using professional development to enhance staff retention

by Denise Huang and Jamie Cho

It was my intention to work here for the summer and then leave and go be a sports agent somewhere. But after three months of enjoying what I was doing and realizing there was really a connection here working with kids that I decided to stay on, change my major from communications to child development and began my career from school age…. I worked really hard, got my units, became the child care director here…. I truly believe that I was really born to be in this field.

With these words, Carol summarized a decision that led to 15 years of service at a community-based afterschool program. As a college student, she never anticipated a career in education, yet, with one summer experience forced on her by her mother, she felt connected and that she was "born to be in this field." Fueled by her enthusiasm, she moved up the ranks from child-care provider to director and eventually to executive director.

With her passion for education and devotion to the program, Carol is the ideal afterschool employee. However, her 15-year tenure makes her an exception in the afterschool arena, which is plagued by high staff turnover (Spielberger, 2001). This article discusses strategies for retention, with particular attention to the role of professional development in retaining staff.

The data and research findings for this paper were derived from two studies. The first was commissioned

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to the National Afterschool Partnership (NAP)[1] by the U.S. Department of Education to evaluate effective practices at the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs). The purpose of this study was to develop resources and professional development tools related to the establishment and sustainability of afterschool programs nationwide. Using rigorous methods, researchers identified 53 high-functioning programs representative of eight geographic regions, including rural, urban, community-based, and school district related programs. Exemplary practices in organization, structure, and especially in content delivery were examined.[2]

The second study, the Extension Study,[3] was set up to further evaluate how effective programs retain high-quality staff members. Four of the 53 programs in the NAP Study were examined in greater depth regarding staff recruitment, professional development, staff retention, and student outcomes. This paper extracts critical data and findings from both studies to reflect on how professional development may create a program climate conducive to effective staff retention. Findings discussed in this article are consistent with extant literature on professional development and support state licensure guidelines and accreditation standards.

Research Methods

The sample for the NAP Study consisted of 53 21st CCLC programs serving elementary and middle school students. They were chosen between 2004 and 2006 based on the Annual Performance Reports (APRs) or Profile and Performance Information Collection System (PPICS).[4] Each had met stated goals or had shown improvements in student achievement for two consecutive years. In addition, each program demonstrated promising practices in one or more of six content areas: reading, math, science, arts, technology, and homework help. For the Extension Study, four programs, one each from California, Florida, Indiana, and Texas, were selected from the original 53 programs. Based on PPICS or state standardized test data, these programs had gains in student achievement for the school years 2005–2006 and 2006–2007. Both district-affiliated and community-based programs were included in the sample. The number of staff employed at each site ranged from approximately 6 to 20. Project directors reported being in their positions 1–15 years, site coordinators 1–6 years, and instructors 1–13 years.

The NAP Study used a mixed-method strategy of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Qualitative methodology was selected for the Extension Study since such methods are most effective in revealing staff and parent perspectives. Various interview protocols were developed for project directors, site coordinators, site instructors, and parents to specifically address questions about staff qualifications, hiring and retention, relationships, and professional development.

The Importance of Staff Retention

Research has indicated that participation in afterschool programs is beneficial to students' academic development and social adjustment (American Youth Policy Forum, 2003; Posner & Vandell, 1999). Participation likewise protects students from becoming victims of crime and reduces teen pregnancy, smoking, and drug use (Fox, Flynn, Newman, & Christeson, 2003). These positive outcomes can be attributed to a number of factors, including homework help, enrichment activities, and enhanced motivation through engagement with the afterschool staff (U.S. Departments of Education & Justice, 2000).

The literature also shows that a positive relationship with just one caring adult can serve as a protective buffer for at-risk students (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). For example, positive relationships with adult mentors in Big Brothers Big Sisters has resulted in increased academic achievement and school attendance, as well as a reduction in risky behaviors, for the participating youth (Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Hall, Yohalem, Tolman, & Wilson, 2003).

