which incorporates thorough job descriptions, authentic interview questions with ‘audition-type’ opportunities for candidates to showcase what they know and can do.
- Provide staff with mentoring opportunities among the site-level team as well as with staff from other programs.
- Share evidence-based practices through social media.
- Develop ways to incorporate staff talents/hobbies into program offerings that link with curricular frameworks or common core standards.
- Tactfully remove individuals that prove incapable of professional growth.

Implications for the Field

There are myths and persistent perceptions, held especially by cynics in schools, that the field of afterschool education lacks credibility and validity. Those perceptions are due, in large part, to how educators view the low levels of educational training of afterschool staff. Low-level training limits income levels which contribute to high transiency levels, all of which

further erodes credibility. While unconstructive perceptions may be inferred for many reasons, research² clearly validates the academic and social-emotional benefits that participants in afterschool programs can attain. Afterschool professionals must work to eliminate negative perceptions by increasing professionalism.

Professional learning opportunities must be developed that prepare Millennials to be successful in the workforce. Likewise, professional learning that enables workers of different generations to maximize their characteristic strengths and minimize shortcomings would be beneficial. Furthermore, training must be developed to help Millennials lead others of their own peer group as well as those who are older.

Older afterschool leaders often report that Millennials do not appear to take their jobs seriously. They get push-backs when they ask them to work extended hours that might interrupt their social and extracurricular activities. Research³ shows that they need frequent reminders about the commitments of the job they have accepted and what ramifications their actions, both positive and negative, might have on the program and the lives of the children and youth. Millennials must be given advance notice of schedule changes and meeting dates so that they can fit work into their life.

Millennials generally lack predisposed ideas or prejudices about race, lifestyle, or appearances. They do not judge on first impressions which may explain why they do not “dress for success” for interviews or jobs. They need to be taught that others do value and judge on appearance.

We live in a technologically advanced and interconnected world. Millennials are globally savvy. The Internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc. have shaped them with new and unique outlooks and countless contacts. Site directors with lesser technological aptitudes should capitalize on Millennials’ skills, encourage them to share their

² Durlak, Granger, Shernoff, Vandell et. al. (see references)

³ Heatherfield, Espinoza, et.al. (see references)

ideas for improvement at the workplace, and charge them with advancing use of technology for all program participants.

Summary

Establishing and maintaining high levels of professionalism is a challenge in many professions. Complacency, especially as reported among the youngest members of the afterschool workforce, can be counteracted by developing positive relationships and repeatedly teaching expectations. Lack of professionalism exists where site directors allow it. Now is the time for afterschool site directors to lead the field by identifying, teaching, and clarifying professional behaviors and attitudes.

There are abundant evidenced-based models of exemplary, credible, professionally grounded afterschool programs. Workers in those programs are well-trained and adhere to high expectations. They understand how they should look, act, conduct themselves, think, and learn. Strong leadership is evident.

For afterschool program sustainability, professionalization of the field is imperative. All members of the workforce must capably work with school personnel and convey to community stakeholders a credible and valuable service for children, youth, and families.

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About the NAA Program Site-Directors Committee

This advisory committee has been established to identify issues, concerns, needs, and best practices for those members of the profession with direct leadership responsibility at the program site level, whether full or part-time. The committee makes recommendations to the NAA Board of Directors and/or NAA staff regarding resources that are needed, leadership needs, concerns from the field, membership issues, professional development needs, and networking opportunities for NAA members.



NAA Member HelpLine

Are you reflecting upon a professional issue or experience and wrestling with what to do, what to say, and how to act? Even if you are fortunate to have a mentor, another unbiased viewpoint might also provide insights that prove invaluable. The National AfterSchool Association offers the Member HelpLine for its full-status members. Post a question, and you'll get responses and advice from members from across the country.

<http://www.naaweb.org/form.asp?i=4>

Recommended Readings

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