
COLLABORATING WITH PRINCIPALS IN AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

A Resource Brief

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In some ways, a school is like a grocery store and an after-school project is like the produce or bakery section: It's not a freestanding operation but a complex unit in a bustling, customer-oriented workplace. The goods must be fresh, attractively displayed, nutritious, and appealing to shoppers. The bakery or produce manager has expertise in meeting those goals. But the department itself is part of a larger enterprise led by the store manager, who is accountable to customers for providing high-quality goods, to employees for making the store run smoothly, and to the owners for earning a reasonable profit.

In schools, the "goods" nurture children's development and the "profit" is learning. But the operating principle is similar, according to site coordinators at thriving TASC sites and the principals who host their projects. The school has one chief manager—the principal—and successful site coordinators attribute their success in part to being perceptive and responsive members of the principal's team.

A strong, sustainable relationship between school and after-school leaders grows from the combined efforts of the principal, the site coordinator, and the nonprofit organization that sponsors the TASC project. Together, these partners establish the values, priorities, and rules that will shape their partnership. As the project matures, they help the program grow and improve while keeping it efficient and vital. And when challenges arise, successful partners turn them into positive experiences by solving problems with honesty and tact.

Matchmaker Encourages Joint Planning

Former Manhattan superintendent Bernie Mecklowitz, who contributed to a TASC-sponsored Principals Institute, learned about the nonprofit organizations in his district and invited those who seemed to share his schools' interests to discuss ideas about after-school programs. As Mr. Mecklowitz became better acquainted with each organization, he began to pair them up with specific schools. Not only did he introduce the potential collaborators, he also helped to develop the projects and arrange their funding.

Among the challenges faced by urban schools with high poverty and low achievement is turnover among school and project leaders. This Resource Brief presents seven promising practices that TASC projects developed during the program's first two years to sustain and renew the partnership between site coordinators and principals. Starting with a good foundation is important, but as these collaborators learned, partnership is always a work in progress and changes in leadership offer opportunities to refresh commitment and rethink arrangements.

1. Build on Shared Values

Shared core values are the building blocks of any strong partnership. Planners from the sponsoring organization and the school should have similar answers to questions such as: Are fine arts classes central to the after-school program or simply a welcome extra? Should students have a role in choosing which activities will be offered? What role should parents play? Steve Kennedy, coordinator of the after-school project operated by Good Shepherd Services at P.S. 32 (Brooklyn), explains that his principal and sponsoring organization "had consistent philosophies. We were on the same mission.... [The principal] runs a child-centered school, and my goal is that she sees the after-school program as an added asset."

Your project can share its school's values without necessarily offering the same activities, but it helps if both programs have the same ideas about how to treat children, the same assumptions about how the program will operate, and the same vision for what should happen between 3 and 6 p.m.

When one partner leaves and a new one joins the team—whether it is the principal or the site coordinator—the coordinator can initiate a meeting with the principal to review the common goals and values that launched the project. Either may ask to revisit earlier plans in light of experience or shifts in school priorities. The focus of this encounter should be on refreshing the shared vision of how to serve children as part of a team led by the principal and grounded in common values.

2. Make the Program a Joint Creation

Successful after-school projects are not simply tagged onto the regular school program. They are the result of joint planning and negotiation by the principal and representatives from the sponsoring organization.

In some schools, the TASC-supported program evolved from a relationship between the school and nonprofit organization. P.S. 24 (Brooklyn) had worked for several years with Educators for Social Responsibility to integrate conflict resolution lessons into the school program. C.E.S. 42 (Bronx) was a longstanding partner of the American Museum of Natural History. In both cases, the after-school program was jointly designed to give the schools more of the services provided by the partnering agency.

At sites like these, the principal often shares responsibility with the site coordinator for making choices about which aspects of their work to enlarge, how to allocate resources, and how to put plans into action. Their initial ideas about what works may need to be revised as the project evolves. At C.E.S. 42, after a year of using group leaders (aides) to deliver after-school natural history lessons, the principal and site coordinator decided that those lessons required staff with more expertise. They now rely on specialists trained by the museum to lead science activities exclusively.

