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STRENGTHENING SOCIAL AND
EMOTIONAL HEALTH

AfterSchool Works! New York Professional Development Survey Analysis

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APRIL 2009

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Acknowledgments

This effort would not have been possible were it not for the forward thinking and leadership of Sara Espinosa of AfterSchool Works! New York, Kate Kuhner-Eberts of the YMCA of Greater Rochester, and Sally Crosiar of Healthy People Learn. They came together in response to a gap created by the loss of the Training Institute of the local Cornell Cooperative Extension. The absence of the supports and services available to the Greater Rochester community has been felt in different ways. This report is one step in the effort to move forward with a shared vision for advancing the quality of after-school programs by promoting professionalism.

We are especially grateful to all of the respondents who took the time to contribute to this important discussion of how and what training can further their development as professionals working with children and youth. Responses were thoughtful and informative. We thank you for the important role you play in supporting the positive development of the children and youth of our community.

We thank the Rochester Area Community Foundation for sharing and supporting the vision of advancing quality in after-school programs by recognizing that staff members need to be well trained in order to best meet the needs of the children and youth they serve.

Executive Summary

There were 101 respondents who answered questions on trainings they had attended, training opportunities they would like, their experiences, and the children or youth with whom they work. They were forthcoming with their thoughts and feelings about professional development, creating a substantial guide for possible directions for future training opportunities. They are concerned for the social and emotional health of the children and youth they serve and would like to attend trainings to better prepare them to support the children and youth in their care.

Major Findings:

Youth:

- ❖ Many of the children and youth with whom respondents work are experiencing hardship, trauma, or live in poverty.

Programs:

- ❖ More than 90% of respondents felt that their program was child-friendly or youth-focused.

Training:

- ❖ The most frequently requested training was social and emotional health, followed by program implementation and curriculum, child and youth development, with academic tutoring as the least desired.
- ❖ Approximately 30% of the respondents have a current, valid School-Age Credential, indicating a community-wide area for improvement.
- ❖ The top five trainings that respondents said they were “very satisfied” with were as follows: School-Age Credential; First Aid and CPR; Multiple Intelligences in After School; Active Play Games; and Character Education in After School. While 67% said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of training, the balance reported that they were either dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, or neither.

Introduction

Children's Institute, in conjunction with AfterSchool Works! New York and the YMCA of Greater Rochester, hosted an online survey in March 2009 to ascertain the professional development needs of the after-school community in the Greater Rochester area. The online survey is part of a broader effort, "The Greater Rochester Area School-Age Professional Development Project," funded in part by the Rochester Area Community Foundation. The project involves the design and implementation of training and other supports for after-school professionals in the Greater Rochester area so that they can better meet the needs of the children, youth, and families they serve.

Methods

The online survey was conducted using the Survey Monkey platform. The survey comprised 32 questions designed to collect information about and satisfaction with previously-attended trainings and to assess respondents' needs and interests for future professional development. Many of the questions were open-ended so that respondents could respond freely and specifically.

The desired return rate was 125 respondents. To achieve this goal, an email invitation with a live link to the web address was sent to 100 "after-school stakeholders" including front-line staff, administrators, and community partners who work with, serve, or support children and youth in the Greater Rochester area. The invitation included a request to forward the email link to any partners serving children and youth. After initially low response rates, the invitation was followed by a letter mailing to the 254 individuals/organizations known to the Greater Rochester After-School Alliance. The mailing was then followed by three reminder emails en masse, and seven targeted emails to the largest agencies serving children and youth in Monroe County. The emails were followed up by eleven phone calls to agencies and community leaders.

Despite the multiple methods of disseminating the survey invitation, the potential pool of respondents was limited by two realities. First, many front-line staff work part-time and consequently do not have time to do this sort of activity because their time on site is spent with children and youth. Second, with any survey there is a great risk of low response rates due to self-selection. These two limitations combined to result in lower than the desired sample of 125, resulting in a final collected sample of 101.

Respondents

The sample of 101 does not reflect the stereotype of after-school and youth workers, who are seen as male teens who work part-time for minimum wage and who have not completed their educations. Two-thirds of respondents were female. All respondents were over the age of 21. Forty-three percent were 40 and older. Fifty percent of applicants have a Bachelor's degree, while eight people are working on degrees. Fourteen respondents hold Master's degrees or higher. Two-thirds of respondents are in administrative positions, or are not front-line staff. Eighty-nine percent of respondents are paid \$10 per hour or more.

This sample is not representative of the field at large because of the disproportionate representation of administrative versus front-line staff; therefore we caution the reader that the results do not reflect the experiences of various staff members.

Three-quarters of respondents are employed by their program full-time. Thirty-nine respondents have worked at their program for at least five years, while twelve have been there for ten or more years. Of the 75 respondents who have worked in after-school programs, 16 have been in the field for more than ten years. Of the 55 respondents who have worked in youth development, 24 have for over ten years. There is overlap, meaning a number of respondents have worked with children and youth. Many have also worked in the field of education or with children and youth in different capacities – as teachers, coaches, paraprofessionals, camp counselors, babysitters, nannies, Girl Scout leaders, and early childhood educators.

Respondents report a wide range of length of time at their site, from 0 to 30 years. They have been working at their sites for an average of 5.7 years. More than three-quarters (76.8%) report working full-time, with the balance working different part-time schedules (5% work 15 or fewer hours; 7% work 16 to 25 hours; and another 7% work 26 to 34 hours). Again, we recognize that this sample reflects more of the professional side of the field and does not necessarily reflect the experience of the child care or youth-development worker.

