

A PRINCIPAL'S GUIDE TO DEVELOPING AN EXEMPLARY AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM

Andria J. Fletcher, PhD
Copyright 2009: Center for Collaborative Solutions
www.afterschoolsolutions.org

Copyright 2009

A PRINCIPAL'S GUIDE TO DEVELOPING AN EXEMPLARY AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM

Andria J. Fletcher, PhD

In the last decade, the purpose and potential of afterschool programs have radically changed. No longer simply childcare or recreation, programs are providing children and young people with a safe, positive learning environment—and doing much more. They're supporting students' academic achievement and strengthening their social skills. They're keeping children and young people safe during the hours they are most at risk and offering students opportunities that wouldn't otherwise be available because of the income limitations of their families. They're helping students build their self-confidence, improve their ability to work well with others and gain a sense of mastery over new ideas and information. And, they're reconnecting neighborhoods with schools, engaging communities and forging new partnerships.

When students regularly attend *high quality* programs, they have the equivalent of 91 additional days a year of educationally enriching experiences. Their California Standards Test (CST) scores often measurably improve, especially at Far Below Basic, Below Basic and Basic levels. Their attendance during the school day increases. They learn more, perform better in the classroom and get better grades. English Language Learners develop oral and written communication skills more quickly than their peers and move from Levels 1 and 2 faster. Special Needs and Resource Specialist Program (RSP) students are often more successful in meeting Academic Index Performance (API) expectations. And, longitudinal studies demonstrate that students who attend high quality programs during their elementary school years are more likely to graduate from high school.

This paper focuses on the critical role of principals in supporting the development of high quality, sustainable programs that lead to these kinds of results. It's based on solid research, extensive interviews with principals and classroom teachers and more than 15 years of experience working with school-based afterschool programs throughout California.

Step 1: Establish clear roles, responsibilities and goals. Clearly defining roles and responsibilities is essential to the development of an authentic partnership and the success of your program. Principals who do this well see themselves as leaders, mentors, trouble-shooters and champions.

- As leaders, they work closely with the Site Director to set and achieve worthwhile goals.
- As mentors, they provide guidance, counsel and expertise to afterschool staff members.
- As trouble shooters, they anticipate problems in advance and support the development of positive relationships between teachers and afterschool staff members.
- As champions, they advocate for the program and remove obstacles that may interfere with its success.

The most effective Site Directors see themselves as partners with principals, team leaders, coaches and mentors, managers and community builders.

- As partners, they work closely with principals to reinforce what students are learning during the school day.
- As team leaders, they build a high performing staff that resonates with a common purpose and uncommon synergy.
- As coaches and mentors, they provide ongoing support to ensure that their staff becomes competent and confident in their work.
- As managers, they oversee program development, manage site budgets, maintain accurate records and supervise their staff.
- As community builders, they work closely with parents, community organizations, local business and others to create a wide range of opportunities for students.

Once you've clarified roles, responsibilities and relationships, work with the Site Director to set meaningful, achievable goals. All good performance starts with the establishment of meaningful goals. Just the act of setting them will make a huge difference in channeling people's energy in the same direction. The most successful school/program partnerships share several goals in common, including:

- Developing and retaining a high quality program staff,
- Attracting and retaining a predetermined number of students,
- Providing engaging and enriching learning experiences,
- Strengthening student academic and social skills,
- Building authentic community partnerships; and
- Securing adequate funding to support program quality and sustainability.

Work closely with the Site Director to establish goals that meet the mutual interests and needs of both the school and the program and are aligned with funding requirements. Limit the number of goals selected to one or two for the upcoming year. Set the bar high enough to really make a difference *and* wide enough to involve everyone, including the certificated and classified staff, in working together to achieve them.

Step 2: Make the program an integral part of your school community. Align program goals with your Single Site Plan for Student Academic Achievement. Because the purpose of this Plan is to provide a structured means to improve student academic performance through continuous development, implementation and monitoring cycles, it is important that the Site Director understands what it means and learns how to align activities and approaches with it. Once this has been done, meet with him or her on a regular basis to set and review goals, create strategies and discuss what is working and what can and should be improved. Include the program as a strategy for carrying out your Plan.

