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# Promising Practices in Out-of-School Time Professional Development

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# Promising Practices in Out-of-School Time Professional Development

## **Abstract**

Research in the out-of-school time (OST) field confirms that there is a strong connection between professional development (PD) for staff and positive outcomes for youth. According to Heather Weiss, Founder and Director of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), "Professional development for those who work with children and youth is fraught with challenges and ripe with opportunity – specifically, the opportunity to increase staff quality, which experts agree is critical to positive experiences for children and youth" (Weiss, 2005/2006). However, as Thomas Guskey (1998) states, "For many years, educators have operated under the premise that professional development is good by definition, and therefore more is always better. If you want to improve your professional development program, the thinking goes, simply add a day or two." Thus, although considered important for staff, OST professional development often does not benefit from adequate attention or expertise.

The purpose of this document is to broadly define OST professional development and summarize promising practices in its design, implementation, and evaluation.

## **Comments**

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## **Promising Practices in Out-of-School Time Professional Development December 2007**

### **Introduction**

Research in the out-of-school time (OST) field confirms that there is a strong connection between professional development (PD) for staff and positive outcomes for youth. According to Heather Weiss, Founder and Director of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), “Professional development for those who work with children and youth is fraught with challenges and ripe with opportunity – specifically, the opportunity to increase staff quality, which experts agree is critical to positive experiences for children and youth” (Weiss, 2005/2006). However, as Thomas Guskey (1998) states, “For many years, educators have operated under the premise that professional development is good by definition, and therefore more is always better. If you want to improve your professional development program, the thinking goes, simply add a day or two.” Thus, although considered important for staff, OST professional development often does not benefit from adequate attention or expertise.

The purpose of this document is to broadly define OST professional development and summarize promising practices in its design, implementation, and evaluation.

### **Defining Professional Development**

The terms *human resource development*, *staff development*, and *professional development* reference similar activities but are defined differently by different fields and individuals. In the business world, human resource development “is the profession that helps organizations to enhance workforce effectiveness and productivity through learning and other performance improvement activities” (Broad and Newstrom, 1992). The National Staff Development Council (NSDC), which primarily targets formal educators, defines staff development as “the continuing education of teachers, administrators, and other school employees” (NSDC, 2004b). In their 2004 Out-of-School Time Evaluation Brief entitled “Promoting Quality through Professional Development,” HFRP describes professional development as “a full range of activities that have the common goal of increasing the knowledge and skills of staff members and volunteer.” (HFRP, 2004). Precise definitions become more difficult when youth leaders and parents serve in educator roles, and personal enrichment can overlap with professional development. For the purpose of this document, the Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC) defines OST professional development as activities, resources, and supports that help out-of-school time practitioners work with or on behalf of children and youth. In this context, “practitioners” can be volunteers, teenagers, parents, or other non-staff members, provided that the PD experience transfers to and culminates in supporting OST youth participants.

## **Goals and Objectives**

The first step in designing or implementing professional development is to establish fundamental goals and objectives. Similar to identifying goals and objectives for OST programs, it can be helpful to work backward from an evaluation framework. For instance, Thomas Guskey (1998) lists five levels of evaluation for PD programs: 1) Participants' Reactions; 2) Participants' Learning; 3) Organization Support and Change; 4) Participants' Use of New Knowledge and Skills; and 5) Student Learning Outcomes. ) The OSTRC includes "Extension," a sixth domain that is particularly pertinent to non-formal educators (OSTRC, 2004). Extension refers to sharing information with colleagues, adapting lessons to other audiences or age groups, and similar ways of expanding the learning experience.

Using this evaluation framework as a template, consider goals and objectives that articulate 1) the participants' positive responses to the professional development; 2) the knowledge and skills that participants will attain; 3) how participants' organizations will support them in using this new information; 4) how participants will apply what they learned (and what they will need to apply it); 5) in what ways students will be impacted; and 6) with what other staff, programs, or students this information will be shared. The answers to these six questions can then be developed into multiple sets of goals and objectives. Another way to approach this is to list "implementation goals" and "impact goals." Implementation goals and objectives include standards for how the PD will be delivered, while impact goals and objectives address the effect on staff and students. Remember that goals can be very broad but objectives should be measurable (additional details are included in the "Evaluation" section of this paper).

