

Evaluate staff members' needs to find right training opportunities

By Melissa Magner and Kathy Schleyer

Through the past decade, the out-of-school time (OST) field has seen demand for services increase dramatically. Data from the America After 3PM study has shown that approximately 8.4 million children participate in an after-school program, an increase of nearly 3 million children in the past five years (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). As the demand for OST services and the complexity of the OST field continues to grow, more is expected of child and youth workers. Training and resources to support these outcomes must keep pace with demands on OST programming.

This increased attention on OST program quality has heightened the importance of appropriate training and preparation for OST staff. Professional development provides the means for individual growth, new leadership skills and, on a larger scale, field-building.

However, according to a policy brief from The After-School Corporation, "the after-school field does not have standard educational or training requirements or standard job descriptions and titles. This makes it difficult for organizations to articulate career ladders, or for workers to envision career paths."

Not only does professional development benefit the after-school professional, but also the program. Research shows that professional development can lead to quality after-school programming. Some research (Wehrell-Grabowski, n.d.) indicates that staff members at higher-quality programs typically receive more training and are more likely to participate in training that addresses after-school activity content, including training on how to implement specific curricula. There are many ways in which professional development can leave a positive impact.

There are numerous professional-development opportunities available, although determining the right quality training to meet program staff members' needs isn't always straightforward. Jane Vella, a leader in the field of adult learning theory, offers 12 principles of effective adult learning that can help guide a choice for professional development (adapted from Vella, 2002):

1. A course shaped to, and by input from, the audience;
2. A comfortable sharing environment;
3. An environment that fosters dialogue and listening;
4. A sequence that moves from simple to complex and includes reinforcement;
5. Hands-on exercises and activities;
6. Instructor respects and engages learners;
7. Relevant to mind, heart and body;
8. Useful;
9. Open dialogue between instructor and learners;
10. Teamwork, as a process and a principle;
11. Engagement;

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For those who prefer to go in depth, the seminar approach is ideal. NIOST's Summer Seminars are modeled on the theory of adult learning. For two days per topic, participants are immersed in hands-on, engaging activities rich in dialogue.

This practice has been offered to the field for more than 20 years to build specific skills and expertise on topics such as the delivery of technical assistance, use of assessment tools, building management skill, after-school system building, and linking the school day to after-school programs.

The seminar approach provides a unique forum for participants to connect with expert out-of-school time leaders, peers, share best practices and reflect on improvement strategies linked to research.

NIOST's 2010 seminars are scheduled for July 12-15 at the John Hancock Center in Boston. Seminars offered are:

- Elevating professional development at the program and system level
- After-School Program Assessment System (APAS)
- Effective Management Training
- Quality Advisor Training

For more information on the seminars and how to register, go to www.niost.org/content/view/1646/282/. Registration closes July 6.

12. Accountability; comprising principles 1 thru 11.

Other things to consider when choosing professional development are your program needs, time available, size of staff and available resources. Explore local opportunities such as online courses, webinars, coaching, fellowships, peer-networking, technical assistance and mentoring. Consider inviting an instructor to your area, and collaborate with other programs. Less frequent, but valuable, are local or national conferences that typically are set up so participants can take part in multiple workshops over the course of the conference.

Spring is an opportune time to begin professional development planning for the summer and next school year. Whether attending a national conference, a local event or an online webinar, training can serve to renew and refuel us while helping to improve program experiences for the youth we serve. Make it a goal to include funding or writing a grant for professional development for you and your staff.

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Melissa Magner is project coordinator and Kathy Schleyer is research administrator at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time.



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