



"Systems Trump Programs"

A Case for Agency Support in Afterschool

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At a training by one of New York City's main afterschool funders, the presenter introduced common scenarios in the field. My group's scenario read something like this:

Liz just started as director of an afterschool program. She is excited to start a new arts program and wants to hire teaching artists. When she asks her human resource manager to explain the hiring process, he tells her to ask her supervisor. Her supervisor tells Liz to e-mail a coworker. Liz sends the e-mail but never hears back. Liz asks her supervisor for the program budget but is told she is not allowed to see it. She asks how much she is allowed to spend on instructors. No one seems to be sure. After a few months of this, Liz is getting discouraged and losing her ambition. What should Liz do?

People in my group said the situation resonated with them. As they gave suggestions on how Liz could move forward, I was stuck on more basic questions: "Why is this acceptable? Why isn't Liz's agency accountable for supporting its afterschool program?" In the large-group

discussion, a program manager from the funder sponsoring the training said she sees situations like Liz's all the time. That raised another basic question: "If our funders know this is a problem in the field, why aren't they doing anything to prevent it?"

When I started my inquiry for the National Institute on Out-of-School Time's Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellowship, I wanted to investigate afterschool programs that had been rated "excellent" by funders. I wanted to understand what excellent programs look like and how they get that way. I had a hidden assumption: that success rests solely—or maybe just mostly—on the shoulders of the person on the ground running the show: the program director.

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However, as the year of inquiry wore on, an unforeseen theme kept popping up. It became more and more clear to me that, if you want to run an excellent program, you need support from your agency or organization, which in turn needs support from program funders. In other words, “systems trump programs” (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

This essay explores what I learned during that year. My aim is to help program directors who have found themselves in Liz’s shoes: They want to run high-quality programs, but they make little headway because they have little support from their agencies. Besides offering program directors some ideas on how to cope with this situation, I also want to implore agencies to take ownership of their programs and to beg funders to hold agencies—and themselves—accountable.

What Makes a Program “Excellent”

The first thing that tipped me off to the importance of agency support was a list of programs rated “excellent” by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). In 2014, out of 703 out-of-school sites, 28 were identified as excellent. The tipoff was that those 28 excellent sites were sponsored by only 17 agencies. A light went off in my head: This can’t be a coincidence. These agencies must have good systems and be helping their programs to succeed. I started to realize that the program director isn’t the only one who lays the groundwork for success; the agency is important as well.

To arrive at these ratings, DYCD grades sites based on their administrative records, rate of participation, and two site visits by DYCD program managers every year. The visits, which usually last at least two hours, include a combination of observations and interviews. The observers rate sites in six main categories: facility and environment, effective staffing, relationships, structures and partnerships, quality of implementation, and program content. The observers visit program sites but not the agency’s headquarters—that is, they assess the program only at the point of service where children and staff interact. The agency itself never seems to be evaluated.

My plan for examining what makes a program excellent included surveys of sites, both those rated excellent and

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some that were not. However, I received surveys from only two of the programs rated excellent—not enough to go on. In this essay, therefore, I report only on my interview with a DYCD program manager and my visit to a highly rated site, during which I interviewed four staff members including the program director.

When I interviewed program staff, the things they said would make a program excellent had little to do with the six categories on which DYCD rates programs. My respondents kept bringing up criteria such as “buy-in” and holistic programming. For example, when asked what makes programs excel-

lent, longtime DYCD program manager Karen Hill said:

The first and most important thing is that everybody must buy into the program. And what I mean by “buy in” is, they must be committed. Everybody wants to be a part of it... Number two: The program must have support from either their main agency or their top person. It must be very supportive of the program.

Karen’s words reinforced what I was learning about agency support, but the criteria she outlined were not reflected in the rating tools.

