



Creating Holistic Partnerships Between School and Afterschool

Kenneth Anthony and Joseph Morra

According to the Harvard Family Research Project (2010), schools need collaborative partners to help children and youth thrive. For over a decade, afterschool programs have been positioning themselves as viable partners. After all, afterschool programs challenge students' thinking, teach collaboration, and help children and youth find their passion.

Furthermore, in 2008, 56 percent of afterschool programs were located in school buildings (Parsad & Lewis, 2009). Intentionally designed school-afterschool partnerships can have positive academic results (Bennett, 2015), increase social skills (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007), and improve attendance (Chang & Jordon, 2013). Addressing these factors could help our educational system close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers. The depth of partnerships between afterschool programs

and schools has been shown to improve student academic outcomes (Bennett, 2015).

However, school-afterschool partnerships are more often promoted (and included in grant proposals) than fully realized. Current partnerships are often limited to daily attendance and behavior reports. School leaders accept that afterschool programming is important, even

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as they discount its worth by treating it as entirely separate from the school. Meanwhile, afterschool program leaders may be pulled from full partnerships with schools because of the immediacy of program needs, among other reasons. Educators on both sides are missing opportunities to go deeper, to improve student achievement by connecting students to afterschool experiences that complement their learning during the school day.

To identify what stands between schools and afterschool programs and what can connect them, the lead author, Ken Anthony, conducted an exploratory study in three schools in a southern New England city. In all, 18 interviews were conducted with school and afterschool staff. Following a framework proposed by Bennett (2015), this exploratory study focused on three specific aspects of school-afterschool relationships: sharing of academic resources, sense of partnership, and communication structures. Together, Ken and co-author Joseph Morra developed recommendations for the field based on the findings of this limited, small-scale study. We aim not to provide definitive conclusions but to enter a conversation about how schools and afterschool programs relate to each other. Our status as afterschool practitioners, though it could be seen as a source of bias, gives us a realistic perspective on what happens “on the ground” in school-afterschool partnerships.

Perhaps our most salient finding was a disconnect between school and afterschool staff. However, school and afterschool staff described informal structures and opportunities that could contribute to more substantial connections. The findings reinforce what afterschool practitioners have often identified as avenues for improving school-afterschool partnerships.

The State of School-Afterschool Relationships

Substantial research has shown that, in order for communities to reap the academic and social benefits of afterschool education, schools and afterschool programs must collaborate (Bennett, 2013; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Pierce, Auger, & Vandell, 2013; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). The Harvard Family Research Project (2010) asserts that “in-school and non-school supports [should] collaborate as equal partners to work toward a shared vision for children’s learning” (p. 2).

School leaders would seem to agree. In a nationwide survey (Daniels, 2012), 82 percent of school superintendents said that afterschool programs are important, citing the social-emotional and academic benefits; 75 percent reported that they encouraged principals to work with community-based organizations to offer stronger afterschool programs.

However, developing partnerships between schools and community-based organizations takes time and effort (Wallace Foundation, 2010). The perceived difference between youth development and formal educational approaches can impede conversations. Romi and Schmida (2007) assert that the two philosophies are inextricably linked; with good communication, practitioners of both can share their craft and art. Both partners

need to be thoughtful about the process, designing and building the system together and adjusting the relationship to keep it sustainable (Yohalem, Devaney, Smith, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2012) in order to build trust and a common vision. This common vision begins with “identifying and recruiting stakeholders from multiple backgrounds” representing all aspects of a child’s life (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2008, p. 166).

Our work is based on a framework proposed by Tracy Bennett (2015), which in turn builds on two studies by Gil Noam and colleagues.

The first of these (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausey, 2003) defined a bridging continuum of school-community partnerships, from *self-contained* programs, which make little attempt to collaborate with schools, through *associated*, *coordinated*, *integrated*, and finally *unified* programs. The last represents a seamless learning day, with little differentiation between the school and afterschool environment (Noam et al., 2003). The second study (Noam et al., 2004) identified “four Cs” of successful afterschool programming: collaboration, communication, content, and coherence.