Invite the Site Director to participate in faculty meetings. Consider having him or her serve on the School Site Council and the School Leadership Team (DSLTL) if your school has been identified for Program Improvement (PI). Invite the program staff to attend open houses, back-to-school nights and other special events. Designate places around campus where students participating in the program can display their work. Ask teachers to refer students who they believe can benefit most by attending. Keep the front office staff informed about the program, make student registration forms available and encourage them to talk with parents about the benefits of having their children enroll.

Share space and resources. Having access to classrooms, libraries and computer labs is essential to developing high quality afterschool programs and achieving positive results for students. If you encounter resistance from teachers, find creative ways to limit the impact of the use of their classrooms. Rotating rooms every three months or so is one of these. Clearly explain the rules related to computer use to the afterschool staff and share the cost, if necessary, of hiring someone to serve in a supervisory capacity. Keep in mind that frequent access to computers can measurably reduce the digital divide and significantly improve the quality of project-based learning and other approaches commonly offered in afterschool programs. Provide access to copy machines, computers and internet access and some form of office space where Site Directors can work, staff members can meet and materials can be stored.

Step 3: Hire an Academic Coach. Hiring a credentialed teacher as an academic coach for the afterschool staff is *the one action* that seems to consistently support the development of authentic school/program partnerships and produce positive results in student academic achievement. The approach is practical, easily implemented and relatively inexpensive. Typically paid a stipend of about \$5,000 a year from the program's grant funds for five hours a week or so of consulting services, academic coaches are certificated teachers. Their primary responsibilities include:

- Aligning afterschool activities with the school day in language arts and math curricula and California State Standards;
- Training, coaching and mentoring afterschool staff members in homework assistance, academic support and classroom management;
- Advocating for the value of the program with their colleagues; and
- Trouble shooting when problems arise over the use of classroom space and other common issues.

Hire the right person for the position. Be sure to select someone who not only has expertise in these areas but who also truly understands the value of balanced programming and different adult learning styles; relates well with people with diverse background and experiences; and is skilled at identifying what is working and what needs to be done to help staff become increasingly successful. In most cases the program will cover the cost.

Keep in mind that one of the greatest challenges in afterschool programs is classroom management. Training is critical, but to be effective it must be followed up with individualized coaching and support. Learning how to apply what is learned in workshops almost always requires modeling and coaching in setting where the staff is actually working with children and young people. The expertise and experience of an academic coach is indispensable to helping staff learn effective management approaches and techniques.

It's important for the program staff to be knowledgeable about and support and enforce the school rules. In many cases, it's common practice for program staff to engage students in creating contracts that define expectations that reinforce these and in some case broaden them. It's also typical for programs to require parents and primary caregivers to sign contracts that explain what is expected and identify progressive discipline measures that may be taken if these expectations are not met. In combination, these approaches go a long way toward encouraging positive behavior and simplifying the demands of classroom management.

To the extent possible, have the program staff spend at least some time observing certificated teachers in their classrooms. Not only will this demonstrate a commitment to learning from them, it will strengthen relationships, open the door to greater communication and improve their skills. If teachers stay in their classrooms afterschool, which many do, be sure that program staff feel free to ask for assistance when it might be needed and solicit suggestions on how they might strengthen, change or improve what they are doing. Most teachers are happy to provide this and grateful that their knowledge and experience is recognized and appreciated.

Step 4: Train the staff to provide appropriate homework assistance. Students deserve the best help they can get with their homework. In many cases, the educational levels, living conditions and language barriers in their families make it difficult for children and young people to get the help they need when they go home. Most of them truly appreciate the time they have to do their homework and the help they receive afterschool – and so do their parents. Having this support:

- Strengthens academic skills by reinforcing learning,
- Builds self-confidence,
- Increases personal responsibility,
- Improves grades, and
- Reduces stress at home.

