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Publication #2009-06

February 2009

USING COACHING TO PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME STAFF

Part 3 in a Series on Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in Out-of-School Time Programs: The Role of Frontline Staff

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BACKGROUND

Although skills needed by out-of-school time practitioners can be introduced during training, many skills can only really be learned on the job with ongoing support and supervision provided by a “coach.” Research from both the education and out-of-school time fields supports the value of staff coaching as a professional development tool, and staff coaching has been found to be a component of high-performing out-of-school time programs.^{1,2}

In an effort to expand what is known about staff coaching, Child Trends recently conducted a literature review on this topic. Additionally, Child Trends collected data on staff coaching 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 literature review and links these findings to effective strategies for staff coaching in out-of-school time programs. The brief also describes these strategies.

WHAT IS STAFF COACHING?

Staff coaching (sometimes known to practitioners as ongoing staff support and supervision)³ is one component of professional development, which includes a variety of education, training, and development activities with the common goal of increasing staff knowledge and skills to improve youth outcomes.⁴

Staff coaching involves ongoing teaching, reinforcement of newly learned skills, and adaptations of skills and knowledge of the field to fit practitioners' personal styles.⁵ Staff coaching includes activities for both individuals and groups, such as on-the-job observation, instruction, modeling, feedback, debriefing, and emotional support. Staff “coaches” may be other frontline staff members, administrators, outside consultants, or staff supervisors.

Staff coaching has been identified as one of six core implementation components—or *implementation drivers*—necessary for helping practitioners implement evidence-based and innovative services effectively.⁶ These six core components include:

- **Staff selection and recruitment**
- **Pre-service and in-service training**

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.

- **Coaching, mentoring and supervision**
- **Facilitative administration**
- **System-level partnerships**
- **Decision-support data systems**

This brief focuses on the third driver: *staff coaching*.

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

Out-of-school time programs derive numerous benefits from staff coaching. While behavior change is difficult under any circumstances, staff coaching can help practitioners overcome the fragility, awkwardness, and incompleteness of newly learned behavior, three common barriers to implementing evidence-based practices.⁵ Additionally, ongoing coaching can help prevent the natural tendency to backslide. Coaching can have positive effects in all four areas.

- **Fragility of newly learned behavior:** Because it takes time for practitioners to become adept at using newly learned evidenced-based practices, those affected by these practices (e.g. program participants) may react negatively to them at first. If this happens, effective coaches support practitioners through this period of getting worse before getting better.
- **Awkwardness of newly learned behavior:** No matter how thorough the initial training, newly learned evidence-based practices may feel uncomfortable and even unnatural at first. Effective coaches teach practitioners to get a feeling for the nuances of each practice and to find ways to work with these practices in the context of their personal styles and unique circumstances.
- **Incompleteness of newly learned behavior:** Only so much material can be covered during any initial training. Effective coaches guide practitioners as they move from entry-level knowledge and skills toward expert-level knowledge and skills.
- **A tendency to backslide:** Even after new approaches and practices are mastered, it is natural to gradually slide back into familiar ways of doing things. Ongoing coaching can help sustain new behaviors and prevent backsliding.

Evidence from the Education Field

Because of the similarities between the fields of education and out-of-school time and the limited amount of research on staff coaching available within the out-of-school time field, Child Trends broadened its scope to include evidence on staff coaching from the education field. Most of this research focuses on peer coaching, that is, frontline staff receiving guidance and support from other frontline staff. Evidence from the education field suggests that peer coaching is at least as effective as traditional supervision, that it encourages collegiality and experimentation, and that it is positively related to teacher change and student performance:

- **Peer coaching is at least as effective as traditional supervision.** One experimental study found that peer coaching—when participants have received some training in coaching techniques and when feedback is consistent—is at least as effective as traditional supervision for training prospective teachers.⁸ (In an experimental study, people are randomly assigned to two groups and the results for these groups are compared.)
- **Peer coaching encourages collegiality and experimentation.** In another study, teachers participating in peer coaching reported that they tried new techniques more frequently, felt more confident about trying something new, and were more willing to try something again that did not go well the first time.⁹
- **Peer coaching is positively related to teacher change and student performance.** Teachers in two studies made more changes to their lessons during a phase in which they were receiving coaching. In one study, teacher changes corresponded with positive changes in children’s participation.^{10,11}

Evidence from the Out-of-School Time Field

Evidence from the literature and from a recent study done by Child Trends suggests that staff coaching is a valuable component of out-of-school time programs.

- **Staff members appreciate and enjoy participating in coaching activities.** One out-of-school time program director reported that classroom teachers working with the program appreciated the opportunity to work with coaches because they do not receive coaching from their school district.¹² Another program director reported that her frontline staff members requested more time together in order to share experiences and best practices, and to plan (that is peer coaching).¹³
- **Staff members who receive coaching report improvement in their skills.** Staff members with the After-School Literacy Coaching Initiative of Boston who reported being more involved with literacy coaching activities were significantly more likely to report improvement in their skills.¹⁴ Staff reports of working one-on-one with a coach, observing coaches model read-alouds, being observed, and getting feedback were all significantly correlated with reports of improvement in skills.
- **Staff coaching is a consistent component of high-performing programs.** High-performing out-of-school time programs use longtime staff and managers to mentor, guide, and work with new staff.^{15,16} Results of a study examining high-performing after-school projects funded by The After-School Cooperation (TASC) are instructive in this regard. The study set out to determine what characteristics, if any, these programs shared. The evaluators found that high-performing projects supported on-the-job mentoring, as well as peer modeling.¹⁷
- **Program quality is linked with certain coaching characteristics.** The CORAL Initiative, an academic after-school program designed for students in low-performing schools, identified its use of literacy directors (literacy coaches) as a promising practice. The Initiative found that program quality was highest when literacy directors:
 - Had both literacy experience and training;
 - Had been hired during the planning stages of the program;
 - Had some authority over program leaders; and
 - Had sufficient time to work with and monitor program leaders, making frequent visits to sites to observe and provide ongoing feedback.¹⁸

WHAT STEPS CAN PROGRAMS TAKE TO COACH FRONTLINE STAFF EFFECTIVELY?

