

Practitioner Insights Research-to-Results

Child TRENDS.

*...Reflections from Practitioner Roundtables
for funders of out-of-school time programs.*

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WHAT PROGRAM PROVIDERS WANT FUNDERS TO KNOW

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OVERVIEW

Over the course of several Roundtables held with out-of-school time program providers involving dozens of organizations, Child Trends has learned a lot about the concerns and wishes of the hardworking people who run out-of-school time programs. In this brief, we share several themes that have emerged from these discussions. Not surprisingly, Roundtable participants identified funding as an overriding concern. But they also shared other concerns that affect their abilities to implement effective programs. These concerns included the difficulties in attracting, training, and retaining highly qualified staff; the challenges associated with being accountable to funders; the need for greater flexibility to meet program needs; and the organizational dilemmas faced by small programs.

WHAT DO PRACTITIONERS WANT FUNDERS TO KNOW?

Lack of money. Even though more funding was the first and foremost wish of program providers, their comments made it clear that they were not so much concerned with money, per se, as they were with the program quality and capacity that money can make possible. Program providers identified finances as a limitation on their abilities to serve more children and to hire and retain the most qualified staff. They also expressed the wish for funding that was more secure and long term, so that they and their employees could better plan their programs and their own lives.

Program managers explained that having to offer low wages meant that they often could not compete to hire the best and the brightest. Even if they manage to hire highly qualified and idealistic staff members, the demanding work at low pay takes a toll on staff and increases turnover. Employees are often able to obtain higher paying jobs with better benefits elsewhere, so they move on. Program managers, like researchers, understand the importance of sustained positive relationships for children and youth. They recognize that high staff turnover undermines the retention and development of program participants. As one program manager said, “When a staff person leaves, you see kids leave.” Not one program manager spoke about wanting a higher salary for himself or herself. Program managers spoke frequently, though, about the need to provide youth workers with better wages to reduce turnover.

Another consequence of high turnover is that training is wasted when people leave. In fact, program managers face a wrenching dilemma because they recognize that training is essential for staff, yet they know that trained staff members are more likely to be offered better jobs and leave.

Lack of flexibility. Program managers also expressed a need for at least some flexible “gap dollars” (that is, funds that are not tightly allocated to a particular purpose or group) that can be used to fill a budget gap

when needed. For example, if government funding can only be used to serve children up to age 12, programs would benefit from having some flexible funding that would allow them to serve some children a little past that cutoff date.

Roundtable members also emphasized the need for flexibility to allow for coordination with other programs. For example, instead of competing with one another, programs would benefit from coordinating their outreach efforts. Also, practitioners sought flexibility so that they could provide services in ways that are in tune with the current generation. One Roundtable participant noted that kids “are texting at light-speed, and we’re asking them to write with a pencil,” highlighting the need to invest in better technology.

Few resources for research and evaluation. Practitioners are increasingly being held accountable for results. While they agree with this expectation in principle, they rarely have training in research or evaluation, and they find the process challenging. One person suggested that funders provide mini-grants so that staff could learn about evaluation. Participants were adamant that funders who expect evaluation need to provide the resources to support it. Practitioners also requested more information about research and evaluation that is brief, clear, concrete and down-to-earth, and user-friendly.

Small organizations. Many out-of-school time programs are small. Thus, they are unable to benefit from the economies of scale that the larger “franchise” organizations enjoy when it comes to expertise or services for accounting, purchasing, health care coverage, retirement plans, and the like. Program managers have to wear many hats, handling myriad responsibilities in addition to their program responsibilities; and many lack the expertise, time, and/or the energy to handle them all, or handle them well. In particular, bearing these burdens year after year produces fatigue and, sometimes, burnout.

Lack of full-time positions. The lack of full-time positions poses another dilemma for program providers. Because out-of-school time programs are almost always held after school during the school year, they rarely offer 40-hour-a-week positions. As a result, many potential employees cannot afford to take a job with these programs. Volunteers can be of help; but program managers noted that working with volunteers is not always easy or successful.

Pressure to make unrealistic promises. In order to be funded, program providers sometimes feel that they have to promise more than they believe is possible. Funders need to understand that a brief intervention is unlikely to change the life trajectory of a disadvantaged child and only hold programs accountable for goals that can realistically be achieved. Also, if a program really works to recruit at-risk kids—not just children and youth who are already doing well—some difficulties and problems have to be expected. Staff members who work with high-risk children need extra support and resources, and programs do not want to “sacrifice the quality for quantity.”

Outcomes. Practitioners understand the need to focus on academic outcomes, given the current emphasis on academic proficiency and also the importance of academic achievement to success in life. However, program providers observed that “we can’t forget about the success of the whole child. There’s physical activity, emotional well-being, the arts...” Many practitioners also noted the importance of providing choices, involving youth in making decisions, providing interesting and engaging activities, and not just providing “more classroom instruction.” One Roundtable participant spoke of encouraging staff to catch kids “doing good.” This perspective implies measuring positive outcomes, not only negative outcomes.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUNDERS

A number of strategies might help program managers build and sustain high-quality out-of-school time programs. Certainly, as Practitioner Roundtable participants noted, more funding is needed; but programs would also benefit from greater security in their funding. This objective might be met by providing

multi-year or renewable grants. Funders who tend to provide initial but not ongoing funding might consider making more sustained commitments.

A lack of adequate resources, while obviously related to funding, might be addressed in varied ways as well. For example, to provide better benefits, health insurance pools that serve a number of organizations could be formed, thereby reducing administrative costs and reducing the cost of coverage. In addition, an endowment might be established that would allow organizations to contribute toward employee retirement accounts.

Small organizations with part-time employees might be better able to attract and retain qualified youth workers if the organizations were able to provide training, ongoing coaching, and benefits, such as health insurance. Funders could support collaborative approaches to facilitate these efforts, for example, by helping organizations to share staff. Also, funders might develop or provide pooled services, such as a centralized human resources expert, training for staff from multiple organizations, or a fund that ensures a line of credit for programs to help them survive the time between when they pay staff and when the organization is paid for its work. The Center for Nonprofit Advancement in Washington, D.C. (www.nonprofitadvancement.org) is one example of an organization that provides pooled health care benefits.

Implicit in the Roundtable conversations is the hope that more funders will come to understand the difficulty of what practitioners do. Although it might be nice if kids could be “scared straight” out of committing delinquent acts in a single morning, numerous evaluations have found that the “Scared Straight” approach doesn’t work.¹ Instead, it is necessary to build relationships and invest in children and youth over time, and this does take considerable effort and resources. As more and more programs develop a theory of change or logic model, they will be able to define the outcomes that can reasonably be expected in the short, medium, and long term. Also, as funders come to understand the needs and circumstances of children and families in their community, they are likely to be more patient, flexible, and realistic in their expectations.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing that there are always exceptions, in general, out-of-school time program managers and staff are very dedicated, care deeply, and work hard for modest wages. Underlying their comments was a plea that funders at all levels recognize how diligently they perform their jobs, understand how important and demanding their tasks are, and join with them to identify ways to better support the work of high-quality, effective out-of-school time practitioners.

¹ Child Trends (2003). San Quentin Squires Program. *Guide to Effective Programs for Children and Youth*. Retrieved on October 30, 2008, at: <http://www.childtrends.org/Lifecourse/programs/sanquentin.htm>. Washington, DC: Child Trends Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully.

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