Unfortunately, not all homework assistance leads to measurable improvement in academic achievement. How the time allotted for homework is structured, how competent staff members are in providing appropriate assistance and how much follow-up is in place will make all the difference in the results. You can provide invaluable support by helping staff determine how much time should be set aside for homework and asking teachers to provide weekly homework packets if they are available.

Encourage staff to focus on homework assistance rather than completion. Most high quality programs favor limiting the time to an hour or less to ensure that students have adequate opportunities to participate in other activities –which should be intentionally designed to strengthen academic as well as other skills and provide a variety of experiences that would not otherwise be available to students.

Have your academic coach train the staff in the basics of your textbook adoptions and work closely with them to ensure that they have the coaching *and* ongoing support they need to be able to provide appropriate assistance. The degree to which student improvement occurs depends largely on the extent to which staff understands the approaches used in the math, language arts and other curricula used during the school day. Without knowing how to provide *appropriate* support, staff members can and often will unintentionally confuse students and hinder rather than accelerate their progress.

Develop a system that allows staff to know whether homework is consistently being turned in on time and done correctly – and whether it is making a difference in student academic performance. Without confirming these things, the staff may think this is happening when it is not. Take time to establish the kind of classroom connections process described below to ensure that this system is in place.

Step 5: Help staff understand the basics of State Standards. Aligning afterschool activities with State Standards is important. The challenge is translating Standards into language that is understandable to staff members who don't have a background in education. Academic coaches can provide invaluable assistance in this area. In addition, an increasing number of packaged/published materials already align their content and approaches with specific Standards, making it much easier for staff to develop and implement activities and projects appropriately. Working with the Site Director to identify and review these materials can make a significant difference in the results.

Help staff understand why State Standards matter. It's not enough for them to know what the Standards are, it's equally important for them to understand why they're important. For example, National Institutes of Health studies indicate that students who are behind in reading in third grade have only a 12 to 20 percent chance of ever catching up. This, and other kinds of evidence, help staff understand why being intentional in their approaches to strengthening students' knowledge and skills is critical – no matter where children and young people are in the educational process. This has a real impact on how motivated and committed staff will be in integrating State Standards into their work.

Step 6: Build positive relationships with staff members. Regardless of the structures you and your Site Director put in place, the systems you create or the training that's offered, nothing will matter as much as the relationships that are built. The ability to develop the kinds of relationships that really make a difference depends on being available to provide support and encouragement and make suggestions when they are needed. When staff members know that principals understand how demanding their jobs and their lives really are, what is working for them and what is not, it sparks their enthusiasm and strengthens their commitment.

Spend time with staff members informally. Become personally acquainted with them. Wander around and visit them where they're working. Create opportunities for informal conversations and talk with them about their ideas and interests. Learn what excites them, what challenges them and what's important to them. Spending even a few minutes a day doing this makes it possible to assess situations, uncover problems and offer solutions that would be impossible at a distance. It also builds trust, credibility and empathy and significantly increases staff retention.

Making time to meet with program staff at least twice a month for 30 minutes or so can make all the difference in how successful a program is. It demonstrates the value you place on their work and acknowledges the contributions they are making to the success of children and young people. It provides an opportunity to target support by offering strategies that can strengthen their skills and help them overcome obstacles they may be facing. And, it's essential to letting them know they are part of a school-wide team.

Step 7: Establish formal communication channels. Formal communication channels between program staff and classroom teachers are essential, and they can be established in a variety of ways. They can be as simple as scheduling a five-minute weekly check-in or setting up a system that allows written messages to be exchanged through the front office. Or, they can be as complex as meeting together regularly to share Individual Education Plans. In a growing number of programs, staff members and classroom teachers communicate via student folders that include:

- Homework packets,
- Information on materials covered in class,
- Assessments of student academic progress; and
- Assessments of student attitudes and behavior.

Although using this system takes time, it is well worth the effort. The process can be facilitated by you and by academic coaches or teachers and staff members themselves. No matter what approach is taken, the important thing is to establish *and* maintain ongoing communication through a formal classroom connections process.

