
Developing Professionally: Using the Afterschool Training Toolkit to Coach Your Staff to Success

In the winter 2005/2006 edition of the Harvard Family Research Project's *Evaluation Exchange: A Periodical on Emerging Strategies in Evaluating Child and Family Services*, editor Heather Weiss invites readers to learn about innovative approaches to professional development, including coaching.

Accepting that invitation, this article discusses the merits of afterschool leaders using the Afterschool Training Toolkit, an online professional development resource under development in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, to build the capacity of their staffs to develop high quality programming for academic enrichment through effective coaching and mentoring. Currently, afterschool leaders and practitioners can access the first two of six content area tools: literacy and mathematics. In the latter part of 2006, they can watch for the addition of tools to address the areas of science and the arts, and in early 2007, technology and homework help tools will follow.

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Currently, training through national, regional, state or local events is the most traditional form of staff development for afterschool providers. Often these events offer one-shot learning; participants have one shot, right here, right now, to get all the information they need to implement the training in their programs once they're back home. Some of the acquired learning trickles down to the local programs, but many times additional support or coaching is needed. Unfortunately, that support often doesn't occur. Time to practice the new learning, or opportunities to discuss it, are difficult to establish in the busy schedules of afterschool. As a result, the new learning may be forgotten or practiced in an ineffectual or semi-successful way. Without additional support for practice, new learning may never develop into an instructional practice for some staff members.

In visits with national 21st Century Community Learning Center leaders and staff, we are continuously asked about ways to develop staff in a less formal venue than a training event, utilizing shorter time increments. What follows is a model that accommodates both requests, as well as increasing the quality of programming for academic enrichment.

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The Afterschool Training Toolkit — A Catalyst for Change

The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning's *Afterschool Training Toolkit* is a free online staff development resource that afterschool leaders can use to help instructors – whether school day professionals or community volunteers – develop the content knowledge, concepts, and skills to provide quality academic enrichment to students in afterschool programs.

The Toolkit fills two critical gaps: the need for models and

materials that ground content-area instruction in effective approaches to teaching and learning, and the need for assessment tools and procedures that increase programs' capacity to assess and demonstrate their impact on student outcomes. It addresses the issues that sites face when designing and implementing effective academically oriented afterschool programs.

The Toolkit focuses leaders' attention on enrichment practices in six content areas – reading, mathematics, science, the arts, homework help, and technology. It serves as a comprehensive theory-to-practice staff development resource, not as a specific curriculum. The Toolkit provides practitioners with access to principles of content-area subject matter, examples of meaningful learning experiences, and models of effective approaches to teaching and learning through lesson samples, video vignettes, and extended resources, including research to support enrichment practices. Since project directors and site coordinators design afterschool programming, they comprise the Toolkit's primary target audience. As they develop proficiency in understanding and implementing high-quality academic enrichment, they can better inform, coach, and mentor their instructors in those same skills.

In considering ways to use the Toolkit with staff during informal, regular staff meetings, the Partnership suggests three time-allocated sessions: 15-Minute Facilitated Session, 30 Minute Coached Session, and 3 Hour Facilitated Workshop.

In the 15-Minute Facilitated Session, the afterschool leader serving as facilitator may choose to begin building staff's capacity for high-quality programming by focusing on any of the 15 content area practices currently included in the overall Toolkit. For example, in a 15-Minute Facilitated Session focused on the content area of literacy, the facilitator may direct staff to work on the practice of Read Aloud.

First, the facilitator invites staff to read two paragraphs from the Web-based Toolkit describing the practice of Read Aloud. The facilitator may ask staff to think about the way they conduct Read Aloud with their students and then share their processes with the group.

Next, the facilitator draws staff members' attention to the web-based Toolkit video vignette of a real-world afterschool program implementing a Read Aloud or one of the 15 other practices included in the comprehensive Toolkit. The facilitator invites staff to take brief notes or mentally note the behaviors or processes that resonate with them.

They might also formulate questions about behaviors or processes in the video that pique their interest. Following the video, the facilitator asks the group to share their thoughts and reflections through questions related to their practice; i.e., what processes/behaviors did you see that you do regularly with your class? Differently? Aspects of the video they liked? Aspects they need/would like more information about? Would they try Read Aloud with their class? What additional information/materials might they need to try Read Aloud?

It follows that the lengthier professional development models using the Toolkit employ the same strategies, incorporating more time for working with or coaching small groups after reflection on the new practice, or observing and consulting with staff members after their implementation of the practice with their classes. Those who achieve success can serve as facilitators or coaches during the next professional development opportunity, and in this way, the leadership and learning are shared.