Bennett (2015) refined these structures into a framework measuring alignment between schools and afterschool partners. The framework has three key areas: sharing of academic resources, sense of partnership, and communication. Bennett surveyed school principals and afterschool staff in 78 schools in 11 southern California districts about the extent to which they perceived align-

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ment between the school and afterschool program, defining *alignment* as “specific collaboration practices between afterschool programs and schools that attempt to coordinate student learning as they transition from the regular school day to the afterschool program” (p. 1). She defined sites in which both school and afterschool leaders had high levels of agreement on all three scales as “highly aligned,” and sites where school and afterschool leaders showed substantial disagreement as “misaligned.” Bennett then examined more than 8,000 student standardized test scores to find that students at highly aligned sites performed better than did students at misaligned sites.

Instructional misalignment can result from lack of meaningful communication between school and afterschool personnel. Harris (2011) calls on educational leaders in schools and community-based organizations to identify curriculum linkages in order to translate classroom rigor into real-world relevance.

Methods

Our research involved a limited study of three afterschool programs located in schools. They are typical cases of expanded learning opportunities in out-of-school time, representing varying degrees of school partnership. Such cases can be useful for research purposes (Lichtman, 2013) because they may be representative of common practices and experiences among school and afterschool personnel and can help researchers identify practices that warrant further study.

Three K–6 school-afterschool sites in one urban school district in southern New England were chosen at random for study. Site A was located in a lower-income neighborhood and served families with significant needs. Site B was located in a more affluent area of the city but drew students from a nearby housing complex. Site C was also in a low-income area, but the neighborhood had more single-family homes and less crime than did Site A's neighborhood. The afterschool programs studied at Sites A and B offered such typical programming as homework

help, physical activity, and academic enrichment. Site C hosted a theater program that had a long relationship with the schools it served. All three programs were just one of many in their sites, sharing the school with as many as five additional program providers.

All three programs received a mix of funding, including state grants, 21st Century Community Learning Center grants, and local philanthropies. Typically these

funders require school districts to partner with a community agency. The district and community supported the alignment of learning through initiatives funded by a community network of afterschool providers and the school district (Whipple, 2014).

A total of 18 individuals were interviewed, six from each site: the principal, the afterschool program director, the afterschool site supervisor, one afterschool front-line staff member, and two school teachers. School district staff helped to identify appropriate interviewees and provided contact information.

The primary data collection tool was an 11-question interview guide based on Bennett's (2015) framework. Every interview question addressed one of Bennett's three areas: sharing of academic resources, sense of partnership, and communication. Questions asked respondents to describe the relationship between school and afterschool programs, the communication with the school or the afterschool staff, and any sharing of academic resources.

Other questions focused on the depth of the relationship, for example, the level of engagement of the principal and school leadership, afterschool staff training in curriculum delivery, and afterschool alignment with the school day.

One-on-one interviews were conducted in private offices at either the school or the community-based organization. After all 18 interviews had been conducted, the data were analyzed through an open-coding method that allowed for codes to be refined and themes to be developed.

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Staff Perceptions of the Relationship Between School and Afterschool

The first finding emerged during data collection: The length of the interviews was linked to the respondent's relationship to the afterschool program. Afterschool program directors gave the longest interviews. They expanded on basic responses to discuss, for example, the academic and social goals of their programming. School staff generally and principals specifically gave shorter interviews. Many reported little or no knowledge of the programming occurring after school. However, staff members and principals who had been involved in an afterschool program, either in the past or currently, gave longer interviews than those who had not. Though initially troubling, the brevity of responses emerged as a finding that reinforced all interviewees' perception of a disconnection between school and afterschool.

