Technical Assistance Paper Number 8

Collaborative Strategies for After-School Care in the Public Schools

Familiarity and safety have a great deal to do with selecting a site for before-school, after-school, and wrap-around programs for school-age children. Well aware of the value of civic trust, public school administrators play host to all types of school-age child care programs. A variety of youth and child care groups benefit from locating within the public schools.

To collaborate effectively takes more than a simple desire to do the right thing. It also takes a set of effective strategies and a spirit of cooperation. This paper is intended to illustrate some of the strategies that caring program directors, public school administrators, and seasoned observers of school-age child care have found invaluable to the collaborative process.

The Pros and Cons of a School Collaboration

Because the mechanics and the timing of transportation can be so difficult and costly, one of the most convincing reasons to operate a school-age child care program in a public school is expedience. Children already get to and from school, so they can, in the same way, get to and from the program site. Other sound advantages include:

Overall cost reduction – Generally, fees for space rental in a public school compare favorably with rental rates elsewhere. The immediacy of a gymnasium and a playground can help keep down transportation and insurance expenses. In addition, schools can often rent, loan, or sell

equipment and supplies that might be otherwise beyond the program's budget.

Concurrent services – A major benefit of a successful school-age child care program is the consistency of care it brings to a child's life. Putting school-age child care in close proximity to schoolteachers, guidance counselors, health specialists, and social workers creates opportunities for school and school-age child care professionals to work closely together. This interaction helps to establish consistent caring and learning; children reap the reward.

Credibility – Despite all the recent criticism directed at them, public schools in many areas retain their traditional image as safe institutions. Parents and neighborhood residents may respond more positively when the school embraces school-age child care within its walls. School classrooms meet legal requirements for fire, safety, and other licensing-code standards.

Conversely, there are a number of reasons to avoid public schools as sites for school-age child care programs:

Conflicting attitudes – School administrators' ideas about behavior, discipline, and control differ and often conflict can develop. Schoolteachers have been known to get territorial and to view school-age child care program staff as "playgroup leaders," or "glorified baby sitters."An inhospitable environment will not be conducive to successful collaboration.

Undesirable physical space – Some schools offer a child care program only a cold, cavernous gym. Some offer a storage room. Perhaps

photo by Sarah E. Round

an active classroom or two will be made available, but only on the condition that absolutely nothing inside be moved or touched.

Low administrative priority – For political reasons, school administrators may prefer other groups that wish to use school space. Some give preference to community school functions, PTA activities, or their own meetings, so that the school-age child care program gets pushed in and out of various spaces at the convenience of others.

Comparing the Ideal with the Real

Given all the pros and cons, it's easy to see that deciding on a site for a school-age child care program isn't too different from deciding, all at once, which house to rent, where to find a job, and how to make new friends. It's a major decision, not to be made lightly.

Program directors usually have a reasonable idea of how much rent they can pay—or they may want to have some input into any arrangement with the school leasing them space. But what happens if the school board has an attorney to write up the agreement, while the school-age child care program doesn't have one to read them? A program director may see him/herself as a colleague in the company of child care educators and professionals, but will the school principal welcome input?

These and other factors in establishing a relationship with a school are crucial to everyone involved. An after-school program operating in a school building should have the following:

• an authorized resolution from the school board and/or committee

• a minimal set of school regulations with which to comply

• a high degree of autonomy with regard to caregiver hiring and internal program policies

• formal school-age child care orientations to familiarize all school personnel with the program's significance

• reasonable access to all appropriate facilities and equipment

• open channels of communication through which the program director and

the school or lessor consult prior to any substantial changes in program conditions

• a formal and consistent approach to resolving conflicts between the director, the program's caregivers, and the school or lessor

• contractual agreements that legally support all these points and contain no secret escape clauses

Hundreds of school-age child care programs and site directors have negotiated these issues successfully with their lessors.

Prelude to Collaboration

As with making any important decision that affects the lives of others, you begin by seeking a mutual vision of the ideal situation. This vision will include not only the items on your wish list, but also the wishes of children, parents, and other people important to the program's success. You'll want their participation and support for the program, and you'll want them to respect and welcome your input, so why not take the initiative?

