

A Guide to Organizing a School-Age Care Program

If you're a parent, a teacher, a child care director, a school administrator, or a service-group volunteer—even if you're simply interested in the well-being of New Jersey young people—you probably know at least one child with whom you would like to reclaim opportunities for learning, social interaction, creative expression, and just plain fun.

But how? Where do you look for allies in planning school-age care services? And how do you mobilize the people and resources of your community to make such services possible?

As in most things dealing with human nature, there is no single "correct" way to help all the children in New Jersey. No single institution in American society can or should take on the task of caring for school-age children during the hours and days when school is closed and parents are at work. This fact puts us all at an open door to the creative contributions of many different individuals and groups, who can work together to

build comfortable and appropriate after-school environments for school-age children.

This paper will take you on a guided tour of a process for getting a school-age care (SAC) program started. By following these general guidelines, caring people in New Jersey and throughout the country have developed the support, the resources, and the local commitment to improve the outlook for school-age children in their communities. You can do it too.

PHASE 1 Heed the Call to Action

To start, you'll want to get in touch with others who share your perception of a pressing, unmet demand for organized services. Think creatively and inclusively about who else might already be interested. At different times in various communities, the YMCA, YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Campfire Boys and Girls, League of Women Voters, city chambers of commerce, and Junior League have all played parts in developing programs

that meet the demand. Make your own list of possible contacts.

As you begin your inquiries, you may find one or more collaborative school-age care initiatives already under way in your community. If the planners seem to be responsible and committed, you may not want to duplicate their process. Instead, join them in their efforts. Remember that the key is always collaboration. If no one has yet begun the process in your community, the first step may be yours.

That first step is the formation of a planning committee, also known as an action group. See Figure 1 for the name and contact information of your SAC coordinator at your Unified Child Care Agency who perhaps can add to your source list of potential action group members.

PHASE 2: Prepare a CANARI (Community Assessment of Need and Resource Instrument)

Most working parents of school-agers don't need to be convinced that New Jersey communities offer too few excellent and affordable after-school services. Other important potential partners—such as mayors, city council members, school board members, school superintendents, and business leaders—may ask for demonstrable proof that such a demand exists.

To meet this frequent requirement, start with a look at demographic data that have already been collected. Your local library carries the current edition of the U.S. Census of Population and Housing, which contains pertinent information about your area—such as the number of children by age group or the income characteristics of working parents. Here again, check with your SAC



photo by Sarah E. Round

Figure 1

Need More Information?

Contact:

New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition (NJSACC).

The mission of the New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition is to promote and support the development, continuity and expansion of quality programs for children and youth during out-of-school time.

The Coalition can be reached at:

NJSACC

231 North Avenue West,

PM # 363

Westfield, NJ 07090



- civic groups (e.g., League of Women Voters)
- local and state colleges
- school principals and school districts
- PTOs and other parent groups

PHASE 3

Evaluate Current Community Conditions

A successful CANARI gives your action group a great deal of information for thinking critically and creatively about various sources of assistance and cooperation in your community. Of course, it also provides your group with insights into the interests of parents and children, your potential clients. Assuming that your CANARI has been a success, use the responses to guide you in your deliberations.

Before deciding to take the plunge into center-based school-age child care service, encourage everyone in your action group to consider the following questions. The best answers may not come quickly or easily, so give yourselves plenty of time.

What Kind of Experiences Do We Wish to Help Create?

Stories are often heard about planners of school-age child care services who, for all their good intentions, wind up with what can only be regarded as waiting rooms or holding areas. In these programs, children may be told to remain quiet and seated all afternoon, confined in an echoing cafeteria furnished only with hard tables and benches. The planners may achieve safety for the children, but at the cost of exploration, surprise, discovery, and the joy of play. Consider the effect of such bargaining on your efforts.

As well as clear limits and expectations for behavior, consider school-agers' other developmental needs: a base of warmth and security, opportunities to develop initiative and independence, encouragement of imagination and creativity.

Consider also that parents looking for a

coordinator.

Then, using the knowledge you gain from these sources, you can put together a Community Assessment of Need And Resource Instrument, otherwise known as CANARI. Although simply a public interest survey, it is a way to convince local policy makers of the general demand for school-age care. You can also convert the survey results into a press release and perhaps attract publicity for your initiative or provide service planners with invaluable information to aid service design.