The iterative coding process revealed 25 codes in the data, 22 of which appeared in responses from all three sites. These 25 codes fell into five major themes:

- Misalignment
- School administrative support for the afterschool program
- Informal structures and opportunities
- Program elements
- Barriers

Misalignment

Interview responses that were coded *disconnection*, *collaboration and coordination*, *need for meetings*, and *need for communication* fell into the category of misalignment.

The code *disconnection* was particularly salient; it appeared in all 18 interviews. All three afterschool directors emphasized this disconnection. The Site B director said, for example, "I think half of the time, some principals don't even know what some afterschool programs ... provide." Similarly, the director at Site C stated, "No one from the school staff would check back in on what we were doing, sometimes not even responding to invitations ... to come see what the kids are doing." The Site A director described a lack of involvement with the school and its teachers, saying that she had no idea what

went on in classrooms or staff meetings. School teachers also described a lack of connection. A teacher from Site B summed it up: "There is no partnership at all.... We don't have any interaction with [the afterschool program]." A Site A teacher said that student performance might trigger communication, "but beyond that, it's really separate."

Lack of collaboration and coordination was evident, for example, when the Site C principal insisted that "anything that happens within the building afterschool needs to go through me." This assertion sounds more autocratic than collaborative. This same principal was open to increasing collaboration between school teachers and afterschool staff if "their educational piece in the afterschool" were "linked to what we do here."

School and afterschool staff talked about the need for meetings and better communication. Afterschool staff wanted ongoing dialogues to help school staff better understand the afterschool program. The principal at Site C seemed to agree that regular meetings could improve communication, seeing such meetings as a way to bring grade-level teams together to create targeted interventions that could

bridge the school and afterschool environments. In terms of communication systems, the Site B principal suggested a streamlined system that would target student needs, such as a check sheet or other method of informal communication, suggesting that otherwise afterschool staff might inundate teachers. The afterschool director at this site suggested that email would be an efficient method of communication "if we had even just the email list provided by the school for the children in our class, who their teachers are." No consensus emerged about modes of communication, nor was there evidence that any of these suggestions would be followed through.

School Administrative Support for the Afterschool Program

The theme of school support for the afterschool program includes such codes as *administrative-level communication* and *depth of principal involvement*. The relatively large number of responses related to administrative communi-

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cation and follow-up suggest that communication about such day-to-day concerns as homework assignments did take place at the study sites. The afterschool director at Site B reported, “Our staff gets the attendance from the day to ensure that we get the proper kids for the afternoon that were in school.”

Evidence of deeper communication beyond purely administrative tasks was rarer. Four afterschool and one school respondent talked about the importance of shared academic goal setting. However, they did not indicate that such sharing actually took place at their sites. The afterschool directors at all three sites said that they had initial meetings with their school principals at the beginning of the year. The principal at Site B noted that she had little communication with the afterschool program, “other than behavior concerns or that type of thing.” However, she reported that she had regular contact with a school-afterschool liaison whose position was funded by the state. The afterschool director at this site, by contrast, did not mention the liaison. She indicated that she met with the principal as needed but described a substantial connection with the school secretary on logistical issues.

The afterschool front-line staff seemed to perceive an informal and generally supportive relationship between the program and school administration. The Site B staff member said:

They always tell us that if there’s any issues—anything we need whatsoever—don’t hesitate to contact them. If I’m at the school and I run into the vice principal and whoever, they’re always asking how things are going. They’re very concerned.

The afterschool staff member at Site A had a similar assessment: “The assistant principal pops in once in a while. She’ll ... say ‘Hi’ to the kids and see how everything is going.”

The principal at Site B described how the school helped to recruit children into afterschool programs by asking teachers to identify students who could benefit. She also described her lack of involvement in the community-based program, saying that she got involved only in “logistic things” such as busing and parent pickups. The principal at Site C was disappointed in a lack of

communication about student recruitment: “I didn’t have a whole lot of say on how they were inviting kids to participate, and that was a problem.” This principal said that the letter sent by the afterschool program to parents about the child’s status in the program was misleading. She concluded, “I think that next year I would like to look over what they write.” She wanted to work with teachers to recruit children who could benefit most into the afterschool program.