Similarly, the NAP Study reveals that one of the most important components of afterschool programs in determining student success is the availability of positive adult role models. The findings further indicate that the staff working in these successful programs were above the national average in their years of experience and education levels, were motivated by intrinsic goals, and, most importantly, developed positive relationships with students and their families. The study identifies the presence of a qualified, motivated staff with a low turnover rate as an essential component in high-quality afterschool programming. Compared to the California afterschool staff turnover rate of 40 percent or more each year ("School-age care in California," 1996, p. 1), the NAP Study programs had 43 percent of the staff remaining at the same program for 3 to

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5 years, 14 percent of the staff remaining at the same program for 6 to 9 years, and 9 percent of the staff remaining at the same program for 10 or more years.

This evidence underscores the degree to which afterschool staff influence students' social and academic outcomes. However, little is known about how programs can retain quality staff or what role professional development plays in sustaining staff motivation. The purpose of the Extension Study was to reduce the research gap and examine how staff qualifications, hiring decisions, relationships among staff, and professional development opportunities interact to create a program climate that is conducive to student learning.

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Strategies for Retaining Staff

Raley, Grossman, and Walker (2005) state that, despite the benefits of positive relationships with adult role models in afterschool programs, hiring and retaining qualified staff members often poses a challenge. They found that, because funding for salaries was limited, afterschool staff were often paid low wages and worked in part-time or temporary positions, which they would eventually leave in favor of full-time or higher paying jobs. Fortunately, Raley and colleagues (2005) also identified strategies, in addition to higher salaries, that can help to retain high-quality staff:

- Hiring staff who have passion, respect, and concrete skills for working with young people
- Aligning staff skills with tasks
- Making training substantive and accessible; offering day-to-day staff development
- Monitoring program quality

Among these strategies, professional development, which encompasses the last two items on the list, is frequently mentioned by other studies (Flores, 2007; Zhang & Byrd, 2005). Professional development is important for retaining qualified staff because it provides opportunities for growth and can improve worker satisfaction. Furthermore, professional development increases staff efficacy and feelings of competency, thereby bolstering motivation and a sense of belonging in the program (Huang et al., 2007).

For the purposes of this paper, we define *professional development* as any learning opportunity that provides skills and knowledge for both personal development and career advancement; these opportunities range from conferences and lectures to informal learning opportunities in the workplace. As illustrated by the National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (2008), the variety of approaches to professional development include consultation, coaching, communities of practice, lesson study, mentoring, reflective supervision, and technical assistance. Speck and Knipe (2005) describe professional development as intensive and collaborative, ideally incorporating an evaluative stage. The following sections discuss key elements in Raley, Grossman, and Walker's (2005) theory on professional development and use the data gathered in the NAP and Extension Studies as examples.

Setting the Stage

All programs in the Extension Study said that they offered continuous professional development to their staff members. These opportunities ranged from job orientation and preparation for new employees, to professional development for existing staff, to meetings and other informal opportunities for communication and collaboration among stakeholders.

These four programs all held orientations for new staff. These orientations introduced employees to the physical space of the program; outlined the safety concerns and needs of the students; and defined roles, duties, and responsibilities for specific staff members. All staff reported that they were adequately prepared for their job responsibilities through orientations, trainings, and shadowing opportunities. The executive director at the California program said that new staff were given the opportunity to shadow a veteran staff member:

> The majority of them will do two days at a shadowing site. So they will go over there and learn the ropes and see the program with another group leader, or the program's leader will sit with them and just show them everything…. And then they'll go to their site.

Additionally, new staff received materials to familiarize them with their programs. One project director explained that all new employees received job-specific manuals:

> Their staff manual serves as their bible; it has everything that the program does, everything that they should be doing. It has their standards in it and their

job description, so at any time they can go back and remind themselves, "This is what I should be doing." As far as our supervisors, they have the same thing. Once they're hired, we have a program supervisor manual so we go through that…. It has eight categories, and it talks about finances, staff development, enrollment responsibilities, and stuff like that.

In addition, for specific afterschool curricula such as literacy programs or technology, science, or conflict resolution classes, the instructors attended specific trainings on the delivery of these curricula.