We believe that through this model of facilitating, coaching, and consulting, afterschool practitioners can better understand the connection between the instructional practice (the what), the exemplary and promising examples of that practice

within the context of actual afterschool programs (the how), and the rationale of why a practice works within the context of afterschool (the research/theory base). As their understanding of the connectedness of each part of the practice builds through the narratives, video vignettes, lesson examples, and other key toolkit components, afterschool practitioners can apply their understandings to the process of planning for afterschool academic enrichment.

Outcomes of Toolkit Use

There are multiple possible outcomes for afterschool practitioners. First, project directors will understand how to assess the infusion of academic content into enrichment opportunities in their programs. They will work with site



Photo by Jim Friedman

coordinators to plan training and coaching for their instructors. In turn, site coordinators will understand how to train and coach their instructors. Next, both project directors and site coordinators will be able to develop action plans for moving forward in implementing academic enrichment as the focus of their program. As a result, instructors will come to better understand academic enrichment and plan accordingly. Sustaining their afterschool programs should become easier, once site coordinators and project directors share aggregated student achievement data with school and community leaders showing that afterschool makes a difference. Finally, boys and girls will benefit from engaging, academically-enriched activities each day, and student achievement outcomes will improve.

School principals, district superintendents, and parents will begin to understand that an important ingredient in student success is regular participation in afterschool enrichment activities. Afterschool leaders who use a shared leadership approach to professional development and incorporate the online Afterschool Training Toolkit into their work are key to student success.

In a recent conference presentation for the National AfterSchool Association, participants actively

engaged in a simulated 15-Minute Facilitated professional development session using the practice of Read Aloud as the focused content. Participants responded enthusiastically to the reflected learning experience, as they compared their practice of Read Aloud to the practice of the instructor depicted in the video clip from the Afterschool Training Toolkit. Participants concurred that they could see the Toolkit as an important and user-friendly resource for their professional development as well as their instructors’.

Free, Online Toolkit Access

The Toolkit can be accessed through the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning Web site at www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/. Additionally, practitioners can participate in professional development sessions on academic enrichment practices excerpted from the Toolkit at eight national regional training events.

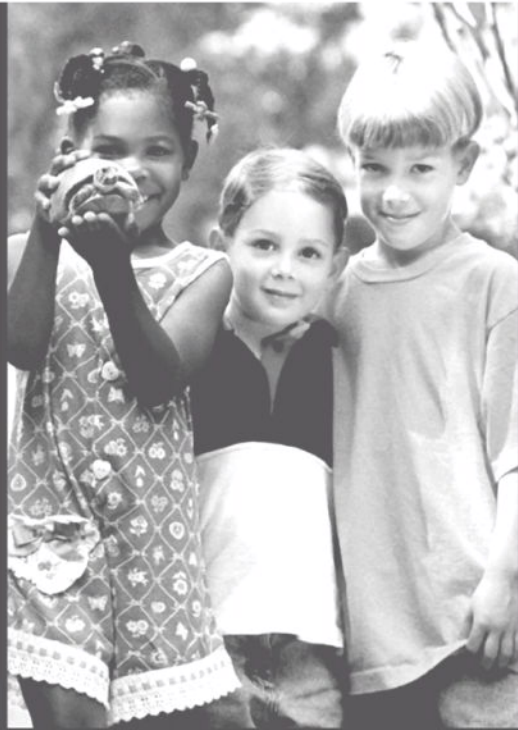
In addition, the Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Center Annual Summer Institute held workshops on the Toolkit’s key components.

Finally, Toolkit materials and supporting resources will be disseminated in workshops, conferences, and meetings arranged to

assist state education agencies and other technical assistance providers in improving the academic quality of afterschool programs.

References

- Weiss, H. (Winter 2005/2006). From the director’s desk. Harvard Family Research Project’s *The Evaluation Exchange: A Periodical on Emerging Strategies in Evaluating Child and Family Services*, 4, Volume XI .
- Garmston, R., & Wellman, B. (1999). The importance of professional community. In *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups* (pp. 27-28) . Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon Publishers, Inc.



In high-quality schools, students learn something new every day.

Should afterschool learning be any different?

**NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR
QUALITY AFTERSCHOOL LEARNING**

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<http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/>

The Afterschool Training Toolkit is a free online staff development resource featuring promising afterschool practices in **literacy, mathematics, science, the arts, technology, and homework help.**

It includes **content goals, sample lesson plans, research links, and video segments** that show you how successful afterschool programs use innovative activities to engage student learning.