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Informal Structures and Opportunities

The theme of informal structures and opportunities included interview responses that were coded into such categories as *homework* and *informal relationships*, among others. Nearly all afterschool staff members described

having informal connections with the school teachers. The afterschool director at Site B described a typical situation:

If there is something that’s going on with the child, and he doesn’t understand homework or forgot their homework in the classroom, our staff takes the kids to the teacher. They go and ask for help, ask for clarification, or go get the homework ... so they’re always visiting with the school-day teacher.

Some afterschool staff said that they ascertained what academic content children were studying by looking at their homework. School teachers did not discuss homework-based links with afterschool staff.

However, the principal at Site B said that afterschool staff might “ask questions on how to assist the kids with their homework” or check on children who say they don’t have any homework.

Three afterschool staff members described using informal connections to work around lack of information shared about students due to confidentiality rules. The front-line afterschool staff member at Site C said, “If the student comes from a home of abuse or neglect, or ... is

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an easy on-off switch for having a crisis, we're not given that information. We're only given medical info." She then spoke about "having ... school staff on site" and knowing school personnel from previous experience, saying, "I can talk to them."

The idea that these informal connections were working is reinforced by the finding that afterschool and school staff who worked directly with children were more likely to agree with one another than were the afterschool and school administrators—particularly in this area of informal structures but also in responses to other questions. The reason may be that these front-line staff enjoyed more informal connections than the administrators did. More intentional connections could facilitate deeper communication about student needs.

Program Elements

The theme of program elements includes interview responses coded as *curricular components*, among others. One of teachers at Site B exemplified teachers' typical view of afterschool programming as "a good extracurricular activity for the students. It's more of a relaxed atmosphere.... It's something that [students are] interested in." The principal at Site B said that the afterschool programs were "not specifically teaching academic content.... Like the martial arts [program], they're not teaching academic content, they're teaching the self-discipline piece." This principal revealed a bias toward academic programming as she contrasted the martial arts program with the literacy program, noting that the staff were "automatically ... more academically aligned."

By contrast, the afterschool director at Site A talked about the academic content in her program: "[Participants] have spelling quizzes and spelling tests.... They... identify what the words are, define them, do riddles, things like that." The afterschool front-line staff member at Site B spoke of alternating social-emotional supports with academic instruction:

In planning with my colleague, we know that our students need help with blended words, they need help with fluency, they need help with sight words—and then they also need social and emotional awareness. So one day, we teach an intervention; the next day we teach a social-emotional skill.

These afterschool respondents believed that their programs were facilitating important learning, whether the content was strictly academic or also social-emotional.

Along those lines, the afterschool director at Site C outlined the substantial credentials of program staff:

All of the lead teaching artists have either degrees—in some cases a couple of advanced degrees in theater or in education—or extensive, 10 or 20-plus years of experience working in theater, especially working with children in theater, writing, directing, performing. So I'm working with theater professionals.

The afterschool director's perception of staff qualifications encompasses the diverse experience afterschool practitioners bring to their work.

Barriers

The theme of barriers included codes for *professional development*, *expectations and qualifications for afterschool staff*, and *territorialism*.

School staff addressed training as an indicator of afterschool program quality. One teacher cited the importance of "how well the personnel is trained and how well they can work with kids." The principal at Site C and the teacher at Site B both raised issues about how the afterschool staff managed student behavior. The teacher said that "one of the afterschool programs had a lot of difficulty with handling some of the kids, and so they had to bring in ... more structured staff." The principal at Site C seemed to have some respect for the training of the afterschool staff: "The onsite coordinators go through quite a bit of training on how to manage peers of their own age, because, I mean, they are young.... But they all go through quite a bit of training."