Providing Formal Training

Research shows that continuous professional development is needed to maintain staff efficacy (Duran & Duran, 2005). Halpern, Spielberger, and Robb (2001) stress that regular staff training can improve the quality of afterschool programming. Opportunities for formal professional development at these four programs ranged from periodical to monthly and from voluntary to mandatory. The differences were mostly based on job titles, with site coordinators receiving the majority of professional development opportunities. The interpretation of *professional development* also seemed to vary by position. In general, staff reserved the term for formal lectures and workshops, while the management considered training, staff meetings, regular feedback, and shadowing opportunities part of their staff's professional development.

Formal professional development and training catered to the needs of the employees. For site coordinators, professional development mostly focused on site management and job-specific uses of technology for management purposes. For non-certified staff, training generally emphasized classroom management and academic or enrichment programming. However, staff members who were certified teachers rarely participated in these trainings, since the information repeated the professional development for their day-school jobs. All program directors and site coordinators emphasized the importance of detecting the specific professional development needs of their staff members.

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When funding was an issue, these programs attempted to resolve the problem through innovation. For example, in order to provide professional development for all staff members, the Florida program worked hard to connect with the county's educational offices. Consequently, all afterschool activity leaders participated in a countywide teacher work day as well as a county-sponsored conference at a local middle school.

Another cost-saving strategy to maximize external benefits was the "train the trainer" approach, described by a Florida site coordinator:

> Funding is always an issue, but we make do. One of the things we've learned is if we can't take everybody, we're going to take the teachers or the activity leaders or coordinators who will come back and bring back the information. So we actually have a workshop within a workshop. They'll get the information, even if they're presenting; we come back and we share that information with everybody else.

Offering Day-to-Day Professional Development

More crucial than formal training is day-to-day professional development in the forms of mentoring and coaching of afterschool staff (Raley et al., 2005). Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, and Mielke (2005) state that meetings and open dialogue with staff help to strengthen staff professionalism.

Staff Meetings

The four programs in the Extension Study held regular staff meetings to enhance staff knowledge and skills. All four program directors reported that they held site coordinator meetings at least once a month. Besides addressing daily operational issues such as deadlines, memos, and training on, for example, particular computer software or the Internet, these meetings provided opportunities for managerial staff to share information about what was and was not currently working at their sites and to strategize future improvements. One site coordinator from Indiana added:

> During our site coordinator meetings we normally discuss what went on at the professional development. Last time we had two representatives that actu-

ally led a session based on their professional development workshop. So they redid their sessions and we were able to see what they did at the presentation.

Site coordinators also reported holding regular site-level staff meetings as a form of informal professional development. In contrast to the site coordinator meetings, site staff meetings varied greatly in frequency from weekly to monthly to as-needed. At many sites, the credentialed teachers who worked in the afterschool program offered job-specific preparation to their colleagues. They might, for example, mentor new staff by answering questions and telling them about site rules or provide training on how to work with students. At the Florida program, one of the credentialed teachers prepared new staff by teaching them about lesson planning:

> One thing we do is make sure that the afterschool staff have a format for the lesson plans. We are able to recycle some lesson plans to tweak them, make them a little better, fit the group that we are teaching that year. But most of the time we want to make sure that they have the lesson plans and they know this is the benchmark we're trying to go over at this point.

Staff meetings were also used as opportunities for team building, collaboration, and support. Staff members shared information, talked about difficulties, and received feedback or advice. Staff meetings were thus opportunities for mutual learning and mentoring.

Leveraging Human Capital

Another common theme among these four programs was that the project directors and site coordinators worked to maintain a family atmosphere characterized by collaboration and open communication among students, staff, parents, and day-school staff.

By using regular meetings and daily operations as professional development opportunities, these programs shared their vision, fostered team-building strategies, and maintained positive working environments as a means to motivate and retain staff members. To enhance a sense of belonging for the staff members, the four programs maintained an open and trusting environment where staff could ask questions, seek support and advice, and feel

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accepted. One site coordinator described the relationships at his site:

> When I go to work I feel it's more of a family because it's someone I can just go and talk to. For example, [the program director] is someone I can talk to about things that are happening in my life. He's also in the professional demeanor where I know if I have a problem here at school I can just go and talk to him about it.