An appropriate way to formulate this vision is with a Community Assessment of Need and Resources Instrument (CANARI). The CANARI is sometimes a neighborhood telephone survey and sometimes a mass mailing, but always a handy democratic way to find out what everyone is thinking about school-age child care.

A CANARI can be the first concrete step in bringing together all the potential partners in an after-school collaboration. One highly effective CANARI approach makes the school a distribution and data collection point. If the school and the program organizers work together to plan a school-age child care program, a professional environment will be established and seeds for future collaboration are sown.

For more on this, see "Getting Started," Technical Assistance Paper No. 2 in this series.

Roles and Goals

Starting a successful collaboration means being very specific about what you want for yourself and for the children who ultimately enroll in your program You'll want to express clearly the prerogatives you'll require and the responsibilities

you're willing to handle. Since school administrators and staff want assurances that you know what you're doing, you'll need to do your homework before you go into the school.

The challenge is to frame your objectives in a reasonable and achievable manner. If you work for an agency, the agency's mission statement might contain some basic wording to get you started. Try to see beyond the obvious generalities about "health" and "safety."

Think about how your school-age child care program can succeed where other efforts have not. Develop your ideas and your vision of this program with precision. Then find the words to describe this vision in a compelling and convincing manner. Try to avoid pie-in-the-sky ambitions to help "every child in the state" or "every family in the city," because these can be seen as signals of inexperience and naiveté.

Using this vision statement as the framework, flesh out your proposal. Develop concrete objectives, timetables for accomplishment, and descriptions of the roles each partner will play in the collaborative effort. You'll want to spell out your intentions about who will:

• administer the program

• hire, orient, and train caregivers and supervisors

• manage the program's finances

• design and implement the daily dynamics of the program

• arrange or negotiate for specific equipment and supplies

• satisfy pertinent licensing standards

After this, you'll want to continue to flesh out your vision. Detail the roles and contributions that you believe appropriate for school personnel, such as:

• dedication of adequate and appropriate space, including specific details about square footage, times of availability, and terms of access

• opportunities to share other space and equipment as needed

• provision of basic utilities

• assignment of custodial and transportation services

• cooperation on liability and insurance

With all of this in hand, you will be ready to initiate the process of conferring and negotiating with key people at the school. Personal contact shows your commitment best, so make time to meet with each principal, superintendent, school board

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member or committee member, custodial supervisor, or transportation chief who can help move the process along.

In all likelihood, your negotiations will lead you into various bargaining sessions. Always remember that you must speak for best interests of the children—the same children who are the concern of the school administrators with whom you are negotiating.

Ongoing Orientation

How will the members of an established school community treat a new and untested school-age child care program? With uncertainty and caution? With open arms? With utter indifference? With some of each?

In whatever way school personnel respond to your program, their attitudes will reflect back onto the caregivers and the children. Adrift in rocky seas, even the most well-intentioned program may flounder, so it makes sense to devote as much attention to the voyage as you do to the launch. Put, and keep, the school-age care/school collaboration on an even keel with an ongoing orientation strategy.

School personnel can appreciate and support your program only if your caregivers and supervisors embody the values of your vision statement. Caregivers who fully understand how an after school program works are likely to carry out its goals and objectives, all of which contribute to your collaboration. When you get your people excited about what they do, school personnel can see your vision in action. This can give everyone —the children, parents, teachers, and school administrators—a sense of the program's significance.

Newly hired staff must learn basic operational procedures—conflict resolution, emergency protocol, late pickup rules. In addition, make certain that all new employees are familiar with the unique political aspects of their school site. Each school has its own particular personalities, and all employees should know who's who.

Not every important bit of information may have made its way into the caregiver handbook, so be sure to discuss any tacit agreements that exist between school personnel and school-age care staff. To keep the program lively and comfortable, encourage questions about school-age care/school policies and procedures,

because you never know where the next wonderful idea will come from.

At the school site, you can create opportunities for teachers, staff, and service workers to participate in an organized information session. To get everyone into the act, some directors start the program year with a big school-wide meeting. This kind of "open house" can be cleverly planned to simulate, on a time-shortened basis, a typical day in your school-age child care program: arrival and snack, small-group activity, free choice, etc. When staged with enthusiasm, it gives everyone a feel for the program that no single speech can generate.