Given the important role that staff coaching plays in helping practitioners overcome the fragility, awkwardness, and incompleteness of newly learned behavior, as well as the tendency to backslide, it is critical that out-of-school time programs incorporate some elements of staff coaching into their professional development strategy. The following recommendations and action steps are based on the evidence available from the literature and from a recent Child Trends study on effective implementation strategies.

- **Select coaches who are knowledgeable.** Coaches should have knowledge of coaching theory and technique, as well as content area knowledge. If staff members will coach each other (peer coaching), consider providing some initial training in the art of coaching. If employing “expert” coaches, make sure they have experience not only in their field (for example, reading interventions) but also in coaching. Coaches working with effective out-of-school time programs interviewed by Child Trends were master trainers, supervisors, or staff members with years of experience working with the target population.¹⁹ For example, one out-of-school time program paired each new teacher with a veteran teacher.²⁰ Another program reported hiring experienced classroom teachers to serve as mentors or “implementation gurus” to college students providing frontline services.²¹
- **Promote positive relationships between coaches and staff.** Coaching relationships should be built on respect, trust, and collegiality. To promote such relationships:
 - Roles, expectations, and the purpose of the coaching relationship should be clear from the beginning, and both coaches and staff members should understand and believe in them;
 - Feedback given by coaches should be positive, nonjudgmental, and should not be used for evaluative purposes; and
 - When possible and appropriate, staff members should be given some degree of choice in their coach, be it peer or expert.²² In this context, one program found that classroom teachers hired as frontline staff were less resistant to coaching when it was provided by a peer rather than by an administrator.²³
- **Institute team meetings.** Coaches and staff or peer coaching teams should meet frequently and should engage in a wide variety of activities beyond observations and feedback. These activities

might include providing emotional support and companionship, planning, and reflection. One program manager noted that such meetings should be planned ahead of time or—given the busy schedules of out-of-school time staff—they may never happen.²⁴

- **Allow sufficient time for program staff to develop new skills.** Coaches and program staff should remember that the transfer of new skills takes time, approximately 25 teaching episodes for complex strategies.²⁵ Program staff members should allow themselves time to experiment, practice, and make mistakes. One out-of-school time program reported setting an “action research topic” to be the focus of the year. For the 2008-09 school year, ongoing support and coaching will focus on the topic “developing positive staff-youth relationships.”²⁶
- **Support and promote coaching initiatives fully.** Administrators should make sure that sufficient time and resources are devoted to coaching activities. For example, one out-of-school time program allocated time for every member of its administrative staff—from curriculum developers to communications directors—to conduct site visits to observe frontline staff in action. These informal observations helped program directors identify staff support needs and promoted deeper understanding and commitment for all staff.²⁷ Additionally, administrators should cover the responsibilities of staff members when necessary and help them work coaching into their busy schedules. One program found time for newly hired frontline staff members to observe veteran staff in action by having administrators stand in for the new hires.²⁸
- **Consider coaching as a long-term professional development strategy.** Coaching can be more than an implementation tool. It may also encourage experimentation and staff collegiality. Some evidence also suggests that effective mentoring and coaching can improve staff retention, a perennial challenge in the field.^{29, 30} In addition, some out-of-school time programs reported hiring graduates of their program as frontline or administrative staff, pairing them with supervisors in order to help them meet their career goals and climb further up the program’s career ladder.³¹

CONCLUSION

Staff coaching is one of six implementation drivers (staff selection and recruitment; pre-service and in-service training; coaching, mentoring and supervision; facilitative administration; system-level partnerships; and decision-support data systems). In order to implement evidence-based and innovative services effectively, all six drivers must be addressed. More research is needed to determine best practices for coaching program staff and whether the strategies vary depending upon the program population served and staff characteristics. Nevertheless, some clear ideas have emerged about effective strategies for coaching frontline staff to implement practices effectively and achieve positive outcomes. The recommendations Child Trends presents below reflect those ideas.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAFF COACHING, BASED ON AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

- Coaches should have knowledge of coaching theory, as well as content area knowledge.
- Coaching relationships should be built on respect, trust, and collegiality.
- Coaches and program staff or peer coaching teams should meet frequently, both formally and informally, and should engage in a wide variety of activities.
- Program staff members should allow themselves time to experiment, practice, and make mistakes.
- The program administration should support and promote any and all coaching initiatives fully, including making sure that appropriate time and resources are devoted to the coaching experience.
- Coaching should be considered a long-term professional development strategy.

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PROGRAMS INTERESTED IN STAFF COACHING

- **Child Trends**
Child Trends' Web site includes additional briefs on implementing evidence-based practices, as well as briefs on other topics relevant to out-of-school time programs; available at: <http://www.childtrends.org/youthdevelopment>
- **The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)**
Researchers at NIRN are in the forefront of implementation research and are responsible for developing the framework on which this brief is based (i.e., the six core implementation drivers, one of which is staff coaching). Those interested in more details about the framework will want to read *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*; available at: <http://nirn.fmhi.usf.edu/>
- **Harvard Family Research Project**
This project and its associated database provide both information and research findings about out-of-school time programs (e.g., professional development strategies), as well as a number of out-of-school time program evaluations. For example, *The Evaluation Exchange* winter 2005/2006 issue features an article highlighting one out-of-school time program's staff coaching model; available at: <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/professional-development>

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