



Building Professional Development Systems for the Afterschool Field

This executive summary is based on the strategy brief of the same name published in December, 2007. For a copy of the unabridged brief, go to http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/afterschool/pd_systems.pdf.

Professional development plays a vital role in supporting quality afterschool programs. Despite growing recognition of the importance of a trained afterschool workforce, the field lacks fully developed professional development systems.¹ Policy and program leaders at all levels – national, state, and local – are considering how best to support the professional development needs of those who work with children in afterschool programs.

Challenges for Afterschool Professional Development Systems

There are many challenges for professional development system for the field of afterschool, which include

- **The nature of the workforce and of the job:** Like early care, the afterschool field is characterized by low wages and high turnover. In addition, the afterschool workforce tends to work part time. These factors have implications both for the motivation and ability of the workforce to pursue professional development and incentives for programs to provide professional development opportunities.
- **Lack of identity as a profession:** Many see afterschool care as supplemental work or interim work. In this largely paraprofessional workforce, workers may not view themselves as “professionals” or see afterschool as a “career” and are less likely to invest in training.
- **Lack of identity as a field:** The term “afterschool” refers to a broad spectrum of programs (arts, academics, recreation, youth development, etc) that serve children of different ages. This diversity in program focus can make it difficult for professional development system leaders to design and provide training geared to the desired skill set for providers.
- **Varying prior experiences and educational backgrounds:** Recent studies have shown that afterschool providers vary greatly in age, education and prior experience. The various experiences and backgrounds of participants make it difficult to design a system and offer trainings that meets providers’ diverse needs and abilities.
- **Different professional development goals:** The desired duration and intensity of professional development offerings differ among members of the afterschool workforce, with some providers wanting single workshops and others interested in pursuing degrees. This highlights the likely need for different modes of delivery and entry points for an afterschool professional development system.

Approaches to Creating an Afterschool Professional Development System

To address these challenges and create a professional development system for the afterschool field, states and localities have taken a variety approaches to building professional development systems for the field:

- **Building off the early childhood professional development system.** Many states have strong early care and education professional development systems and have successfully expanded them to the school-age care field. For example, Illinois is building a professional development system based on an existing framework in the Gateways Initiative from the early care and education field.
- **Connecting existing systems.** In other cases, state and local officials from many systems and agencies are collaborating to create a system for school-age care providers. These efforts typically

¹ A professional development system not only includes comprehensive education and training to adequately prepare afterschool providers for their work, but also offers various supports to ensure the value, quality, alignment, and accessibility of the education and training offered.

involve several state agencies, including labor, education, child care, workforce development, and juvenile justice, which all have a stake in ensuring a qualified afterschool workforce.

- **Creating a new system.** Alternatively, some states may want to create a new system to address the specific needs of workers in the afterschool field. In these cases, modifying the system for early child care is not seen as viable or ideal. Instead of connecting existing systems, a new system is needed.

Elements of Successful Professional Development Systems:

Successful systems of professional development have several interconnected components that include:

- **Funding:** Investment is needed to plan and implement professional development systems for afterschool programs and to make training financially feasible for participants. Financial support for the system can include scholarships for professional development, courses and degrees; compensation and retention initiatives; and tiered reimbursements or quality rewards as part of a Quality Ratings System.
- **Core Knowledge and Core Competencies:** These serve as the basis for the professional development, and include core competencies (observable skills), core content (such as health, safety and nutrition) and a career lattice to recognize and track progress.
- **Qualifications and Credentials:** These include credentials and degrees, pre-service requirements and continuing education requirements.
- **Quality Assurances:** Trainings and trainers are monitored and evaluated to make sure the content and delivery of training meet quality standards.
- **Access and Outreach:** This encompasses how providers and staff learn about and access trainings. Efforts in this area include online databases of training and education opportunities, career development advising, and multiple delivery methods of training (distance learning, workshops, mentoring programs).
- **Infrastructure to support the system:** This includes a stable governance structure, effective leadership, adequate planning and TA expertise.

Lessons Learned:

Many themes emerge from some of the initial efforts to develop professional development systems for the afterschool field. Key lessons echoed by national experts and local leaders include the importance of:

- **Building off and connecting to existing systems where possible:** Many leaders found it easier to build off existing networks rather than start from scratch. Linking to the efforts of another field can create efficiencies and make the task seem more manageable. However, it is important to make sure existing systems can be modified to adequately meet the needs of the afterschool workforce.
- **Understanding the workforce and supporting workers' needs:** The diversity within the afterschool workforce is one of the main challenges in designing a professional development system for the field. In addition to diversity of settings and of ages of children served, cultural diversity can also be addressed in the professional development offerings.
- **Developing a broad base support:** A key lesson echoed by many of the national experts and local leaders was the importance of building a broad base of support. This included getting buy in from key leaders and making sure all the necessary players were at the table and involved from the beginning.
- **Nurturing partnerships and collaboration:** Partnerships and collaboration play a critical role in successfully creating professional development systems. Although one agency may take the lead in developing a component of a system, all system-building efforts require collaboration, especially to ensure appropriate linkages to other parts of the system. An important partner in many systems was higher education.
- **Incorporating incentives in system building efforts:** For a system to be comprehensive and sustainable, the interests of all stakeholders must be represented, aligned and met. Compensation and incentives are necessary to make afterschool providers invest the time and energy to participate in the professional development system.