## **Integrating Staff Needs and Input**

Articulating goals and objectives should be done concurrently with assessing staff needs and incorporating staff feedback. Staff needs can be ascertained through effective program monitoring and evaluation; that is, areas in which programs could be improved or enhanced may be areas in which staff might benefit from professional development. This approach should be combined with genuine input from staff: what they say they need or want, through what venues they believe it could be provided, and toward what immediate or long-term purpose.

Methods of gathering staff input include paper surveys, on-line surveys, focus groups, and individual and collective meetings. Several PD needs assessment questionnaires have been developed for university staff, such as the "Ward Survey," and can be modified for OST staff (Ward, 2007). A few tools have been designed specifically for the OST field, including the "Staff Training Survey" contained in the "Beyond the Bell Toolkit" (Learning Point Associates, 2005), and another developed by the Francis Institute in Kansas City (. For focus group suggestions, refer to the "OSTRC Focus Group Summary," which provides a template for and results from five PD focus groups conducted in 2004-2005 (OSTRC, 2005a). Meetings may be formal or informal and take the form of designated staff development sessions, retreats, and forthright conversations between staff and supervisors.

## **Professional Development Standards**

Once goals and objectives have been identified, staff needs have been ascertained, and staff feedback has been incorporated, how does one develop a professional development strategy?

The OST field has not developed a core set of professional development frameworks. However, other disciplines have published versatile standards and guidelines for PD design and implementation. Although many have been created specifically for classroom teachers, they can help frame an OST PD strategy. For example, the twelve comprehensive NSDC staff development standards are research-based, adaptable, and conveniently distributed under the headings of “Context Standards,” “Process Standards,” and “Content Standards” (NSDC, 2004a).

A few OST organizations have published professional development guidelines. For example, a document produced by New York’s Partnership for After School Education (PASE) suggests that “since many different organizations train trainers, a common set of standards or principles needs to be agreed upon” (PASE, 1999). Their recommendations include allowing for a range of learning styles, integrating theory and practice, and honoring participants’ life experiences.

### **Designing and Implementing Workshops**

OSTRC research indicates that most OST organizations primarily rely on workshops as their professional development venues. There are numerous resources, outside of the OST field, which can help staff design and implement PD workshops. Many integrate adult learning theory (“andragogy”) and Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Armstrong, 2000; Lieb, 1991). One particularly useful textbook on the subject is “Teach with Style: A Comprehensive System for Teaching Adults.” Written by Jim Teeters (2001), it covers the “Teach with Style Model,” adult learning principles, diverse instructor styles, and planning for continuous improvement. Another informative text is “Transfer of Training” by Mary L. Broad and John W. Newstrom (1992). Although written for the business community, it contains hundreds of tips for transferring knowledge out of a workshop and into the work environment.

There are also several OST resources that can help staff design and implement effective trainings. These include:

1. The Pennsylvania Keys’ website, which features a “Pennsylvania Quality Assurance System (PQAS) Sample Professional Development Module” that provides detailed information on how to structure an OST professional development workshop ([www.pakeys.org/docs/PQAS%20Sample%20Module.pdf](http://www.pakeys.org/docs/PQAS%20Sample%20Module.pdf)). The site also has several handouts about adult education and related teaching methods. In addition, the PA Keys’ predecessor, PA Pathways, published a helpful document entitled “Steps in Planning and Delivering Training.”
2. The Out-of-School Time Resource Center, which offers “Promising Practices for Out-of-School Time Professional Development Workshops.” This publication integrates general suggestions such as cultivating opportunities for self-direction and self-reflection, encouraging real-life applications, and promoting teamwork.

### **Additional Professional Development Formats**

Although the term “professional development” is often used interchangeably with workshops and conferences, PD can be a much richer, more inclusive, and more creative endeavor. The OSTRC believes that “types of PD include (but are not limited to) onsite training, workshops, conferences, formal education, technical assistance, access to a resource center, peer mentoring, electronic listservs, professional associations, networking meetings, supervision, internships, apprenticeships, observations/shadowing, grant proposal review, staff meetings, and advocacy

groups” (OSTRC, 2005b). The National Staff Development Council confirms that “Attending classes, workshops, or conferences is one way that teachers – and other school employees – learn some of what they need to know. But other types of staff development are just as important and, often, more effective than traditional sit-and-gets.” (NSDC, 2004b).