School committee meetings and general school assemblies provide useful forums for broader orientations. In addition, elementary school principals schedule a variety of open, parent, and staff meetings throughout the year. These occasions offer you another opportunity to spread the word about your program. Where school-age child care directors have made a personal investment in the relationships between their program and the school, principals invite the participation and counsel of the director as a matter of course.

To encourage this linkage, you may wish to invite school personnel to sit in on program staff meetings. If yours is an agency program, you may also choose to invite a school representative to become part of your local advisory board.

Although a well-planned general meeting can be a real morale-builder, that morale may be short-lived unless you give it a

boost from time to time. A more intimate setting can help each person more openly share his or her feelings about the objectives. For example, a get-together with teachers for coffee or hot cider in their school lounge can lend a personal touch.

In meetings big or small, it's often the informality of school-age child care that school personnel seem to want to discuss. The idea of children making themselves "at home" at school may be a little disconcerting. In timely and appropriate ways, orient school personnel to the positive notion of controlled chaos. If children in your program have opportunities to design and choose their own activities, good for them. If your program encourages children to speak freely, to express themselves articulately, or to register healthy skepticism, so much the better. To be on the safe side, make sure the program hasn't actually fallen out of control while you've been out orienting everybody!

Where mistrust lingers, you may have moved too quickly or without shoring up a critical base of support. Because you've come from "outside," your program's image as a squatter, an intruder, or a temporary annoyance may not disappear so easily. Deeply negative impressions may only be dispelled by redoubling your efforts at consensus building.

If you and your program associates stay professional and tend to your

Various Types of Administration

School Operated and Staffed

The Cherry Hill School-Age Care Program is an example of a program run by the school district which provides before- and after-school care and half-day care for kindergarten children. Parent fees pay all costs except for space and custodial services, which the district provides through the regular school budget. The program is open on most school holidays and has the cooperation of school principals in finding appropriate space for after-school and full-day programs. The program pays the district to transport to another school, but the cost is much lower than it would be if the after-school program had to provide its own busing service. The school-age care director and teachers are all school employees; the district handles payroll and pays all program bills through its accounting department. The program has covered its cost every year but the first. The financial help during the first year was crucial in getting the program off the ground. One of the benefits of being an integral part of the school system has been their ability to work closely with other school programs such as the Chapter I summer educational program.

Administered through Community Education Program

An example of an after school program run through the Community Education Program is the one in the Paramus School. As in the case of programs run by the school district, the staff are considered employees of the Board of Education, and are paid through the community school. There is no direct cost for the facility or custodial staff. The program is open on school days, and it operates a vacation-day program when the school is closed for a few consecutive days such as Christmas vacation. A benefit of this type of program is that some of the administrative costs, such as employee benefit packages and equipment purchases, can be channeled through the school's budget. As a community program, the connection with families can be less cumbersome since the community school offers something to the entire family, or to family members individually.

Outside Agency Using School Buildings

Archway Programs in Atco, N.J. provides twenty-four programs in education, child care and human services. It contracts with sixteen school districts to provide school-age care programs at thirty-four schools, with no cost to the school districts. Districts agree to provide space, storage, and refrigerator use; Archway provides all the teachers and materials, and handles all the financial arrangements with parents and suppliers. Archway also provides insurance. Children are given a program in their own school without additional cost to the school district.

Private School

Even small private schools such as the Princeton Friends School have found it economically feasible to provide affordable school-age care on a small scale. By sharing space, equipment, and staff, the school has been able to provide care on-site. Parents like the fact that their children are at the same site all day, rather than having to be bused to a new location after school.

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responsibilities, the trust and respect you earn should replace any initial fear or suspicion on the part of school staff.

The Personal Touch

An effective ongoing orientation strategy draws encouragement, support, and assistance from school personnel. However, since orientation is a two-way street, they'll be watching for you to show your understanding and appreciation of their contributions. As positive relations develop, you'll want to recognize your collaborators not only as professionals but as people.

The time may come when school personnel can benefit from your support. Perhaps a legislative battle over state educational issues begins to brew, or a local situation comes up that specifically affects your joint site.