Depending on the geography of your area and the type of community you wish to survey, a CANARI can involve:

- a printed questionnaire
- telephone interviews
- a door-to-door survey
- a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting
- a congregational gathering
- an e-mail inquiry
- any combination of these

See Figure 2 for a sample questionnaire, but don't copy it word for word. The success of your CANARI depends heavily on whether or not it addresses your local community's values. In some communities, even the choice of language might skew your results. To avoid this possibility, one

Florida county, for example, used Spanish and Vietnamese as well as English for its CANARI questionnaires. Make certain that your action group specifically designs its CANARI with your community in mind.

Any veteran of the printed-questionnaire method will tell you that distributing surveys is the easy part. The challenge is getting people to complete them and send them back. If your return rate is very low, the results may be too sparse to have any value.

So, in addition to recognizing local community values, do everything possible to keep your CANARI questions brief, direct, to the point, and simple to answer. That way you'll be able to compile, analyze, and summarize your results easily.

If you decide to go with a printed-questionnaire style CANARI, be sure to add a cover letter that explains who you are and why you're asking such personal questions. In this cover letter, emphasize that the CANARI is simply a gauge of current public sentiment, not a promise of any kind. Include the name and phone number of at least one contact person, and don't forget to communicate some urgency with your deadline for returns.

To assist with CANARI distribution and retrieval—or simply to lend their name and credibility to a cover letter—you may wish to invite participation from:

- cooperative extension services
- local planning councils
- youth bureaus

safe place, where their children will receive adequate supervision, want a program that is affordable and that respects their values and cultural background. When your action group agrees on the program's primary purposes, be sure that this mission takes into account the qualities in life you might wish for yourself and for your own children.

Who Will Attend Our School- Age Child Care Program?

Information from the CANARI can help you determine your admission standards: children's age and/or grade level, place of residence, school of attendance, family size and income, and so on.

Your admission standards will partially control your total attendance figure, or program size, as will the availability of an affordable and appropriate location.

Group size also effects total attendance. In order to maximize availability of service, some planners use the highest number allowed by New Jersey state law, one (1) caregiver for every eighteen (18) children. Since it is quite difficult for one caregiver to establish close ties or permit too wide a range of activity with so many children, others groups plan a lower caregiver - child ratio. In either case, the costs of hiring and training qualified caregivers have an impact on program size.

Who Will Administer Our School- Age Child Care Program?

An effective administrator of a school-age care program manages the business in accountable and dependable ways. An excellent one does so in creative, flexible, and responsive ways as well.

Will your action group have to establish a brand-new administrative structure? Not necessarily. Perhaps an existing program could be adapted or expanded to meet the demand for school-age care. An experienced administrative partner who can diversify into school-age care may be just what you need.

School-age child care administration can be one of the following types:

1. A societal institution plays the dominant role.
 - youth-serving agency (YMCA/YWCA, Campfire Boys and Girls, Boys and Girls Clubs)
 - community school
 - day care center
 - public housing authority
 - private/parochial school
2. A community-based group plays the dominant role.
 - parent board
 - chartered community-based organization
 - religious congregation
 - county/municipal agency (parks and recreation departments)
3. Community and institutional groups collaborate in leadership.
 - parent group + public/private school
 - youth-service agency + public school
 - community school + youth-service agency
 - congregation + parent group + private school
 - public/private school + county/municipal agency

If no existing agency appears able to effectively administer the program you envisage, you may wish to embark on the process of creating a new formal organization.

Figure 2

Elementary School-Age Care Survey

The _____ is currently studying the issue of school-age child care. Please help us assess the needs of our community by answering the following questions. Return one questionnaire per household to your child's teacher or school office by _____. All responses will be treated confidentially.

1. How many elementary school-aged children do you have who need care before and/or after school? _____ CHILDREN
2. If an organized and supervised before/after school program was started in the area of your child's school, would you take advantage of it? . YES . NO . MAYBE
3. For every child that you would send to a school-age care program, check the grades in which they are currently enrolled by entering the number of children in each grade. K ____ 1____ 2____ 3____ 4____ 5____
4. When would child care be needed?
 - . BEFORE SCHOOL . AFTER SCHOOL . BOTH . SUMMER
5. Collection of parent fees is necessary to provide funds for school-age programs. Please indicate the amount you would be willing to pay weekly per child. . \$1-14 . \$15-19 . \$20-24 . \$25-29 . \$30-34 . \$35-39 . \$40-45 . over \$45
6. Do you have current arrangements for before and/or after school care for elementary aged children on a regular basis? (This may include care provided by a neighbor, relative, day care center, older sibling, etc.) . YES . NO
7. Are there preschool children in your home who will need school-age care within the next five years? . YES, HOW MANY _____ . NO
8. Please indicate how important the following features are to you when considering a school-age care program. Check column (1) for VERY IMPORTANT, column (2) for SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT, or column (3) for NOT IMPORTANT.

