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STAFF SELECTION: WHAT'S IMPORTANT FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

Part 1 in a Series on Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in Out-of-School Time Programs: The Role of Frontline Staff

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BACKGROUND

Research on successful out-of-school time programs repeatedly has found that the caliber of a program's staff is a critical feature of high-quality programs that achieve positive outcomes.¹ Therefore, attracting, selecting, and retaining high-quality staff has become a major objective of out-of-school time programs.

To expand what is known about staff selection, Child Trends recently conducted a review of existing research and collected data on this topic as part of a study on the role of frontline staff in the effective implementation of out-of-school time programs.¹ This brief presents findings from that study and the research review, as well from other research about staff selection, and links these findings to effective strategies for recruiting and selecting frontline staff. The brief also describes these strategies.

WHAT IS STAFF SELECTION?

Staff selection has been identified as one of six core implementation components—or implementation drivers—necessary for helping practitioners implement evidence-based and innovative services effectively.^{2,3} These core components include:

- Staff selection and recruitment
- Pre-service and in-service training
- Coaching, mentoring, and supervision
- Facilitative administration
- System-level partnerships
- Decision-support data systems

This brief focuses on the first driver: staff selection.

Staff selection involves recruiting, interviewing, and hiring new staff or redeploying existing staff within the program.

¹ For this study, Child Trends conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine program directors of evidence-based out-of-school time programs (i.e., programs that have been experimentally evaluated and demonstrated positive outcomes). Child Trends also held a Roundtable with program staff from nine additional evidence-based out-of-school time programs. The purpose of the interviews and Roundtable was to gather information to better understand how the selection, recruitment, training, and coaching of frontline staff can facilitate the successful implementation of evidence-based, promising, and innovative program models in the out-of-school time field.

WHY IS STAFF SELECTION IMPORTANT FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

The move toward implementing evidence-based out-of-school time programs has prompted interest in a suitable workforce and, in particular, the experience, education, credentials, and skills that practitioners need to facilitate high-fidelity implementation of new and innovative services for children and youth. Indeed, the practitioner is the person who is most responsible for delivering the services effectively to program participants. Therefore, it is becoming imperative to identify successful strategies for recruiting and retaining high-quality staff and to determine core competencies associated with effective practitioners of evidence-based and innovative programs.

Research conducted on staff selection in the human services field suggests that both formal qualifications (e.g., education, background, certification, and experience) and less measurable personal and interpersonal characteristics (e.g., commitment, communication skills, and attitudes toward youth) may be important when recruiting staff. Despite the limited availability of empirical research about the selection of effective practitioners for out-of-school time programs, key issues to consider when hiring staff have emerged from the field. These issues include experience, education, skills, readiness for and commitment to the program, and personal characteristics.

HOW CAN PROGRAMS RECRUIT APPROPRIATE STAFF?

The successful recruitment of appropriate and committed staff in many ways determines the success of an out-of-school time program. In that recent study, Child Trends found that program directors use five major strategies to successfully recruit appropriate staff:⁴

- Hire volunteers and promote from within – Program volunteers and current staff already have a commitment to the program and an understanding of program goals. Therefore, many program directors reported recruiting volunteers for paid positions. Additionally, program directors suggested creating a “career ladder” to help current staff advance (for example, from frontline staff to administrative staff). This approach can be an effective way to retain talented individuals in the program.
- Encourage peer recruitment – Current high-quality staff members who are committed to the program are often good resources for recruiting new staff. Program directors noted that practitioners who have delivered a service or program successfully can be the best recruiters.
- Tap into AmeriCorps programs – AmeriCorps programs such as Public Allies and Teach for America can be good resources for recruiting staff members who are enthusiastic and mission driven. However, program directors noted that staff members recruited from these programs were most successful when the program was clear about its selection criteria and program staff were heavily involved in the recruitment process.
- Conduct community outreach and form partnerships – Collaborative partnerships with schools and community-based organizations can be effective vehicles for recruiting staff, although, as noted above, it is important that programs are clear with partners about their selection criteria for staff prior to the recruitment process. Additionally, programs should work with partners to understand the preexisting obligations of potential staff and to try to work collaboratively, rather than competitively. Program directors suggested meeting with public school principals to identify strong teachers in their schools who might be interested in after-school jobs, along with participating in community outreach activities and events with other local organizations. Program directors also noted that another good way to attract staff is to establish a presence on university and college campuses by participating in job fairs.
- Capitalize on media and technology – Media outlets, including newspapers and the Internet, are major sources for recruiting staff for out-of-school time programs. Program directors reported advertising job opportunities in community and local newspapers, as well as on Web sites such as Craigslist and Idealist.org.