In many instances, afterschool program staff members are better acquainted with students and their families than classroom teachers are. This means staff can provide important information that may be influencing student performance and/or behavior during the school day, either positively or negatively. Keeping teachers informed can make a real difference in how they respond to children and young people, especially when things go wrong. Similarly, teachers know much more about how students are progressing academically and how they are behaving in the classroom. Keeping communication open and ongoing makes a huge difference.

Step 8: Arrange for program staff to work with grade level and resource teachers. It's very helpful for program staff to have opportunities to talk directly with and be supported by kindergarten, primary and intermediate teachers at the elementary school level. This makes a difference in terms of what is being taught during the day, and it matters in terms of increasing staff awareness of and knowledge about developmental levels. In addition, since state testing will soon go beyond language arts, math and science to include social science, students will benefit from activities and project-based learning that are likely to be offered in the afterschool hours and teachers should be aware of what's happening.

Help staff members partner with resource teachers and specialists. Most afterschool programs include a number of special needs students – not only because access is required by law, but often because programs offer a positive environment, supportive relationships and a wide range of opportunities for students to experience success. In general, programs are designed to meet the needs of the *whole* child and help him or her deal not only with academic issues, but also issues of self-esteem, social interaction and behavior that bear upon the ability to learn and be successful in school. To take full advantage of this, program staff must have good working relationships with resource teachers and specialists and instructional assistants and aids are responsible for working with these students during the school day.

Similarly, because RSP students with learning disabilities are provided with targeted support, it makes sense for the afterschool staff to become members of the team of RSP teachers, parents, regular classroom teachers, school psychologists, counselors and principals who provide support through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Step 9: Help program staff connect with classified staff. Instructional assistants, custodians, front office personnel, cafeteria managers and noon-duty aids often have a vast amount of knowledge of and insight into students and their families. They also have the ability to make things easier, or more challenging, in program operations such as the use of the cafeteria for cooking classes and the willingness of custodians to rearrange their cleaning

schedules to accommodate the use of classrooms in the late afternoon hours. Open, positive communication can make a real difference in the success of afterschool staff and the program itself. It's important to facilitate this.

Step 10: Emphasize continuous quality improvement. A growing body of research and experience confirms that high quality programs are making a real difference in the lives of children and young people. Principals, teachers and staff members are increasingly committed to the continuous improvement of their programs and do their best to ensure that the outcomes they want for students are achieved. They use a variety of tools to make this happen.

It's important for the afterschool staff to have access to records of student attendance during the school day. For obvious reasons, attending school regularly is essential to academic success. The chances are very good that students enrolled in the program are attending school more, especially if this is a requirement of participation – as it should be. Accurately documenting attendance is critical and creating a system to accurately record the level of each student's participation is vital. Although this is a responsibility of the program itself, it's important to provide additional support when it is necessary and to be certain that attendance is being tracked appropriately.

Among the approaches used to assess student academic achievement in afterschool programs, test scores and other quantitative performance data are on the rise. The real question is how to use test scores in a way that makes the most sense. While many approaches are valuable, the use of *matched-pair* assessments of test score data at the elementary school level stands out. Although it takes a little more time, this methodology allows for the comparison of *changes* in the test scores of students who are attending the program with those who have the same classroom teacher during the school day but are not attending the program. The importance of this comes from the fact that classroom teachers play the most important role in student learning and that some are much more effective than others. By holding this variable constant more can be learned about the actual impact of the program than would be possible otherwise.

Track student grades. Students very often improve their grades when they regularly participate in afterschool programs. This can be a powerful indicator of the impact of a program and it can also be a sign of improved academic achievement. It also is important in building self-esteem and self-confidence, increasing enthusiasm for learning and encouraging students to like school more. Work with teachers and academic coaches to determine whether this is happening among students who have been enrolled in the program for at least three months and are consistently attending.

Evaluate student attitudes and behavior. High quality programs provide students with exciting, engaging and appropriately challenging opportunities to expand their knowledge and understanding of themselves and master new concepts and skills. They encourage and motivate children and young people to internalize a personal sense of competence, contribute to their perceptions of themselves as able learners and create a *can do* spirit. Across high quality programs, principals, teachers, parents and students attest to marked improvement in attitudes, behavior, self-confidence and enthusiasm for learning – all of which contribute to success in school and in life.