Find out what the principal's goals are, what the principal is looking for.... Remember, it's her school.

Chris Caruso, site coordinator
Children's Aid Society at PS 8 (Manhattan)

At other TASC sites, the marriage between institutions was arranged by matchmakers who could see how much each partner had in common. For these new partnerships, the process of framing a shared vision can be the glue that cements the relationship between site coordinator and principal and anchors the project in the school community. E. Thomas Oliver, a top administrator at Medgar Evers College, met with the principal of P.S. 181 (Brooklyn) to plan the TASC-supported project that the college sponsors there. The principal, Delores Theobald, said she is pleased with the way the after-school program is beginning to fortify the school's art, music, and drama activities.

When a principal moves on, site coordinators may need to sit down with the new school leader to determine where the match between regular and after-school programs is strong and where

adjustments are needed. In one school, the new principal directed the site coordinator to continue with the original plan, relieved that one part of the operation was already in good shape. At another school, the new principal was appointed to turn achievement around in a hurry, so the coordinator made changes that supported the academic improvements and helped the principal stay informed about after-school news. This coordinator recognized that her predecessor's practice of consulting the principal on every matter was eating into time now needed for other kinds of leadership, so she began reporting work completed rather than asking for guidance.

3. Balance Autonomy with Respect for the Principal's Authority

Coordinators of vibrant after-school programs see themselves as managers but they also recognize the principal's ultimate responsibility for the school's entire education program. Some coordinators acknowledge the principal's role by asking for input on hiring decisions and by reporting to the principal every one or two weeks in formally scheduled meetings. Others make a point of talking informally to the principal whenever they see her or him in the school. Several coordinators have nonvoting roles on the school's governing council, which helps them learn about the principal's goals for the school.

A site coordinator who is both autonomous and cooperative reaps benefits for the school and the after-school program. One coordinator, accustomed in her previous job to doing her own hiring, submitted to her principal's request that a member of the leadership team participate in all interviews. After several joint interview sessions, the new coordinator understood the school's criteria for staff and had adopted them herself. She began asking for school input on other issues, recognizing the value of collaboration. At another site, the after-school coordinator dismissed an aide (who also taught during the school day) for treating children rudely. She immediately reported her action to the principal, who was pleased. Apparently, the principal also considered the aide too harsh but hadn't found a way to fix the problem without alienating other staff.

Veterans know that backing from the principal is essential for any school program's success, but the realities of life in urban schools mean that leadership may be scattered or disrupted from time to time. It pays to remember that a site coordinator may be a valuable ally for an interim principal but has neither the training nor the authority to operate successfully in the long term without a principal's support.

4. Connect the Program to the School Day

The site coordinators and principals we interviewed suggested several ways to link after-school activities to the school without duplicating the school program. One or more of these strategies may be right for a particular program.

If your budget allows and the combination of skills and availability is right, hire regular school staff (both certified and classified) to work after school.

Adopt the school's rules governing student behavior, where appropriate, and use the same language to communicate these expectations to after-school participants. At C.E.S. 42, for example, regular and after-school staff all attended the same workshop so that they used consistent methods to manage student behavior.

Offer activities that the principal supports but are not currently offered in school, such as arts or sports classes. Or, expand a topic that is addressed only briefly during the school day. For example, planners of the TASC project sponsored by Educators for Social Responsibility at P.S. 24 augmented the school's conflict resolution classes by adding two or three more weekly lessons after school. Project staff learned the same techniques for helping students that school staff used during the day.

Help the school improve achievement by offering extra academic support and homework help, carefully tailored to accommodate the resources of after-school staff and the expectations of classroom teachers.

Extra Services Link School, After-School, and Parents

One site coordinator responded to his school's need for Spanish-speaking adults by making that skill a priority when hiring after-school staff. He ended up with more bilingual staff than were employed on the regular faculty, and he made them available as translators during the school's parent conferences.

Another coordinator heard his principal lamenting the lack of support available for English language learners. He added a bilingual after-school staff person who could provide that support.

Be alert for ways to help the school that are consistent with the after-school program's mission and take advantage of its flexibility. As one coordinator explained, "My TASC money and the rules that govern my program allow flexibility, so if somebody in school has a need for something, they'll come to me first." She can't always oblige, but often a plea for assistance shows her a new avenue for program growth.