In addition, out-of-school time staff members reported that they often use referral and return incentives. For example, some programs offer a monetary incentive to staff persons who refer friends, which can offset the costs of recruitment efforts. And some seasonal programs provide staff with monetary or benefit incentives to return the following year.⁵

HOW CAN PROGRAMS SELECT APPROPRIATE STAFF?

Given the primary role that staff members play in the delivery of services, it is essential to select people with the capacity to carry out evidence-based and innovative practices. Selecting appropriate staff members has an impact on whether programs are implemented with fidelity and the degree to which the intended target population achieves successful outcomes.⁶ Results of a study examining high-performing after-school projects funded by The After-School Corporation (TASC) are instructive in this regard. The study set out to determine what characteristics, if any, these programs shared. Evaluators found that high-performing projects were led by experienced staff with a common vision about what the program wanted to achieve.⁷

Even though limited research exists on staff selection for out-of-school time programs, as mentioned earlier in this brief, the available evidence suggests three major factors that should be considered when hiring staff members: 1) commitment to a program's mission; 2) skills and abilities to work with youth effectively; and 3) experience and credentials.⁸ Information on these factors is provided below.

Consider Staff's Commitment to the Program

Assessing potential staff members' commitment to implement evidence-based and innovative services within an out-of-school time program can ensure that newly hired staff members have the motivation to implement program services with integrity. Key areas to assess when selecting staff members include their attitudes toward the services and program guidelines, their openness to learning a new skill, and their willingness (or unwillingness) to buy into the program's mission and goals. Program directors of evidence-based and promising out-of-school time programs reported that they consider commitment and buy-in to be vital characteristics for practitioners in out-of-school time programs.⁹ Specifically, they cited the following characteristics as critical for successful program implementation:

- An understanding and belief in the program's overall vision and goals. Program directors reported that staff members should believe in the program's mission because they are then more likely to abide by the appropriate program guidelines or, as one program director noted, "the established and research-proven recipe," for implementing the program as designed and planned.
- Commitment to and passion about the program. Program directors underscored the idea that committed and passionate frontline staff members are necessary for developing strong, positive relationships with youth and achieving positive youth outcomes associated with program goals. In addition, part of assessing commitment, program directors noted, is determining whether or not potential staff members have sufficient time to dedicate to the program without experiencing burnout. One program, knowing that dedicated classroom teachers are at risk for burnout, only asked them to commit a couple of hours each day to participate in homework help sessions.

Consider Staff's Skills and Abilities to Connect With Youth

Staff's ability to connect with youth is a critical ingredient of successful out-of-school time programs. In particular, there is evidence that staff's ability to promote supportive interactions among youth and between staff and youth is related to achieving positive outcomes for youth. In Youth Roundtables conducted by Child Trends, youth mentioned relationships and personal connections between participants and staff as a common reason for joining and continuing to participate in out-of-school time programs. These positive interactions were associated with higher levels of academic self-esteem and frequency of out-of-school time attendance.¹⁰

The Youth Development Learning Network of the National Collaboration for Youth has specified 10 youth development worker competencies that also address practitioners' skills in connecting with youth.¹¹ These competencies were developed by a working group made up of key representatives from the National Collaboration for Youth member organizations. The core competencies are based on the knowledge, skills, and personal attributes needed by youth development workers to serve as resources to youth, organizations, and communities.¹² These core competencies include:

- Understanding and applying child and adolescent development principles;
- Communicating effectively and developing positive relationships with youth;
- Facilitating age-appropriate activities for program participants;
- Respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity;
- Involving families and communities;
- Working as a team and demonstrating professionalism;
- Empowering youth;
- Identifying potential risk and protective factors for youth;
- Demonstrating the qualities of a positive role model; and
- Interacting in a way that supports asset building.

