



Key Characteristics of Exemplary After School Programs

In Philadelphia, the City's Out-of-School-Time (OST) program serves over 20,000 youth annually.¹ The OST program currently includes 134 Elementary School Model Programs, 53 Middle School Model Programs, 24 High School Model programs, literacy technical assistance for 27 OST sites, four Youth Education for Tomorrow sites and 256 after school clubs. Since July 2008, Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) has managed OST services for the City of Philadelphia.

To better understand characteristics of high performing after school programs, PHMC Research and Evaluation staff held a discussion group with ten OST staff, including eight Program Monitors and the two Program Monitor Supervisors. These program staff discussed the qualities of high performing after school programs, including some special strengths and challenges for congregation-based programs.

Key Characteristics

Leadership and Staffing: High quality staff at all levels is a key component to the effectiveness of an after school program. The site director position is especially important, as this person establishes the overall atmosphere and structure of the OST program. Additionally, the site director must represent and market the program to the family members of the children and to the members of the community where the program is located in order to foster good relationships and effective partnerships. An excellent site director sets a clear vision for the program and is able to leverage community resources to fundraise and plan quality programming. On the other hand, a poor site director can "run a program into the ground" and force the program to stop running its program.

The frontline staff who work directly with the children should have a passion for youth development programs. They are enthusiastic, good with parents, and understand the children and their communities, so they can create engaging and relevant programming. High quality staff are flexible when activities do not work out as intended. While it may be difficult to find qualified and motivated staff because OST staff positions are typically part-time, successful programs have been able to provide full-time employment for staff by creating other part-time positions beyond the after-school program, such as child care programs during the day.

¹ PHMC, 2010: http://www.phmc.org/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=135:out-of-school-time-program&catid=19:intermediary-services&Itemid=1537



Quality staffing is related to four of the eight standards of OST programming, as laid out by the City of Philadelphia.² Strong *human relationships* and effective *program planning, implementation, and administration* all depend on enthusiastic and well-organized staff.

Human relationships: Strong relationships are clearly one of the most important aspects of a successful program according to program monitors. It is also the first core standard for the City of Philadelphia OST programs. Relationships can be categorized into two main types: between the youth and staff and between the staff and youth caregivers. Again, quality staffing is essential to maintaining strong human relationships. Exemplary staff understand and connect with their youth so that they can plan age-appropriate activities that are responsive to student interests. Asking for student feedback on previous activities and opinions about future activities is one way that staff cultivate relationships with the youth. Staff also engage the students' families, as the entire family is a client of an after school program, not just the child. Some ways that successful programs engaged families were through parent advisory councils, family nights, and offering before and after care hours for working parents/caregivers.

Program operations and Structure: A successful OST program has an organized system for filing all internal program records (staff clearances, student intake forms, attendance records, etc.) and clear communication between all levels of staff. If there is an umbrella organization that runs the program, they provide support and technical assistance to the branches when needed.

Exemplary after school programs have a routine schedule and procedures that are clearly communicated to the children and families. Having a set structure sets clear expectations for the children, so that staff do not have to spend extra time explaining how the program operates. Clearly spelled out expectations and procedures also promote a sense of order and calm that does not exist in a program without clear structure.

Activities: Successful after school programs have youth-centered and youth-focused activities that are engaging, interactive, academically stimulating, and age-appropriate. Elementary, middle, and high school OST programs should have distinct activities that are appropriate for the developmental stages of their youth. It is especially important for older youth to have programming that is relevant and practical for them because older youth have more mobility to go to places besides an after school program and are more likely than younger youth to be able to choose what they do with their free time. Exemplary high school programs offer internship opportunities, teach career skills, and include activities that connect the students to new experiences and cultures. Staff can be trained in innovative methods and best practices, but they should also solicit feedback from the students about what they want to accomplish in the program.

² In Summer 2000, the City of Philadelphia's Child Policy Unit and the Philadelphia Youth Council developed, "The Core Standards for Philadelphia Youth Programs." These core standards are based on national youth advocacy recommendations, as well as Pennsylvania's Department of Welfare child care licensing regulations.



Resources: In order to maintain quality staffing and activities, exemplary OST programs have sufficient funding, supplies, educational materials, and physical space for their program. However, even with limitations on resources, creative site directors are able to find ways to use what they have and still produce high quality programming.

Community relationships: When faced with a lack of resources, high quality programs can rely on strong community partnerships to take advantage of job/internship opportunities, volunteer opportunities, free field trips, and community volunteers who can work with the youth. One respondent observed that with a strong network of community resources in place, successful programming can continue even if there is high staff turnover at a site. While the OST program benefits from community involvement, the program also brings value to the community, creating a mutually beneficial relationship.

Issues Specific to Congregation-based After School Programs

Overall, the program staff felt that OST programs hosted or led by congregations did not differ significantly from programs in other sites. They observed the same range of quality programs in congregation-based programs as other sites.

A few staff observed that congregations are more likely to run programs out of older and sometimes unsafe physical spaces, describing the spaces as “those church basement, up the rickety stairs to the attic kind of thing.” Though the program monitors encourage sites like these to make improvements to their spaces and get licensed by the Department of Welfare, congregations do not always have the funding, congregational support, or congregation interest to take those actions. While state licensure is not necessarily an indicator of quality, having an attractive and safe space for the program is vital to a program’s operations.

One interview respondent noted that some congregation-hosted programs served only children from their congregations. Sometimes these programs struggled with maintaining adequate attendance levels, but “they were not willing to look more broadly in the community for kids to participate.” While this was not a typical situation, it does represent one challenge that congregations may face when considering who they want to serve.

Finally, a challenge that some congregations encounter is operating too many community programs at the same time so that the after school program is overlooked. One respondent noted that, “They might run a great food bank...but nobody is going to their after school program even though tons of people could use it,” because there is not enough staffing or resources to run the program properly. Having leadership that is dedicated to after school programming is essential to ensuring a successful program.