Programs

The respondents represent programs operating out of schools; community, recreation, and child care centers; the YMCA; libraries; and faith-based institutions. Out of these settings, the three most-represented settings are as follows: 48 schools (47.5%), 22 community centers (21.8%), and 12 YMCA programs (11.9%). Recreation and religious-based centers together comprise 14 sites (14%). Their programs are located in the Counties of Erie, Madison, Monroe, Ontario, and Wayne. Sixty-eight percent of respondents' programs are urban, in Rochester or Buffalo. Twenty-four percent are in suburban locations, including Churchville, East Rochester, Fairport, Henrietta, Hilton, Penfield, Pittsford, and Webster. Seven percent are in rural locales, including Oneida, Lyons, Newark, and Phelps.

Included in the open-ended comments on why their center is or is not child-friendly or youth-focused, 92.5% of respondents felt that their program is child-friendly/youth-focused. Reasons given included the following excerpts: "Youth are involved in many levels of decision-making;" "being consistent in your mission offers great success;" "more hands-on and parent/staff/child involvement;" "youth are part of the program planning team, they interview new staff candidates;" "we try to cater to all the needs of the youth that will prepare them for life in general;" and "we expect them to do their best at all times." With such high levels of enthusiasm for the programs and children served, we interpret this as major ownership and pride in the affiliation toward the current site where the respondents work. Similarly, however, we caution that this collected sample may not represent the attitudes or experiences of those staff members who participate in the hands-on or "in-the-trenches" areas of programs.

Existing Opportunities for Professional Development

The top five trainings that respondents said they were "very satisfied" with attending were as follows: School-Age Credential; First Aid and CPR; Multiple Intelligences in After School; Active Play Games; and Character Education in After School. While 67% said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of training, the balance reported that they were either dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, or neither.

There were two major obstacles identified to staff attending trainings. One was scheduling – trainings should be offered at times when staff members are not responsible for the care of children/youth. The other more challenging obstacle cited was resources, which need to be available to support the cost of attending trainings.

Desired Opportunities for Professional Development

The training opportunity that respondents felt was most important to their professional development was social and emotional health, which included these topics: integrity, critical thinking, working in groups, taking responsibility, and knowing how to be a team player. Respondents added the following topics of interest: behavior, stress, emotions, managing aggression, bullying prevention, and self-regulation. Seventy-four percent of respondents felt that training in social-emotional health is very important and 25% felt that it is important for their professional development.

The second most important training area was program implementation and curriculum. Fifty-seven percent of respondents felt that this training would be very beneficial to their professional development, and an additional 36% felt that it was important. The third most important area was child and youth development, with 51% of respondents feeling that it is very important and 45% feeling that it is important. Interestingly, given the push for academic outcomes as a result of after-school program participation, academic tutoring was seen as the least important of these four choices, with only 26% of respondents feeling that it is very important. Added topics by respondents include special needs, diversity inclusion (with added interest in children with special needs and immigrant communities), building relationships with parents and school staff, and a variety of administrative topics (e.g. business and staff management, advocacy, safety, evaluation, and research).

Some respondents identified ideal times for them to attend trainings, although most said any time would be good. Those who specified times covered the spectrum of availability, but mornings were identified by 21 respondents as the best time for them (e.g. 9:00-12:00, 8:00-1:00, or “early morning”). Twelve respondents favored trainings in the evening after 6:00. Eight respondents prefer weekends, especially Saturday mornings. Six prefer afternoons, listed as lunchtime or 12:00-3:00. Two specified “during program” as their ideal time.

A considerable majority of respondents identified email as the method through which they would like to receive information about professional development opportunities. Twenty-eight percent would like to receive their information in the mail. One individual would like to receive flyers in his or her mailbox; another likes flyers posted at work; one would like to be informed by his or her supervisor; and one would like to be called.

Of the respondents who answered the question regarding the resources they use, almost all listed the Internet and networking. Another frequent response was reading. Respondents read newspapers, textbooks, resource books, magazines, and scholarly journals. They are looking for ideas, opportunities, and resources to promote quality in their programs.

Key Findings

- ❖ Respondents are concerned about the social and emotional health of the children and youth in their care and seek training that will enable them to work more effectively in supporting those children and youth, many of whom have experienced trauma, hardship, and/or live in poverty.
- ❖ The most frequently-requested training was social and emotional health, followed by program implementation and curriculum, child and youth development, with academic tutoring as the least desired.
- ❖ Approximately 30% of the respondents have a current, valid School-Age Credential, indicating a community-wide area for improvement.
- ❖ The area of special needs was explored on the survey and provided valuable insights into the challenges these sites encounter. Please see the Appendix for those comments. Further analyses would be necessary to explore common themes as expressed by the survey respondents. From the responses, it is evident that the respondents are concerned for the welfare of the children they care for and want to be better prepared in supporting them.

Conclusion

The survey originated from the loss of the Cornell Cooperative Extension's Training Institute and to assess the resulting vacuum in professional development opportunities. The goal was to determine what trainings were needed in order to inform the development and implementation of professional development opportunities for the Greater Rochester area after-school community. Although we did not reach the desired sample size, we received a wealth of information and learned a good deal about the concerns respondents have about children and youth.

The after-school field is young, and so are the professional development opportunities available for advancing the quality of programs. This is due, in part, to the lack of professional authority given to the field, but there has been an awakening during the past fifteen years that recognizes professional development as fundamental to promoting positive outcomes for children and youth and to increasing quality in programs. It is our hope that this report can contribute to the broader dialogue addressing the shift in both paradigm and practice in the after-school field on the topic of professional development.