Out-of-school time programs can benefit from using core competencies when developing job descriptions, selecting and hiring staff, conducting staff assessments, rewarding staff for good performance, or terminating staff for poor performance. In Child Trends' recent study on effective implementation strategies, program directors of successful out-of-school time programs emphasized the importance of these staff competencies, including the ability to communicate effectively with youth and present information in an accessible, youth-friendly format. Because training staff to connect effectively with youth is typically more challenging than is training staff in other areas (e.g., organizational skills), program directors suggested prioritizing this competency when recruiting and selecting staff.

It is also good for programs to highlight the value of hiring culturally competent staff members who have the ability to work and respond in a way that acknowledges and respects participants' culturally based beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and customs.¹³ Out-of-school time programs should consider the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of participants when recruiting and selecting staff. Research indicates that successful programs employ at least some staff members who represent participants' cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Consider Staff's Experience and Credentials

Staff credentials, including education and work experience, are often cited as additional factors to consider when selecting people to implement out-of-school time programs. Program directors of effective out-of-school time programs have called attention to the value of having college-educated staff.¹⁴ Interviews and a Roundtable conducted by Child Trends with program directors underscored this issue. One program director noted that young people often look up to frontline staff as "role models"; therefore, when programs stress academic excellence, it is important that they have educated frontline staff. At the high-school level, the need for highly qualified staff is especially significant. Findings show that older youth tend to view out-of-school time programs as an opportunity to develop skills in a specific area of interest, rather than just as a place to meet friends in a safe environment.¹⁵ Hence, staff credentials and level of experience may be particularly relevant to out-of-school time programs serving older youth.

Program directors participating in a Child Trends Roundtable also discussed the importance of recruiting and selecting staff members whose experiences and skills complement one another and encouraging them to work together as a team. Such arrangements not only give staff opportunities to learn from one another, but also give youth in the program a chance to see adults working together as a team.¹⁶ However, program directors also noted that clear expectations must be set for the team from the beginning to ward against competition among individual team members.

CONCLUSION

Despite the need for additional research, a growing consensus is emerging about what should be done to ensure that out-of-school time programs hire the most appropriate staff to implement practices effectively and achieve positive outcomes. On the basis of the available evidence, Child Trends offers the following recommendations and action steps to support the use of effective staff selection strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAFF SELECTION, BASED ON AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

- Recruitment practices should be comprehensive. Using a comprehensive approach increases the likelihood of finding appropriate staff to implement program practices effectively.
- Recruitment and selection practices should include multiple factors, such as education, interpersonal skills, and abilities. Research findings suggest that while education and experience are important criteria to consider when hiring staff, personal characteristics such as the ability to connect with youth are equally, if not more, important for achieving positive outcomes with youth.
- Staff should be culturally competent. Culturally competent staff members have the ability to work and respond in a manner that acknowledges and respects participants' culturally based beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and customs. Out-of-school time programs should consider the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of participants when recruiting and selecting staff. Research indicates that successful programs employ at least some staff members who represent participants' cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- Out-of-school time programs should apply consistent standards to evaluate applicants to facilitate the decision-making process. Using core competencies to assess staff and make hiring decisions can ensure that appropriate staff members are consistently selected.
- Out-of-school time programs should assess staff readiness, motivation, and openness. Key areas to weigh when selecting staff members include their attitudes toward the services and program guidelines, their openness to learning a new skill or skills, and their willingness to buy into the program's mission and goals.

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