To complement workshops and conferences, effective OST professional development should include additional formats such as:

1. Technical Assistance (TA). In the OST field, technical assistance generally refers to staff or consultants who visit program sites and work on particular issues with individual or groups of staff. TA can be implemented in response to challenges identified through program monitoring, or it may be requested by direct-service or administrative staff themselves. TA can be coordinated with (precede or follow) specific workshops, or it can be implemented on its own.
2. Peer Mentoring. Similar to some forms of TA, peer mentoring connects more experienced staff with less experienced staff to provide individual and ongoing support. Although more prevalent in formal education, several OST systems are beginning to utilize this strategy. For example, the California Afterschool Partnership provides suggestion for and implements successful adult mentoring, coaching, and “guide-by-the-side” efforts (Fletcher, 2004).
3. Small Learning Communities/Peer Networking. There is increasing evidence, within formal education, that small learning communities benefit teachers and students. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) devotes an entire website to the logistics and rewards of small learning communities ([www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc](http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc)). However, classroom teachers working in a single building can more easily meet with one another than OST staff who are spread around cities and regions. OST “Peer Networking Meetings” can be held regionally and host staff from multiple agencies and systems. Successful peer networking models are currently being implemented in cities such as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore (After-school, n.d.).
4. Internships and Apprenticeships. Many fields require individuals to participate in internships or apprenticeships before becoming fully-vested employees. Classroom teachers, for instance, must complete student teaching requirements before receiving their certification and assuming responsibility for classrooms. While many OST staff do not benefit from this practice, some programs and organizations are beginning to invest in this approach. A notable example is the Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers (BEST) Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship program (YDPA), in which professional development is implemented as on-the-job training (Center for School and Community Services, 2002).
5. Observation. Perhaps the simplest and least expensive form of “alternative” professional development is program observation. Instead of spending 2 hours at a professional development workshop, staff take turns observing one another’s programs to explore specific interests (such as behavior management or homework help) or for general pointers. An extension of this approach is to rotate among different programs and compare the same issue(s) in multiple sites. Formal observation tools exist and can help focus, organize, and standardize these activities.

## **Evaluation**

Ultimately, OST professional development is successful only when it positively impacts youth participants. Thomas Guskey’s five levels of professional development evaluation (and the

OSTRC's sixth level) demonstrate the depth and breadth through which PD should be measured. Nevertheless, the field continues to rely upon satisfaction surveys that often place as much emphasis on food quality and room temperature as on the extent to which new knowledge and skills have been assimilated and student outcomes have been achieved.

Formal education has made great strides in evaluating professional development, through approaches and mechanisms described in Thomas Guskey's (2000) "Evaluating Professional Development" and Joellen Killion's (2002) "Assessing Impact: Evaluating Staff Development." The National Staff Development Council has published multiple articles on the topic, including "Evaluating Professional Development," "Evaluating Learning in Professional Development Workshops: Using the Retrospective Pretest" and Thomas Guskey's informative piece entitled "The Age of Our Accountability" (Guskey, 1998; Lamd & Tschillard, 2005; Shaha et. al., 2004). The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory's Spring 2004 issue of "Notes and Reflections" is devoted to "Keeping Professional Learning on Track with Evaluation" (*Appendix C*). All of these documents assert that professional development should be evaluated on multiple levels and each provides suggestions and tools for doing so. The latter include participant questionnaires, presenter self-assessments, online surveys, observer rubrics, and other forms of qualitative and quantitative evaluations. "Teaching With Style," referenced above, includes a variety of excellent surveys, such as "Instructor Self-Assessment Inventories," "Participants Inventories" and "Observer Inventories" (Teeters, 2001).

The out-of-school time field has begun designing and implementing more rigorous approaches to evaluating PD. "Promoting Quality through Professional Development," described previously, provides an excellent overview of OST PD evaluation benefits and methodologies. The Out-of-School Time Resource Center has published a series of OST evaluation instruments including workshop surveys, conference evaluations, presenter self-assessments, and on-line follow-up surveys. To supplement these tools, the OSTRC recently developed an observation protocol for qualitatively assessing OST workshops (OSTRC, 2007). All of these OST evaluation efforts provide increasingly tangible evidence that professional development can positively impact staff, programs, and students.

## **Conclusion**

Out-of-school time administrative and direct-service staff agree that professional development is beneficial and necessary. However, effective PD must be designed, implemented, and evaluated with care and expertise. Only then can the field begin to verify that these investments positively impact children and youth.

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