	1 2 3	
Hours _____	_____	Cost _____
Proximity to _____	_____	Transportation _____
home or school _____	_____	Program quality _____

PLEASE USE THE SPACE BELOW OR THE BACK OF THIS FORM FOR ANY CONCERNS NOT ADDRESSED BY THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. COMMENTS ARE ALSO WELCOME. THANK YOU VERY MUCH! PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM PROMPTLY.

Adapted with permission. Lansdale (Pennsylvania) Chapter of the Association of American University Women, August 1990.



photo by Sarah E. Round

legal requirements, your action group can consult an attorney with regard to:

- incorporation of the organization
- development of bylaws
- application for tax-exempt status

Which Location Makes the Most Sense?

It is preferable to find locations close to or in schools. This makes children’s daily commute much easier. Or, you may prefer sites where parents driving home from work can conveniently pick up their children at day’s end.

Some of the more common locations that meet these two criteria are:

- community centers
- youth centers
- county/municipal buildings (libraries, parks, museums)

- school buildings (public/private—no longer operated as schools)
- churches and synagogues
- preschools and day care centers
- commercially zoned properties (storefront buildings, industrial parks)

To operate your program at a desirable location and still keep costs down, you may wish to explore the option of sharing space. Given the storage capacity and proper tools, caregivers and children can transform rooms and playgrounds used by others during school hours into an after-school program environment, often in as little as twenty minutes. Unless a certain amount of the shared space remains permanently devoted to them, however, children tend to lose the sense that they really belong there, and this unease detracts from the overall caring experience.

Free or low-cost sites have an obvious appeal. It’s wonderful to think about saving money on rent so that it can be spent on caregiver compensation, supplies and equipment, off-site day trips,

and so on. Just remember that, as in all business, you usually get what you pay for.

So, while support may be strong for the most financially expedient solution, be sure to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each possible location before making a final decision.

If your program’s administrator doesn’t own the facilities, you’ll have to prepare for the legal relationship between the program and the lessor. It’s likely you’ll want to make sure that this relationship is fully expressed in writing, possibly in the form of a time, space, and equipment (TSE) contract. A TSE specifically spells out what caregivers, children, and the lessor may and may not do in the lessor’s space. Always be sure to have an experienced legal advisor review contracts and inform you of your rights and obligations.

During Which Hours, Days, and Weeks Will Our Program Operate?

Your CANARI-based information can help you determine the times when most families would like service. Always look for ways to make it available when they want it most. Parents’ early-morning job schedules may make a before-school program a must. For school holidays and summer vacations, some New Jersey programs offer expanded service for ten (10) hours or more each day. Others schedule service during school holidays but don’t operate in the summer. Certain programs schedule regular service even on snow days.

How Will Children Get TO and FROM the Program?

Some sites that don’t provide transportation still serve parents and children well; others operate transportation routes costing thousands of dollars per year. An important issue in New Jersey is location of SAC programs within the boundaries of the school district. New Jersey has more than 600 school districts, many of which are very small. They will usually not bus children to a program outside their boundaries. If a partnership is formed with a private center or community agency outside the district, busing will be a problem. Many organizations and other organizations serve

children from several surrounding small school districts.

In looking at your own community, consider the following alternatives:

- letting children walk, escorted by staff
- public transportation
- having schools transport children
- purchase or lease a school bus
- contracting transportation services with a bus company

How Will We Finance Our Program?

For most school-age care programs, the bulk of direct funding comes from the families served. Your CANARI information should give you a general sense of what parents are willing to pay for school-age care.

Often, only 20 to 30 percent of those who indicate in the CANARI that they would utilize school-age child care service actually enroll their child when a program opens. Realizing this helps you determine the limits of your first year's operating budget, your projected income and expenditures during program operation. Your operating expenses include staff salaries and benefits—about 80 percent of your budget—plus rent, equipment, materials, supplies, utilities, food, and administration.