You and your program people may have certain skills, abilities, knowledge, or contacts that you can apply on the school's behalf. As a collaboration grows, your futures become more interdependent, so it pays to take the time and make the effort when and where it is appropriate.

Everyone likes to feel appreciated for what they do, and too many school professionals receive far less appreciation than they deserve. When someone at the school gives their support, give something back. Along with a letter of thanks, drop off a box of sprinkled doughnuts, or deliver a spring bouquet. A gesture of recognition can go a long way toward reinforcing positive attitudes.

Smoothing Out the Rough Spots

During any school-age care/school collaboration, the subject of assessment is one of sustained importance. Getting

a firm handle on what works and what doesn't for each program collaborator, fine-tuning and making adjustments to your operation, and taking the necessary steps to adapt to changing circumstances all depend on staying in touch with school people's opinions.

You'll want to ask personnel there for formal feedback, at least annually but preferably more often. Like the CANARI, this inquiry can take many forms, but the objective remains constant: to find out what people are thinking. When you get honest feedback, find a way to respond, either by word (make direct in-person contact) or by deed (modify your program operation).

To uphold your end of the collaboration, it becomes especially important to discuss your reasoning with someone who suggests changes that conflict with your vision for the program. Naturally, no one enjoys having their observations summarily dismissed. By letting observers know that

you have considered their feedback seriously, you will defuse the potential for later conflict.

More frequently, the chances are that you will be the one seeking explanations as to why school personnel cannot or will not cooperate in particular areas. A good many of the issues that crop up revolve around entrenched feelings about space usage, transportation, and timely access. What follows are descriptions of some of the difficulties most often experienced by school-age child care directors, along with suggestions of field-tested solutions.

The difficulty:
The spaces that the school offers seem totally unsuitable for the program you envision.

Here, your first task is to ascertain whether or not the area offered is truly the only one available. Again discuss with the principal your vision, and tie it to the basic elements of developmentally appropriate practice. Assure the principal that you are willing to seek mutually acceptable ground. At the same time, assert that neither your professional goals nor the children's interests will be best served by basing the program in these areas of the school.

Suggested solutions:
The art of negotiation will play a keyrole in the resolution. A negotiation can only succeed when each party has something to offer the other, so be careful not to position yourself as a mere supplicant. Determine what barriers are preventing the use of more appropriate areas. Is it a question of money? Liability? A previous commitment? Political pressure? Lack of support from higher administrative levels? Acknowledge the principal's concerns, but make it clear that you are there to offer something of value.

To reinforce your words, you might suggest taking the principal to visit an existing school-age care/school site that meets your standards. You might offer testimonials from other principals or teachers who overcame their initial reluctance to a school-age care/school collaboration. In the absence of testimonials, you might offer copies of published articles that substantiate your position (see the Further Readings section at the back). Give the administrator time to reflect on any new information before making your next inquiry.

After all is said and done, if the school administration cannot accommodate you, and if the offered area really falls below your minimum standards, you may wish to reinstitute your site selection process.

When you have exhausted all of these options, you may still be faced with the prospect of housing your program in less-than-ideal quarters. So, you need to deal with the next difficulty.

The difficulty:
The sole area assigned for after-school care program use is a multipurpose room, cafeteria, or gymnasium.
Suggested solutions:
Due to their cost restrictions and their institutional nature, many public elementary schools have to make do with minimal resources. Their indoor areas may consist of cold tile, stone, and brick. Their outdoor spaces may look more like parking lots than play yards. To mold a suitable environment for a school-age child care program from these surroundings takes a little vision, a little cash, a little collaboration, and a lot of sweat.

Directors who are completely strapped for cash, materials, and ideas make do with whatever objects they find in their assigned room. In some cafeteria bound programs, they and their caregivers move the tables around so that the room looks a little different than it usually does. Some even turn the tables on end to create the illusion of privacy. (At the close of each day, these tables must be returned to their original positions.) In one program, chairs are stacked with lunch crates to create children's cubbies.

Mats, rugs, or blankets can take some of the chill from a tile floor. Various floor coverings spread around an otherwise unfurnished room can give the impression of different zones. Some schools own freestanding blackboards or dividers on wheels, which can be borrowed for use as separators. For programs that can afford them, rollaway storage units do double duty as spatial dividers, and they can be wheeled in and out of shared spaces with little trouble.