Open communication was also perceived as imperative in the collaboration with the day school. Program leaders uniformly stressed the importance of maintaining familiarity and openness across organizational boundaries. Frequent meetings, e-mails, phone calls, and informal conversations were key in helping bridge day-school and afterschool programs. One project director explained his relationship with the day-school principals this way:

> I could pick up the phone [and talk to] any one of [the principals] today…. We're on a first-name basis, where we're very collegial. It could be just a "How do you think we could do this better?" Or they'll call and ask, "Can we do this? Do you think I should do this?" So I think it's a two-way street. It's not my way or the highway.

Day-school teachers who also worked at the afterschool programs served as liaisons between the two entities. They actively related information between the day-school and afterschool staff and monitored students' activities in both settings. Thus, when afterschool staff members identified an academic or behavioral issue, they would approach the day-school teacher freely. As one afterschool staff member said:

> You do talk to the teacher and say, "How's so-and-so doing in math? Because I helped them with it on Tuesday, and he seemed like he got it or it seemed like he didn't get it." And I think the more you work with [the students] after school, the more you can communicate with the teacher. It's almost like going backwards. You start off with the kid, then you talk to the teacher.

Finally, all four programs stressed the importance of extending this open communication to program volunteers and parents. Volunteers, often college students, were recruited with the incentives of flexible daily schedules, the opportunity for practical experience, and the chance to

contribute to society. All programs reported that these volunteers played a critical role in reducing stress on staff members by lowering staff-to-student ratios. Leadership was therefore intentional about keeping them in the flow of open communication. Parents uniformly benefitted from the multi-tiered flow of communication. They reported that the afterschool staff showed caring attitudes toward their children and were quick to address their concerns.

A climate of openness, teamwork, and collaboration helped staff members fulfill their intrinsic desire to make a difference. Many staff members mentioned this motivation as a reason for staying with their programs. They claimed that they were "passionate" about their jobs and enjoyed working with the students, as described by this staff member:

> I just like being able to be in this position and to help children. You know, as a teacher I think when you're really passionate about it, you make a difference in whatever way you can. Sometimes it may not be that I'm providing instruction. It may be that I'm just providing a social need or an emotional need for kids.

Providing Evaluative Structures

To reinforce this motivation, staff needed to know whether they were doing a good job and how to improve their skills so they could continually make a difference in students' lives. All four programs had formal or informal evaluation procedures in place for monitoring student academic outcomes, parent satisfaction, and managerial strategies. Although all four programs mentioned strong objectives in developing the well-being of the whole child, they had particularly strong commitments to goals that focused on academic achievement and improving grades or test scores. These goals were measured by tracking student progress on homework assignments, tests, and report cards.

Staff Feedback

Staff were formally evaluated in all four programs, whether by the administration of the afterschool program, the school district, or the day-school principal. Results were used to monitor program progress and to provide the framework for future professional development.

Moreover, as a strategy for continuous improvement, site coordinators provided verbal feedback on a daily basis, usually through casual or impromptu conversations. Unplanned classroom observations were also conducted by site coordinators and by most principals. The regularity of these informal forms of feedback was evidence of the trusting relationships between the site coordinators and their staff. Furthermore, informal feedback enabled site coordinators to build rapport with their staff, enhance the intrinsic motivation that inspired the staff to stay with the program, and provide a platform for staff to monitor and improve their own teaching strategies, using their skills and talents to make a difference with their students.

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Personalized Staff Development

More specifically, as part of the day-to-day professional development, all four programs gave staff autonomy to create and implement personal goals. One program conducted highly structured staff reviews using a tool developed by its external evaluator. This review enabled staff members to determine their personal goals for the following year. Some goals were self-directed: "I will gain better control of my class" or "I will work with Johnny to get all his homework completed." Others were project-oriented: "I will use this [strategy/curriculum] for eight weeks and I expect my student to [innovation results expected] after this time."

These goals were revisited six months later—sooner if needed—during a formal meeting in which a staff member's immediate supervisor provided individual feedback and encouraged personal ownership. The site coordinator said:

> [We sit every staff member] down at one point and share, "This is where I feel you are right now; these are your areas of growth and the next time we review this, this is where I would like to see you." They also have to write out their goals, and they're held accountable for those goals so that the next time we sit down, we can ask "What did you accomplish from your goal?"