Businesses incur many one-time expenses prior to operation, so you'll have to look a bit further than your families' checkbooks to meet start-up costs. These can include building renovation expenses, equipment and supply purchases, initial staff and caregiver compensation, and legal fees.

In addition, it's good business practice to maintain reserve funds sufficient to carry the program through the first six months of operation, a time during which under enrollment may put a crimp in your operating budget.

As you look for ways to reconcile the difference between possible expenses and available resources, you may discover that resource development can supplement your projected costs. Seek

funding from outside companies and agencies that may have an interest in supporting your service.

Groups seeking to serve at-risk school-agers can explore the possibility of obtaining federal, local, and foundation grants. Figure 3 outlines the information these sources require.

In actuality, it may not be more money you need but rather the kinds of things that money can buy, so explore possibilities for in-kind resources that can bolster your bottom line. Collaboration with schools has become a time-honored method for obtaining in-kind resources. Your group may find schools to share group transportation, make low-cost meals available from school-run kitchens, assist with bulk purchases of supplies, contribute staff time for administrative paperwork, and so on.

Community schools or adult education departments may also have in-kind resources to share, but don't stop there. Happily, in-kind resources are often available as contributions from friendly businesses and community organizations.

PHASE 4

Design the Program and Select the Staff

Perhaps the time will come when it is evident to your group that conditions in your community warrant school-age care program start-up.

At this point, unfortunately, the overriding tendency among school-age child care planners is to say, "We're going to have a program, so we'll have to have some balls, headphones, puzzles..."

Instead, it's time to turn to a new source of information. Ask the kids. Let them help decide what all of you want for the program. Successful planners will:

- capitalize on specific children's specific interests
- balance unstructured child-initiated activities into the overall plan
- set reasonable limits that can be expressed clearly, consistently, and with respect
- allow spontaneity, flexibility, and serendipity within those limits

In a very real sense, the program IS the people whom you select to care for the children. Staff and caregiver compensation generally represent 70 to 85 percent of program expenditures, but account for 100 percent of program excellence.

The first major hiring decision for the administration of a new program, choosing the program or site director, will do much to determine how well or how poorly your program will serve children. Schedule the recruitment and selection process so that your director can join the team two to six months before the first day of planned program service.

An excellent candidate for this position will encourage your program to:

- hire experienced caregivers who have at least some training and are committed to school-age care
 - offer high salaries and extra benefits, even if it means fund-raising
 - ensure good working conditions: breaks, paid time off, opportunities for meaningful staff input
 - consider hiring at least one full-time person per site
 - support paid caregivers with volunteer and low-cost aides, such as work-study students and foster grandparents
- For more on recruitment and hiring, see "The Right Staff," Technical Assistance Paper No. 4 in this series.

PHASE 5

Build Collaborations

This phase of the process is actually an ongoing process in itself, one that builds and maintains a spirit of collaboration between your program and other key groups. The mechanisms can range from a school board to a foundation to a maintenance engineer's union. Handled with skill, this process will win your program a "green light" from these

groups—and keep the light green throughout the life of the program.

You can lay the groundwork for success early on by identifying opinion leaders and decision-makers sympathetic to your effort, some of whom you enlist in your action group. These people can lobby others for you, putting their contacts and authority to work on your behalf.

Prior to their approval, some key groups require that your group attain a formal legal identity and attend to a variety of administrative tasks. The processes of incorporation, obtaining liability insurance, applying for licenses and permits—all these and more can take time, so be sure to plan ahead.

If your program requires formal approval from a school board or local zoning board, a public hearing may take place. In this event, publicize the hearing date and encourage supporters, especially parents who want the program approved to attend the hearing. Legal protection and financial responsibility will be the biggest concerns to those whom you approach for formal approval; anticipate their questions and know the answers.

To further demonstrate that you have carefully thought out and designed your program, prepare a written proposal. Depending on the requirements of the approving body or funding agency, the proposal may need to be either fairly brief or quite extensive.

PHASE 6

Publicize the Program

A big part of gaining approval is generating positive public relations. Cultivate ties with the media from the earliest possible date. If your efforts are deemed newsworthy, local press, radio talk shows, and even television can profile your program.