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Some responses, particularly from afterschool staff, indicated openness to joint professional development; one said, "I think if they maybe had a professional development with us at their school, it would be helpful." A teacher from Site C said that the "young kids" working in the afterschool programs might want to "look for help" from the school staff. "If they put that out there, I'm sure the people in the building would be more than willing to give them a hand." A teacher at Site B, by contrast, said, "Even if [afterschool program staff are] trying to commu-

nicate with us about what they're working on or things that they have coming up, I don't necessarily know if all the teachers would be accepting of it." The teachers seemed to feel that they had something to offer the afterschool staff but that some teachers might not be willing to accept initiative coming from the afterschool side.

Both school and afterschool staff described issues with sharing space. Territorialism on the part of teachers was cited, for example, by the afterschool staffer at Site C, who ran an activity out of the teachers' lunch room. "Something that was said that maybe we shouldn't be in there because, if a teacher has to come in and use the telephone, they don't have the privacy that they wanted." The afterschool director at Site A spoke of how the principal needed to know exactly where in the school each afterschool activity was taking place at what time. Even the principal at Site C perceived territorialism on the part of her staff: "The sharing of space, classrooms—teachers can be very, very possessive of their materials and ... the cleanliness of their room, or the organization of their room." Lack of trust about something as basic as space use does not help to build the relationships needed to align goals and work together to serve children.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Review of the interview responses led to five conclusions related to the five themes into which the interview data fell: misalignment, school administrative support for the afterschool program, informal structures and opportunities, program elements, and barriers. For each of these conclusions, we offer recommendations based on our experience in the field.

Recommendations on Misalignment

The first conclusion is that school and afterschool leaders and staff experience substantial misalignment that impedes collaboration. One way to foster coordination is shared planning, starting with shared meetings. Afterschool directors could ask to report at school staff meetings and request that their staff be invited to teacher planning meetings. They could pay staff members who

are able to attend out of professional development funds. In turn, teachers—especially those whose classrooms are used by the afterschool program—may find it beneficial to attend planning sessions at the afterschool program. Even with differing missions, school and afterschool staff can complement and build on each other's work and share their expertise.

A hands-on approach by the school principal may facilitate collaboration (Newmann et al., 2000). For example, the principal can arrange for the schedules of some staff, including teachers and counselors, to be staggered slightly so they can welcome the afterschool staff and discuss the major events of the day. Samuelson (2007) describes the roles principals can take in creating school-afterschool connections: facilitating regular communication, serving as liaison between school and afterschool staff, and supporting the afterschool program as an integral part of the school.

Recommendations on School Support

Our second conclusion is that the degree to which school and afterschool personnel perceive that the school supports the afterschool program is affected by the relationships between members of each group and by individuals' personal experiences.

Being aware of the social fabric of the school can help afterschool programs build more school support. For instance, if the school places a premium on particular values, such as citizenship, spirit, or compassion, afterschool staff can create programming that supports these values.

Another possibility is to request that the principal schedule visits at key points during the afterschool program to take a "learning walk" (Russo, 2006). Such observations can be an opportunity to show the principal how the afterschool program contributes to the academic, social, emotional, and physical growth of students.

Recommendations on Informal Structures and Opportunities

Our findings suggest that, even without formal administrative support, school and afterschool staff develop ad-

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hoc connections related to homework and attendance. With more intention, these connections could be the basis for expanding collaboration. Sharing space can be a challenge, especially when the individuals using the same space have never met or can connect only in passing. Informal relationships can help to ease the tensions. Formalized agreements, such as memoranda of understanding, are no substitute. When school and afterschool staff develop informal relationships, trust may naturally follow. School staff may learn to see afterschool staff not as infiltrators but as collaborators.