What Matters to Afterschool Staff

Results from the four programs support current literature on professional development (Duran & Duran, 2005; Flores, 2007; Halpern et al., 2001; Raley et al., 2005). Study findings also revealed that critical components of staff retention include:

- Providing clear guidelines and expectations for responsibilities
- Giving staff opportunities to develop their skills and be supported in their professional expertise

Both of these key components were clearly evident in the programs of the Extension Study. Because of mandatory orientations, all staff members were able to clearly describe their roles and understood the program's expectations of themselves and their students. Shadowing opportunities further clarified responsibilities and expectations in advance.

Although external professional development was available to some staff, most support occurred on-site in the forms of daily interactions, personal communications, group meetings, and collaborations among staff members. These regular development opportunities allowed staff to constantly build new skills and maintain up-to-date information about their sites and the field. To keep staff members motivated and engaged, programs invited them to make and meet personal goals. Constant feedback enabled continuous improvement. Regular meetings provided opportunities for management and site-level staff to work together smoothly and efficiently in a family atmosphere.

Not surprisingly, staff across the four afterschool programs consistently reported an intrinsic reason for working in the program. Interview data further implied that incentives such as a career ladder and an ascending pay scale were not enticing enough to recruit or retain staff. A majority of the interviewees stated that the pay was not an incentive, regardless of whether the pay was viewed as good or inadequate. The key reasons staff gave for staying in the afterschool program were altruistic—for example, the chance to provide students with academic, social, and emotional support. One staff member said, "I know for me, I probably could go and find another job with the state and make more money. I'm sure of it, but that doesn't interest me. I love being here."

Interview results from the four sites also supported the idea that providing well-tailored, continuous professional development can enhance staff efficacy, motivation, and retention. In the current economic situation of constant budget cuts, finding that the most effective professional development need not take place in external conferences and workshops is encouraging. Intentional daily communication, feedback, and targeted on-site professional development opportunities do not entail additional costs to programs—but they matter to the staff more than external professional development and may serve as incentives to stay with the program and the profession. Notably, a number of staff members implied that they or their colleagues were encouraged to stay in the programs due to good working relationships with their immediate supervisors and the support received from them. As one instructor explained:

> [The site coordinator] has such a love for the staff and the children, and she hires people that have those kinds of personality traits. She has a lot of care and concern for the teachers and the students, and she asks us, "What can I do for you today? Do you have unmet needs?" And that interest is enough to make people want to stay.

Daily support, mentoring, and training were abundant at these high-functioning afterschool programs, helping to improve program quality and staff satisfaction. Most of these day-to-day professional development offerings were disguised as informal meetings or casual conversations with colleagues and supervisors. Furthermore, staff were empowered and supported in developing personal goals and objectives. Together with the family atmosphere created through open communication, teamwork, and support—not only within the program but often also with the host school—these programs were able to build rapport with their staff and motivate the staff to stay with the program.

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Notes

[1] The National Afterschool Partnership consists of the Southwest Educational Laboratory (SEDL); the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST); the Mid-Continent Resources for Education and Learning (McREL); the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL); the WGBH Educational Foundation; SERVE Inc.; the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE); and the U.S. Department of Education.

[2] For details, see the CRESST Final Report 768 "What works? Common practices in high functioning after-school programs across the nation in math, reading, science, arts, technology, and homework—A study by the National Partnership" (Huang, Cho, Mostafavi, & Nam, 2010).

[3] For details, see CRESST Report 769, "Examining practices of staff recruitment and retention in four high-functioning afterschool programs" (Huang, Cho, Nam, La Torre, Oh, Harven, & Huber with Rudo & Caverly, 2010).

[4] The APRs provided information including program objectives, grade levels served, number of students served, student demographics, student academic achievement data, hours/days per week, the specific content curriculum offered, number of staff in the program, and percentage of credentialed staff. In Year 2, the Department of Education contracted Learning Point to convert the APR into electronic versions called PPICS.