Over the long run, your best public relations will be word of mouth from satisfied parents and children. In the meantime, you can try other methods to increase community awareness.

1. Call and/or visit parents who indicated interest on the CANARI.

Keep a running list of names and numbers of all those who make telephone inquiries, and follow up on them.

2. Send fliers home with children through schools and religious classes. Send fliers to social service agencies; leave them at doctor's offices, supermarkets, and the like.

3. Put posters in supermarkets, shopping malls, churches and synagogues, schools, libraries, coin laundries, adult education centers. Make them bright and easy to spot and read.

4. Invite local reporters to visit and write about or videotape your program.

5. Use radio and Television PSAs (public service announcements)—they're free!

6. Distribute brochures. Make them simple, colorful, and attractive. The aim is to attract attention, pique interest, and present basic facts.

7. Hold an open house. Choose a time that is convenient for your prospective users. Be sure to have the director and caregivers on hand.

8. Mail or distribute newsletters, press releases, and bulletins through 4-H clubs, churches, or other community organizations; put announcements in the publications of some of these types of groups.

PHASE 7

Enroll Children

By the time you begin your publicity campaign you should have enrollment policies and procedures in place.

Be sure your contact person can answer most of the common questions about the application process. Such questions include those regarding required family information, pre-registration fee or deposit, times for visits or interviews, notification of admission, waiting list procedures, and trial enrollments.

To comply with licensing guidelines, distribute written materials to parents prior to enrollment, including a mission or goals statement, a description of the daily programmed policies regarding transportation, discipline, fee payment, emergencies, and medical care.

Combining pertinent information into parent handbook can simplify the task of distributing these materials.

PHASE 8

Open Your Doors

A short while ago, a lack of school-age care inspired you and your neighbors to take up the challenge posed by children's empty hours. Now, to fill that emptiness, you have created a caring program, soon to bustle with active, busy, thriving children.

Figure 3

Funding Proposal Outline

1. History and philosophy of organization
2. Assessment of needs
3. Program information
 - a. age groups to be served
 - b. objectives and methods
 - c. location
 - d. hours of operation
 - e. accountability for day-to-day operation
4. Financial information
 - a. costs and sources of funds
 - b. projected annual revenue and expenses
 - c. liability coverage
5. Evaluation of program

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Further Readings

Child Care Information Exchange. Bonnie Neugebauer, editor. Six issues per year.

Subscriptions available from PO Box 3249, Redmond, WA 98073-3249; (800) 221-2864 fax: (206) 867-5217.
www.ChildCareExchange.com

School-Age NOTES offers the most comprehensive selection of books, training videos and how to manuals.

Resources for School-Age Child Care: Cornell Cooperative Extension

Additional Resources

Join SAC-L

SAC-L is an e-mail group that discusses policies, problems, challenges, and successes among after-school programs nation wide. Become connected to a world of people who care about the quality of after-school care.

Instructions to Subscribe:

Send an e-mail to this address: listserv@listserv.edu To successfully subscribe you must leave the subject area blank. In the body of the e-mail it is required to type **subscribe sac-l your name**. Once you have completed these steps, a confirmation e-mail will be sent to you with instructions. If you are unsuccessful please feel free to call NIOST (National Institute on Out-of-School Time) at 781-283-2547 or e-mail at nioist@wellesley.edu for assistance.

* If you automatically have a signature in the body of your e-mail it must be erased.

Informative Websites

21st Century Community Learning Centers

www.mott.org/21stcentury/index.html

Afterschool Alliance

www.afterschoolalliance.org

Afterschool.gov

www.afterschool.gov

Child Care Bureau

www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/ccb

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE)

<http://ericps.crc.uiuc.edu>

National Association of Child Care Resources and Referral Agencies

www.nccic.org

National Child Care Information Center

www.nioist.org

National Institute on Out-of-School Time

www.nsaca.org

School-Age Notes

www.schoolagenotes.com

USA Child Care

www.usachildcare.org

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZING

Asset-Based Community Development Institute

www.nwu.edu/IPR

Community Tool Box

<http://ctb.ukans.edu>

Local Initiatives Support Corporation

www.liscnet.org

MOST Initiative

www.nioist.org/most.html

National Community Education Association

www.ncea.com

COMMUNITY EDUCATION/SCHOOLS

Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth

www.ccfy.org

Coalition for Community Schools

www.communityschools.org