Accommodate school staff's requests for flexible scheduling, when possible.

[The principal] meets with us often, but she's not a control freak. She just wants to keep us working on the same goals.

Site coordinator

5. Keep the Principal in the Loop

A principal's ability to support the school community depends in part on never being surprised by bad news from outsiders. Successful after-school coordinators know this and find ways to communicate regularly with their hosts. "[My principal]'s day is nonstop, and I'm not quite as busy," explains Samantha Vincent, coordinator of the project sponsored by Educational Alliance at School of the Future (Manhattan). "I try to get issues and problems solved first, before going to her, but all along I keep her notified by note or voicemail." Virginia Temple, coordinator of the project sponsored by Community Education Resource Center at M.S. 67 (Queens), agrees. She talks with her principal daily about staffing, student accomplishments, scheduling, program modifications, and solutions to problems.

6. Understand the School's Culture

Each school's culture—the expectations and beliefs that guide all interactions—has a flavor all its own. Schools have structures, specified in contracts, that assign distinct roles and responsibilities to principals, assistant principals, teachers, counselors, custodians, and food service staff. There are also customs for staff interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and people from outside organizations. In some ways, each school has its own way of being a polite society. New program staff need to learn the local version of good manners to be fully accepted.

Each school also has ways of managing the environment that stem from the principal's

leadership style. Staff may be accustomed to sharing space and learning tools because the principal requires it, or completely averse to the idea because the principal encourages them to personalize their work areas. In some schools, the gym belongs to no one but the cafeteria is the turf of the food service team. Sometimes the library is a hospitable drop-in reading zone, while in other schools it is more like a formal study hall. Learning about these expectations is the first step in determining how best to cope with those that might interfere with a good after-school program. Try to propose solutions that optimize your resources and minimize the disruptions to school norms.

7. Tackle Tough Problems Together

You don't need to bother the principal with countless minor issues, but when a big problem arises, don't try to be a hero and solve it on your own. Working to find a common solution will allow you and the principal to pool your resources, and it also gives you a chance to strengthen your working relationship.

The most common problem requiring a joint solution involves the use of school space and equipment when regular teachers are not around. The coordinators and principals we interviewed suggested the following practices that both partners can use to resolve these problems:

Have after-school staff check to see that spaces are left tidy. Some coordinators give staff a clean-up checklist to follow at the end of each program day.

When disaster strikes a computer breaks or a teacher's supplies disappear apologize to the teacher, repair the damage, and improve staff training and student supervision so it does not happen again.

Have the principal remind teachers that it is best for students if they have access to all school spaces and that the students' needs take priority over teachers' convenience.

Rotate students through rooms periodically to spread out the wear and tear.

The seven tips outlined above are a starting point for building strong partnerships, forging links between school-day and after-school programs, and facing challenges with mutual respect and support. Although the practices aren't always easy to follow, the effort is worth it. As one coordinator said, "It feels better when the principal is on your side."

Sources for More Information

National Association of Elementary School Principals

1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
(800) 386-2377
www.naesp.org

Leadership Center, Bank Street College of Education

610 West 112th Street
New York, New York 10025
(212) 875-4592

National Center for Schools and Communities

Fordham University
33 West 60th Street, 8th Floor
New York, NY 10023
(212) 636-6699

National Institute on Out-of-School Time

Wellesley College
Wellesley, MA 02181-8259
(781) 283-2547
www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW/SAC

In 1998, The After-School Corporation (TASC) launched an initiative to improve the quantity and quality of after-school programs for students in the public schools of New York City and State. Through grants to nonprofit organizations that sponsor school-based projects, TASC now serves students in kindergarten through twelfth grade at almost 200 sites. This Resource Brief shares some of the promising practices used by TASC projects. We hope that it helps your planning, program improvement, and further exploration into the world of after-school services. For more information on the Resource Briefs or the companion Tool Kits, which contain checklists and other practical materials, contact TASC's Research and Education Policy staff at (212) 547-6950 or www.tascorp.org. This brief was prepared for TASC with support from The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York.