June 2001

Focus on Staffing

After School Issues

About NIOST

For over 20 years, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, has successfully brought national attention to the importance of children's out-of-school time, influenced policy, increased standards and professional recognition, and spearheaded community action aimed at improving the availability, quality and viability of programs serving children and youth. NIOST's varied initiatives have moved the field forward using three paths: Research, Evaluation and Consultation; Policy Development and Public Awareness; & Training and Curriculum Development.

NIOST is part of the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. The Wellesley Center for Research on Women and the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies are united in a joint mission to educate, inform and expand our knowledge of women's lives. It is home to an interdisciplinary community of scholars, and theorists engaged in action, research, theory building, publication and training.

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From Contrast to Concrete

Issues in Building a Skilled and Stable Out-of-School Time Workforce

In many ways, the field of out-of-school time (OST) in the year 2001 is a study in contrasts. On the one hand, there is unprecedented opportunity for individual programs and the field as a whole to begin building a skilled and stable workforce. Training opportunities are increasing and the emerging field has developed a system of accreditation, credentials, and other higher education opportunities. Yet much of this potential momentum is blocked in a climate of high staff turnover, increased demands for quality, and a lack of consensus as to the field's identity (Gannett, Nee, & Smith, 2001). The strong economy of the last several years has made matters worse, and a slowing economy will present new and serious challenges around the funding of professional development initiatives.

In another area of contrast, the field needs to take a "long view" in addressing its problems, but staffing and other immediate program concerns require vast amounts of attention and force a shortsightedness. In addition, the field needs to unify around common language, policies and practices, but it is clear that there is no one "fix" to any problem facing the field, and a diversity of approaches is needed (Gannett et al., 2001). Similarly, an enormous strength of the OST field is its unique identify as a provider of invaluable services to children of a certain age range at particular times of the day. Yet collaborations with allied professions will contribute much to this emerging field and will need to be pursued. Further, other fields to which we have typically had very little exposure, such as labor force economics, may provide innovative solutions to our problems.

At the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), we believe these contrasts are a sign of the times – a time of opportunity,

Produced by the **National Institute on Out-of-School Time**.
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This publication was made possible by a grant from the Wallace-Readers Digest Funds.

growth, and challenge. This "issue paper" provides a general overview of the major issues involved in building a skilled and stable workforce in the field. It begins with a brief discussion of the elements of professional development systems created by allied professions and being embarked upon by our own. It then reports the findings of NIOST's semi-structured interviews with 19 "Key Informants" from a variety of arenas within the field of OST. It concludes with recommendations from the field of economics on dealing with the critical issue of staff compensation.

The Pieces of a Professional Development System

The field of Out-of-School Time has begun the work of developing an agreed-upon professional development system, following on the heels of similar efforts in the Early Childhood Education field. While formal professional development systems are multi-faceted, their central goal is to support people who wish to "make a career" out of the work (Costley, 1998).

Wheelock College Institute for Leadership and Career Initiatives suggests five distinct elements of a professional development system:

1. **A core knowledge base** What do staff need to know in order to work effectively with school-age youth and have a positive impact on them?
2. **A career lattice or matrix** that links roles, qualifications, and compensation. What experience and training do staff need to move into a different role in the field?
3. **A system of training** that meets the needs of staff at all levels of work.
4. **A training approval system** whereby the field sets standards on the content, conduct, and quality of training.
5. **A registry of practitioners** that documents all relevant training and education completed by members of the field (Costley, 1998; Gannett, et al, 2001).

Reflections on Pieces of the System

Among the NIOST Key Informants and in the field overall, there is much philosophical agreement on the need to professionalize the field, standardize staff qualifications, and provide much more support for career mobility. Yet there is less agreement on exactly what should be required of a diverse workforce located in a variety of settings and program types. How much college work should be required and for what levels of employees? How much training should be required, on what schedule, and for whom? What are the appropriate roles of certification, apprenticeship, and other models of professional development?

There is also concurrence that the field needs a shared knowledge base unique to the school-age population, sometimes referred to as core competencies.

Core areas described as especially important by Key Informants included:

- Knowledge of child and youth development
- Familiarity with health and safety issues

- Knowledge of program development
- Cultural/community competency.

Additional areas have been outlined in the NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care (Roman, 1998).

With regard to a career lattice or matrix, many Key Informants agreed that there was a link – or at least should be a link — between qualifications and compensation, yet the link is not evident in all programs or for all levels of staff. There was recognition that the field cannot raise the bar on staff qualifications without also increasing compensation, but there was also anxiety that increasing qualifications and compensation may be too expensive for staff and for programs. A related issue raised was that compensation cannot be linked to just one qualification such as education. Rather, compensation should be driven by more of a "portfolio" approach which factors in experience, training, and merit in addition to education.

"Good Part-Time" & "Bad Part-Time"

The part-time nature of much work in the OST field is frequently mentioned as a specific cause of staff turnover and a more general barrier to building a skilled and stable workforce. Yet there is increasing recognition of both "good part-time" and "bad part-time" arrangements in the field. There is clearly some room for part-time work, especially in programs with stable infrastructures and full-time leadership. Many OST staff, for example, college students and enrichment specialists, truly prefer part-time work and can bring special energy to programs at lower cost than full-time staff.

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On the negative side, some of the NIOST Key Informants felt that part-time work belied the complexity of working with school-age children and the importance in young people's lives of stable and consistent relationships with adults. For staff who need full-time work and associated benefits, the realities of part-time work can be a major struggle. There is also a price to pay in the public eye, where part-time work is sometimes perceived as less important. One solution to the part-time problem is to create full-time options by "packaging" or "patchworking" together two or more part-time positions. Staff can work within the same agency, in schools, or elsewhere in community, for example, in child development centers, youth programs, or programs with a more traditional social work or child welfare focus, allowing for a more invested role in children and their families. Creative arrangement of hours is another possibility; before-school and after-school shifts can combine to become full-time positions. Another option is to make part-time jobs more attractive: providing benefits for fewer hours of work; building in more professional development time; offering connections to college courses and other resources in higher education; and facilitating the purchasing of benefits as a group.