Recommendations on Program Elements

Another source of tension between school and afterschool personnel is differing goals: Schools tend to focus on educational attainment while afterschool programs often emphasize personal development. Looking at youth holistically may help to bridge this difference. The skills youth need form a triangle: academic, social-emotional, and essential (21st century) skills. Take away one side, and the triangle is no more.

Admittedly, getting all of the adults who work with a group of children to foster growth in all three areas is easier said than done. One potential strategy is joint professional development. Social-emotional learning may be a key entry point (Moroney & Devaney, 2015). The facilitators of joint professional development should have a foot in each realm; they should be translators who can build community and trust by keeping the idea of youth success at the forefront. Professional learning communities comprising mixed cohorts of school and afterschool staff can provide both formal and informal support that leads to positive change in practice (Public Profit, 2015). The Connecticut After School Network (2016), for example, has created multi-year learning communities that include both school and afterschool professionals.

Recommendations on Barriers

The chief barrier to school-afterschool cooperation that emerged in interviews was school personnel's perceptions of the qualifications of the afterschool staff and their difficulty in sharing space with the afterschool program.

School educators must hold a degree in their field; most are also certified. They may look down on afterschool staff, some of whom do not have degrees and many of whom hold degrees in unrelated areas. However, an increasing percentage of afterschool workers are seasoned professionals. A workforce survey by the National Afterschool Association (2015) found that 38 percent of the workforce had been with their current employer for 10 or more years.

Over time, the perceived professionalism of afterschool staff will improve with the increasing trend in higher education of offering credentials or degrees in afterschool and youth development in schools of education, as in, for example, the University of Illinois at Chicago (2016), Rhode Island College (2016), and University of Minnesota (2016). Formal and informal education degrees can influence one another and even overlap—to the benefit of all educators-in-training, whether their careers take them to schools or to community-based organizations.

In our experience, afterschool and school educators have much to offer one another. Afterschool staff can ably teach how to respect youth voice and choice, foster social-emotional development, and build community connections. School teachers can ably share learning on such concepts as Common Core, Next Generation Science Standards, and curriculum development. As noted above, professional learning communities including both school and afterschool staff is one exciting strategy. Another is exemplified in

the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative in Rhode Island, which requires planning and implementation teams to incorporate both school and community-based staff in the design of summer learning programs.

Such networks can help to break down barriers and decrease territorialism, if school and afterschool professionals will both reach out to one another. The only way to break down barriers is to intentionally embed collaboration into the way schools and afterschool programs conduct their business.

Limitations

This study had three major limitations. The first is sample size and selection. Findings from interviews with 18 edu-

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cators from one school district can suggest avenues for action but cannot be generalized. A second limitation is that all information was self-reported and therefore subject to bias. The actual state of the relationship between the school and afterschool programs cannot be verified without observation. The third limitation is researcher bias. Ken Anthony, who conducted the interviews and did the analysis, has been in the afterschool field for 21 years and has shared the experiences of many of the afterschool respondents. The analysis may have amplified the perceptions of the afterschool providers, while discounting the perspectives of the school educators.

Given these limitations, this study must be considered as exploratory and suggestive only. The findings cannot be generalized but do suggest conclusions and recommendations that are consistent with previous research. Larger studies could explore differences in pedagogy and practice while highlighting communication structures that work to bridge the gaps between school and afterschool personnel.

The Need for Communication

Coordinated systems that bridge in-school and out-of-school learning can support the holistic development of students. This study highlights the opportunities and barriers faced by afterschool programs housed in schools in one community. It highlights steps toward dialogue that can create a shared vision of student learning, particularly around informal relationships, principal leadership, fuller dialogue, and shared professional development. Both school districts and citywide coalitions need to provide the infrastructure that would support ongoing communication and encourage sharing. Conversations between school and afterschool partners need to be founded on trust, not speculation or notions of inability. We owe our students innovative learning experiences that are not limited by the school walls or by lack of coordination among the institutions that seek to educate them.

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