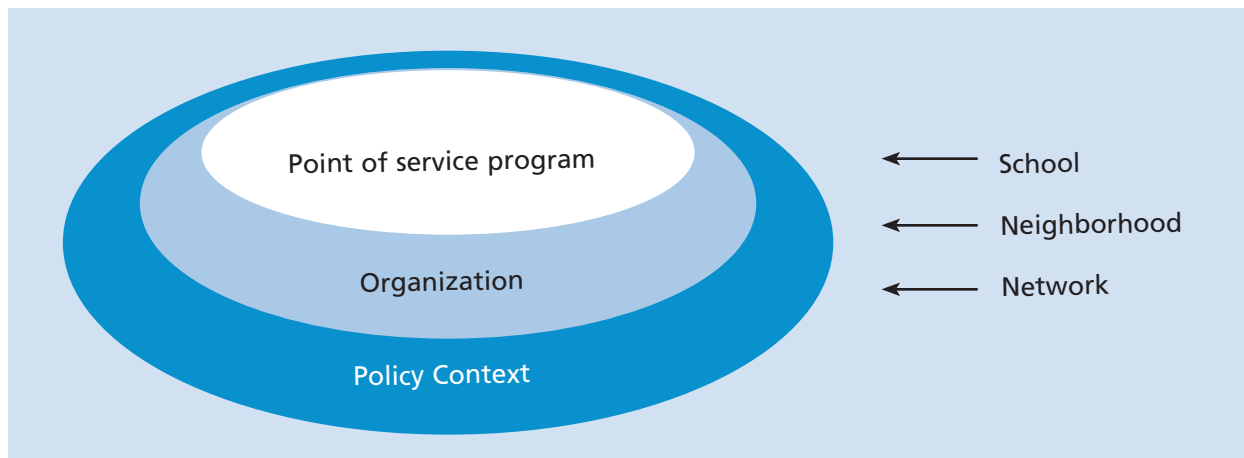
Why Agency Support Is Crucial

The idea that afterschool sites need agency support to run successful, high-quality programs is supported by the Forum for Youth Investment study “Continuous Quality Improvement in After School Settings” (Smith et al., 2012):

Reviewers noted that an explicit focus on how point-of-service settings are nested within higher levels of organizational and policy context is a critical conceptual frame for advancing intervention science because interventions must take account of how “systems trump programs.” (p. 7)

Figure 1 illustrates the idea that programming at the point of service is embedded within the agency context. Both the program and the agency are, in turn, embedded within the policy context, which includes, for example, funder requirements and political realities. On the right are a few of the many additional forces that affect the program, such as its school and neighborhood and the agency’s network.

Figure 1. Program Context



Ratings that measure programs only at the point of service do not account for the broader contexts in which programs function. A program will have a hard time achieving success if its agency lacks effective systems. The ones who need to address this issue are the agencies themselves. In addition, funders need to hold agencies just as accountable as they now hold direct program staff.

What Excellent Programming and Agency Support Look Like

A visit to one of the sites DYCD had rated as excellent helped confirm my sense of the importance of agency support. The Greater Ridgewood Youth Council (GRYC) has provided services to youth and families in the Ridgewood area of Queens since 1980. When I walked into the building, an old Masonic Temple turned community-based organization headquarters, I immediately noticed all the colors. Children's art hung all over the walls. A pre-K group walked past with blue and yellow fish they had made in arts and crafts class. In the background, I heard the busy noises of children playing.

The director of program operations, who managed a variety of GRYC programs, was warm and friendly. As we walked to her office, she introduced me to the crossing guard, the secretary, and all her co-workers. As she told me about GRYC and its work, I was struck not only by how kind she was, but also by how calm and relaxed she seemed. She spent two and a half hours with me without giving a single sign that she had to leave or move on. When she took me to one of GRYC's school-based afterschool programs, I got the same feeling from the site director: He didn't seem to have a care in the world.

The staff and kids mirrored the leaders I'd met—they seemed calm and happy. When bringing out the snack, a

group leader had to say, "If you hear my voice, clap once" only one time, and all the kids went silent. The facility didn't seem exceptional, and the homework time was pretty standard. What set this site apart was the adults' relationships with the kids and the positive atmosphere. This was a program where everyone knew everyone's name, and a clear community existed. The instructors led hands-on activities that seemed to engage and interest the kids. When I asked the site director what he thought every excellent site director should bring to work every day, he said, "a smile." This program seemed to have something that is being lost in many afterschool programs: good old-fashioned fun.

When I looked for reasons for GRYC's excellence, a few things stood out. For one, both the program operations director and her boss, the president of GRYC, had degrees in education and were former classroom teachers. They also described close ties with the community. Both senior leaders seemed to be hands-on, supportive bosses. They visited every site every few weeks and knew staff and children on a first-name basis. The program operations director and site director both regularly reviewed instructors' weekly lesson plans. Simply put, GRYC was very involved in the daily operations of the sites. The result was well-run sites with excellent programming.

When I asked leaders if they set specific goals, purchased expensive curriculum, or had a rigorous staff training program run by highly skilled consultants, they simply said "no." The president told me what he thought made for great programming: "It's about passion. I tell my staff all the time, 'We can teach you anything, but we can't teach you passion.'" GRYC seemed to be sticking to basics—qualified staff, strong relationships, and, most of all, a passion for children. The approach seemed to be working.

The Doom Loop and the Flywheel Effect

GRYC was avoiding what Jim Collins, in his business book *Good to Great* (2001), calls the “Doom Loop.” Instead, it embraced the “Flywheel Effect.” Flywheel Effect organizations like GRYC make change “gradually, consistently—building tangible evidence that their plans [make] sense and ... deliver results” (Collins, 2001).

GRYC didn't rely on magic bullets. The agency was building on strong leadership and offered support to its programs. The president had put together a team whose members stayed for the long term. He “got the right people on the bus.” Collins (2001) points out that great leaders “don't motivate people—their people are self-motivated.” That's the “passion” the president told me he was looking for. Once he put together his team of passionate educators, together they stuck with what worked; they didn't buy into gimmicks but stayed with the basics.