Coming Together "Across the Boundaries"

As it begins the work of creating a skilled and stable workforce, the OST field will need to determine what makes it unique among — and what it has in common with — various professional groups that have been separated historically. How do we connect to and draw from allied professions while preserving our own identity and autonomy? Some NIOST Key Informants suggested that connections with schools and cultural institutions will become increasingly important as school-age care becomes a critical part of a longer integrated day and less of an add-on component. Similarly, connections with the field of Early Childhood Education will allow the field to tap into vast experience with professional development and with involving parents, policymakers, and the public as advocates in professionalization efforts. With regard to the Youth Development field, there are many commonalties, with both fields needing to educate the public about their work and worth, and both fields being involved in similar professional development activities. Moreover, as both fields evolve, they are in many cases serving the very same children (Esposito, 1997). Finally, many of the human service professions across the lifespan – child care, special education, child welfare, youth work, adult reported services, elder care — provide models from which to draw. The Key Informants voiced that there is enormous potential to share expertise and resources.

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There was also much sentiment that higher education is an invaluable partner in professionalizing the OST field, especially with regard to developing or refining relevant course work, creating OST concentrations, and establishing credentials. A comprehensive review of higher education's current involvement would be especially helpful at this stage in the field's development.

Coming Together from Within

Another important issue facing the field is how best to organize and unify itself. Amid a basic philosophical agreement that the field must unify before it is able to move forward, there is a sense that "the union model" or unionizing "across the board" is not the best response for the field at this time. Some Key Informants did feel that unions' track records in other fields (education, health care, military) could be helpful with regard to overall retention and stability, salary negotiations, benefits, improving workplace conditions, and linking training and education to compensation. However, the union model appears less useful in this field due to our diverse funding streams and an overall spirit of collaboration and cooperation between management and line staff. There were additional concerns about cumbersome policies and possible divisiveness.

There was much agreement, however, regarding the need for and value of professional organizations and associations. Such associations can help to build

partnerships and provide forums for people to talk about the work and feel more connected to it. Associations can also play a valuable role in linking people to training and other professional development opportunities and developing a stronger national presence.

Improving the Public Image

As the OST field develops itself as a profession, it must attend to the issue of public perception. There is a great need to enhance credibility with allied professions, local and more distal policymakers, the general public, parents, and even staff within programs. To a certain extent, the field's embrace of higher standards and qualifications, especially with regard to staff education levels, will improve the public's perception. Other more targeted efforts are also needed. For example, the newly formed Afterschool Alliance is accepting this mission and is creating national recognition days and public image campaigns.

Some Key Informants offered up the Early Childhood Education field as an excellent example of a profession crafting and refining its public image. Through dissemination of research findings and through other avenues, the ECE field has convinced the larger society that its work matters and benefits children cognitively, socially, and physically. In similar fashion, the OST field needs to promote how it benefits school-age children in a variety of ways.

The Economists' View on Building a Skilled and Stable Workforce

As we work among ourselves and "across the boundaries" to address our workforce issues, the field of economics — although unfamiliar to many of us — provides an especially valuable perspective. The Wheelock College Institute for Leadership and Career Initiatives has prepared a paper which seeks to add the voice of economists to the dialogue on OST compensation issues (Mitchell, Morgan & Harvey, 2001). Several main points of the paper are described here briefly and are offered as a springboard for further discussion.

First, while the OST field frequently focuses on the "supply" of programs, a more appropriate focus is on creating more effective "demand" for high-quality school-age care. From this perspective, parents as consumers need more detailed information about program quality (e.g., from Child Care Resource and Referral agencies), need to push for higher quality programs, and need to be able to pay for them (e.g., via more subsidies and tax credit programs).

Second, staff in the OST field experience a "negative return on investment," in that the amount they spend on higher education is usually higher than any associated increase in earnings. Scholarship and education loan forgiveness programs can eliminate this negative return.

Third, the field currently relies on an "elastic" supply of low-paid workers with relatively low skills who lack a long-term commitment to the field. Training

programs that put entry-level workers onto a career path can stabilize the workforce.

Fourth, community organizing, via unions and other organizations, can effectively lobby legislators and policymakers around issues of compensation.

Finally, there is currently very little public or private-sector support for school-age care, and the "amount invested per child" needs to be increased.

Towards the Concrete

This NIOST "issue paper" has outlined the major issues facing our emerging field as we build a skilled and stable workforce. Each of the issues presented here – the need to enhance credibility, to agree upon what our professional development system will look like, to enable people to make careers out of the work, and to ally with others while remaining true to ourselves – suggests an important next step forward. These next steps are best constructed on a foundation of solid information about who we are and where we hope to go, through, for example, a survey of the OST labor force, programs, and other pieces of the infrastructure, such as higher education.

More information is clearly needed from staff at all levels: who are they; what are their skills and credentials; how are they compensated for their work; how is their day-to-day work experienced and organized; and what do they need to develop professionally, stay in the field, and make a career out of the work? Data is also needed from programs: what's out there; who and what supports them; what are their compensation policies and practices; how do they recruit and retain workers and how can they improve; what do they do best; and where do they need the most improvement? Finally, more information is needed about the infrastructure in which the field operates: local communities and agencies; higher education; state, regional, and national governments; and national organizations and associations.

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