Program directors should try to balance indoor space constraints by arranging easy access between the room and a more pleasant option, such as a sandfilled or soft-topped play area. Even more desirable, is to plan as many field trips as possible. Head for neighborhood parks, public libraries, children's theaters, or other local resources.

There are other ways to improve the physical environment. For example, instead of assigning children art projects to tack up on the paint-peeled wall, it might be worthwhile to negotiate with the principal to let the children paint the wall itself. A program director might invest a few hours on the weekend to scout rummage sales for used books and toys, scrap lumber, old pianos, and comfortable furniture.

Directors can lobby and negotiate for permanently dedicated areas for their school-age care/school program. All experienced directors have learned that dedicated space is the effective solution for most of their practical difficulties.

The difficulty:
The school provides your program with little or no dedicated storage space.
Suggested solutions:
Often, directors of programs without dedicated space have no input and possibly no advance notice about which schoolroom they may use from day to day. For them portability, flexibility, and convertibility are the essential qualities to look for in a storage system. The rollaway storage carts mentioned earlier often do the trick. Another makeshift

option is to use crates and flat dollies. Either the carts or the crates can be pushed against the walls for relatively secure overnight storage.

Of course, the longer a program willingly operates under these conditions, the less impetus a school will have to assign dedicated space.

The difficulty:
The program meeting place gets bounced around day to day from one room to another.

This condition is one of the most frustrating a school can impose on an after-school program. Aside from the instability it causes, it practically guaran tees that children will become confused, arriving parents will be put out, and the program will quietly be compromised.

In the event your program must temporarily be a "movable feast," it makes sense to develop a stopgap solution.

Suggested solutions:
Initiate a system using a centrally located information board, perhaps near the school entrance or in the administrative office area. Post the program's daily location at the earliest possible time. Alert all parents, staff, regular substitutes, transport drivers, and other concerned parties to the information board.

If the budget will allow, schedule staff to arrive at least one hour earlier than usual. This will give them enough time to gather and transfer activity materials, stock necessary supplies, and prepare the space. In programs where the children take responsibility for program setup and preparation, the staff may be able to arrive later.

Use every reasonable effort to impress school administrators with your program's purpose and emphasize the importance of a stable homeroom or home base. If you approach the situation with a professional attitude, the situation may return to normal very quickly.

In the event that your program is operating under continually adverse circumstances, the preferred solution is to search for a new site.

The difficulty:
The school will not allow the program to operate during official school vacations or holidays.

Suggested solutions:
In some cases, this may be a concern without a cause. Demand for school-age care during, for instance, winter vacation may be so low that the program can go on hiatus also. Anticipate this by distributing vacation/holiday school-age care registration forms well in advance of the period in question.

If you choose to help parents with alternative arrangements, it will be best if you have established a connection with other local after-school care and youth service providers, and local resource and referral agencies. It's not at all unusual for several centers or programs to combine backup care arrangements. Children and parents then have a choice, and you can maintain service continuity for the families who request it.

If the volume of requests is high enough, you may want to plan an off-site program activity. One-day holidays can be no more problematic than a typical field trip. Longer periods call for more extensive planning and much higher costs, but all this is far afield from the issue of school-age care/school collaboration.

The difficulty:
Because of concerns about liability, the school administration resists school-age care program tenancy.

Suggested solutions:
If yours is an agency program, perhaps the agency's existing liability coverage can be extended to the school-age care/school location(s). Seek coverage to an aggregate amount between $1 and $2 million. With this coverage secured, you can confidently put your signature to the school's save and hold harmless agreement. When you sign, you will indemnify the school against civil claims and reduce the administration's resistance to your program.

A Successful Collaboration
Mutual respect and trust count for much. So do ongoing efforts to maintain and improve the flow of information. If you want to make partners out of school administrators, teachers, and health and service professionals, you'll observe their protocols while you advance a few of your own.

In the final analysis, a mutual location succeeds or fails on the merits of the collaboration. The time and effort you devote to this aspect of your program operation can bring many fruitful returns to you, your caregivers, and the children for whom you care.

photo by Sarah E. Round