The most common indicators of positive youth development include improvement in problem solving, decision making, interpersonal and communication skills and an increased ability of students to get along well with others, to work collaboratively and to assume leadership responsibilities. High quality programs use a variety of approaches to determine where they are at any given point in time, assess their progress and make adjustments that may be needed to produce the kinds of positive youth development outcomes they want most.

Social behavior indicators typically also include measuring reductions in disciplinary actions. When programs are successful at strengthening positive attitudes and behavior, it also leads to reductions in the kinds of disruptive behavior in the classroom that take away from teaching and learning and a decline in disciplinary actions that take administrators' time away from other more valuable things. And, it makes everyone's work much more meaningful and enjoyable. Tracking this is an important way of assessing the program's impact on individual students, teachers, administration and the school environment as a whole.

Step 11: Invest in your program. Quality counts and quality costs, not only in terms of time and energy but also in real dollars. Although *Afterschool Education and Safety Programs* and *21st Century Community Learning Centers* grants bring in significant state and federal funding and ought to be used to fund core program operations, the most successful programs generate additional local funding through city, county, school district and private foundation investments.

Eighty-eight percent of afterschool programs rank financial investments and in-kind contributions from school districts and county offices of education as the most important sources of their local financial support. Partnering with programs in this way almost always makes a huge difference in the effectiveness of staff, the resources available and the outcomes for students.

Identify possible sources of funding. A variety of funding streams are available for use in afterschool programs, many of which have a proven impact on building solid partnerships and meeting district and school goals. Depending on whether funds are use to support *Afterschool Education and Safety Programs* or *21st Century Community Learning Centers* grants, these include:

- Title 1 Basic and Supplemental funding, Title II, Title 4 and other categorical funding identified in federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation,
- AmeriCorps and related National Corporation resources,
- California Bilingual Education and Training,
- Safe and Drug Free Schools funding
- Revenue generated from increases in student daily attendance
- Migrant Education grants
- Allocations of Average Daily Attendance (ADA) dollars
- Summer School and Intercession hourly funds

Work with the District and County Office of Education to leverage investments. Most people understand that the social and educational benefits of afterschool programs are increasingly well-known and well-documented. They recognize that high quality programs provide a safe, positive learning environment and strengthen academic and youth development skills. They build community partnerships and reconnect neighborhoods with schools. And, they offer

opportunities that would not otherwise be available to children and young people because of the financial limitations of their families. What is less known, and equally important from a fund development perspective, is that afterschool programs also:

- Bring millions of dollars of revenue into local communities;
- Generate significant cost-savings by reducing, school vandalism and juvenile crime and victimization;
- Create jobs;
- Contribute to increased workplace productivity and local economic development;
- Offer millions of dollars in childcare savings for low-income families; and
- Produce a return on local investments that often exceeds the cost of doing business in other ways by as much as 1,000 percent.

Become familiar with the economic advantages of afterschool programs that are high leverage points for cities, counties, corporations and private foundations and encourage District Superintendents and School Board members to develop partnerships with public and private organizations. The approach is proven and powerful – and it creates the level of balanced and diversified funding that ensures long-term program quality and sustainability.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andria J. Fletcher, PhD. Andi is a nationally recognized expert in afterschool program and policy development. As the former director of one the country's most highly acclaimed programs, she initiated California's first afterschool legislation – which has resulted in \$550 million in state funding. As a consultant, she has led three statewide and regional learning communities resulting in the creation of 36 Learning Centers, supported the development of more than 200 programs and been a keynote speaker and presenter at over 150 national, state and regional conferences, including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the California School Boards Associations (CSBA), the National School Boards Association (NSBA), the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). Many of her publications, including *A Guide to Developing Exemplary Practices in Afterschool Program*, *Lessons in Leadership*, *Securing Local Funding for Afterschool Programs* and *Changing Lives, Saving Lives* are among the most widely used in the United States. She earned her doctorate in Political Science at UCLA. For more information or consulting services, she may be reached at: DrAndiAsp@aol.com