In contrast to GRYC, programs that struggle to find clear direction from their agencies may fall victim to what Collins (2001) calls the Doom Loop: constant change without enough time and discipline to see it through. “They start down one path only to change direction. After years of lurching back and forth, [they] discover they've failed to build up any sustained momentum” (Collins, 2001).

The Doom Loop sounds familiar to many program directors. Many sites and agencies struggle to keep up with constant changes in demands—especially from funders but also from other stakeholders, such as the host school or parents. Every year brings new expectations: How many hours of literacy must we do? How much physical recreation do students need each week? And now we have to incorporate a robust STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) program.

Agencies that have a strong sense of their identity and mission often can deal with new mandates. They say, for example, “OK, there is a new mandate for STEM. What are we already doing that could be considered STEM, and how can we bolster it?” Creatively finding

ways to align what they are already doing to the new standards supports the Flywheel Effect of sustainable change.

Other agencies that don't have such a strong sense of self may panic when faced with new mandates. Often they buy new curriculum from the companies that sell “proven” materials—but without getting proper buy in from program leaders and staff. They go for the quick fix,

causing a constant Doom Loop. Meanwhile, the whole problem could have been fixed by dialogue. Agencies blame funders for always changing things on them. Meanwhile, funders wonder why agencies don't see that the mandates are flexible enough to work with their existing program strengths. The entire process often leaves the program director and staff out of the conversation entirely. Not being consulted leaves staff feeling disaffected, increasing the Doom Loop through lack of buy-in.

Constant change and lack of adaptability creates a systemic Doom Loop effect both in individual programs and agencies and throughout the field. “Systems trump programs” (Fixsen et al., 2005) when top-down policies affect programs at the point of service. Years of constant changes to program mandates have created what feels like a Doom Loop in the entire system.

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Recommendations

How can we convert from Doom Loop behavior to become Flywheel Effect organizations? I have some ideas for program directors, for agencies, and for the field, especially funders.

For Program Directors

For program directors, the Doom Loop may sound all too familiar. If so, your agency may not be supporting your program as it should. Though it can be hard to maneuver through broken systems, I have some ideas to help you keep your sanity and make your program successful.

Give yourself a break. If you are anything like me, you may feel that the success of your program rests solely

on your shoulders and that you are responsible for all mistakes or failures. Stop that! Give yourself some credit, and stop blaming yourself.

Take stock. Figure out what is within your control—what you can fix or improve on, such as program routines and culture. Do what you can in those areas. For things that are outside your control, see the next steps.

Manage up. Addressing issues you can't control, like fiscal and human resource systems, means asking your boss or other higher-ups for help. It can be tricky when your pleas fall on deaf ears, so be sure to document your efforts. If things go wrong, at least you have a record of your attempts to fix the situation.

Call for backup. If you can find an ally either in your agency's senior management or at your funder, you can bring that person the issues that need to be corrected. This tactic has to be executed delicately. Never "throw people under the bus"; speak in generalities and from a place of caring. Your only objective should be to run a great program, not to win a power struggle.

For Agencies

Agencies are under a lot of pressure to perform according to their contracts while always keeping community interests at heart. Agency leaders might consider these steps to support their programs in serving the greater good.

Get clear about the standards. If your funders give a new mandate, ask questions: What does this have to look like? Can we phase it in over time? Is anything we are already doing aligned to this mandate? I have spoken with funders who seemed frustrated that agencies make knee-jerk changes instead of looking at how to align existing programs with new requirements.

Get clear about your identity. If you know who you are and what your programs are all about, you will not bend so easily to every new fad coming down the pipeline. Agencies should invest time and resources in understanding their strengths and the needs of the community they serve. This understanding forms a solid foundation for the work. Figure out what you are willing to change and what is intrinsic to your identity and mission. Get really clear on what is important to you.

For the Field

Program directors and agencies can do only so much. Most efforts to promote the Flywheel Effect and avoid the Doom Loop will have to come from the top.

Hold the agency accountable too. The most important thing funders can do is create systems of accountability. They must give agencies clear guidelines on the

role they should play in supporting programs. They should evaluate not only whether program staff are doing their job at the point of service but also whether agencies are doing their job behind the scenes to make sure programs are successful.

Be clear on what your standards mean. Sometimes the new mandates that come out each year reach agencies in cryptic emails that read almost as threats. No wonder agencies freak out and run to curriculum suppliers for help! Help agencies do what you really want them to accomplish by breaking down what the standards mean. Discuss what compliant programs can look like and how programs will be judged. Make sure agencies know they can meet the standards by creatively augmenting what they are already doing. Above all, keep the lines of communication open.

Our students deserve the best programs we can give them. Sometimes it is our job—whether we are program directors, agency leaders, or funders—to fight the good fight on their behalf. The more the education system as a whole struggles, it seems, the more the afterschool field feels the shock. We have to be our own advocates, working to break the Doom Loop to get our agencies—and our field—established in the Flywheel Effect.

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