Seven Steps for Implementing Afterschool Programs:

STRATEGIES FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATORS

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The need for afterschool programs (ASPs) has increased exponentially during the past 15 years (Hirsch, 2011). Nearly 15% (8.4 million) of K–12 students nationwide participate in ASPs (Mahoney, Levine, & Hinga, 2010). For many cities across the United States, ASP recruitment, training and retention of employees was a challenge and often resulted in staff leaving for higher-wage opportunities and full-time employment (Surr, 2001). Staffing continues to be a challenge with approximately 40% of staff identified as part-time and averaging three years or less of employment with ASPs (Mahoney et al., 2010). The rise in community violence perpetrated by youth and upon youth demonstrates the need for additional venues for ASPs aside from traditional providers such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs and social service/community centers.
This article identifies specific strategies for physical educators detailing the process for creating and sustaining ASPs that provide opportunities for youth skill development, increased academic performance, and fun and socialization. Afterschool programs can serve as catalysts to break down “cliques” and curtail negative activities such as bullying by building relationships among peers. They can also provide a platform for a group, culture or subculture of inactive youth at school by giving them a voice or outlet for equal participation. General ideas on why and how ASPs will benefit students can guide initial development. To create an ASP, a physical educator should follow these steps: 1) conduct a needs assessment, 2) format and design a program, 3) form partnerships, 4) secure facilities, 5) seek external funding, 6) market and promote the program, and 7) conduct periodic evaluations.

**Step 1: Needs Assessment**

The leading factor that influences any program development is the results of a thorough needs assessment. When considering new initiatives such as an ASP, a needs assessment provides valuable data that highlight the needs, wants and interests of those who will participate in the program. The main objective of the assessment is to determine whether there is a need for an ASP and to what extent it is believed students will participate. The assessment inquiry should be structured so that basic demographics of the school’s population are collected, in addition to data that identify potential barriers students may face regarding participation in the program. Some methods for assessing interest in an ASP include:

- Creating a student advisory committee to gather input on what the students want included in the program.
- Conducting interviews or facilitating focus groups with school staff and administrators, as well as groups such as the parent-teacher association (PTA) and booster clubs.
- Issuing a survey to the target audience. Paper surveys, online surveys and questionnaire tools like SurveyMonkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com) are easy to create and convenient for distribution. Prior to issuing the survey, organize a pilot study with a smaller group of people (school staff) to gauge the clarity of the questions created for the survey. Afterward, revise the questions so they are precise before disseminating to the target audience.
- Identifying local agencies such as libraries, cultural centers, recreation facilities, etc., within a one-mile to threemile radius of the school to acquire information on the available amenities and resources to avoid duplication of services and identify potential partners.
- Reviewing research-based data on the emotional, physical and cognitive benefits of ASPs by visiting websites like the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (http://www.niost.org), After School Matters (http://www afterschoolmatters.org), SPARK (http://www.sparkpe.org), the National Afterschool Association (http://www.naa web.org), and the Afterschool Alliance (http://www.afterschoolalliance.org). Access to standards, guidelines, research and evidence-based resources saves time when designing programs and generates ideas for program activities.
- Researching ASPs nationwide to determine what schools and communities with similar demographics offer.

Once the assessment is complete, identify strengths and weaknesses of the information collected and report the findings to school administrators and other stakeholders to garner support and input for the initiative. The program should be viewed as an important asset for students; therefore, endorsement from the administration is essential.

**Step 2: Program Design**

An effective needs assessment provides information about the type of program format and delivery students want. Data collected provide direction on which approach to take in program design, such as:

- designing the program strictly based on what students desire;
- designing the program based on a current perceived need by students;
- designing the program according to a specific set of objectives to be achieved; or
- designing the program to fulfill an external requirement or mandate by another agency such as the Board of Education, a curriculum-accrediting body, etc.

The data collected also determine the ideal format for delivering ASPs, such as:

- Competitive: Will competitive activities such as intramurals or other activities that generate competition be part of the program?
- Drop-in/open: Do students want an open-space format whereby they can drop in and create their own activity?
- Classes or workshops: Do students want a specific class or workshop outside of their normal school curriculum?
- Clubs and interest groups: Are students interested in forming clubs or interest groups aside from those currently available through the school?
- Special events and community outreach: Do students want to engage the community through special events or service projects?

Understanding the difference between what students need, desire and are interested in should be clearly identified prior to designing and formatting the program. By the end of data collection and the analysis process, a “hook” can be identified to get students involved in the program. The main concern is to take into consideration what students will actually show up to do. Youth love big ideas, but when it comes to the activity, do they really intend to participate?

Additional issues for consideration are whether studentathletes will be cleared to participate. For instance, if the program is heavily sport-oriented, the athletic director or coaching staff may need to create specific policies for student-athletes’
ASPs can also provide a platform for a group, culture or subculture of inactive youth at school by giving them a voice or outlet for equal participation. Participation. Alternatives for student-athletes may include offering intramurals as a part of programming during the off season that are inclusive of non-student-athletes. In addition to policies for student-athletes, school administrators may need to draft policies that allow members of other student clubs who participate in official state or districtwide competitions to also participate in ASP activities.

Step 3: Community Partners

Establishing partnerships with local agencies, such as recreation centers, community centers, libraries, universities and hospitals/health clinics creates additional access to resources and activities that can be incorporated into the program. Desirable partners possess resources the program may not have, such as staff with specific certifications or licenses, sport fields, meeting space, access to technology, and program equipment, and they can help offset the budget. The following are some methods for contacting potential partners:

- Request a meeting with agencies that have resources needed for the program.
- Meet with current school partners to review the existing services provided to determine if they can be extended or modified.
- Identify state or federal government agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services, Departments of Education and Justice, federal extension services, and others to determine what resources they can provide.
- Meet with local colleges to determine if there are curriculum-based activities they can provide using student candidates in programs such as teacher certification or recreation administration.

Once partners are identified, human resources and legal departments should work with each partner’s agency to:

- formalize contracts for service;
- review insurance policies;
- complete staff background checks and validate certifications or licenses indicative of specific program areas;
- jointly create a risk management manual with policies that cover permission slips, program waivers, criteria for external partnerships and other specified areas of concern for partners; and
- annually review contracts to update established policies and revalidate staff credentials.

Step 4: Facilities

Sport fields, classrooms and multipurpose rooms are typically high-use areas during afterschool hours, and the sharing of amenities such as equipment and facilities among internal staff is commonplace. Scheduling space for ASP activities should be done with consideration given to sport teams, existing student clubs and other activities such as school and community special events. Taking students off campus for ASP activities at locations such as parks, swimming pools, sport fields and libraries or cultural centers broadens the activities offered during program hours and should be included in scheduling. Establishing a cohesive schedule for all entities can be accomplished by:

- creating a spreadsheet that represents all entities occupying internal and external building space (classroom, multipurpose room, gymnasium, sport fields, theater, etc.) during afterschool hours to prevent overscheduling program areas;
- conducting a meeting with key personnel (teachers, custodial staff, coaches, faculty advisors) who share the same building space after school to negotiate usage time; and
- reviewing the schedule periodically with the identified personnel to make adjustments as needed.

Step 5: Program Funding

Creating a sustainable program requires securing grants from private and public sources, establishing community partnerships, and creating new revenue streams (Afterschool Investment Project, 2006). There are 3,309 grants for ASPs serving 1,456,447 children and youth in 9,824 school- and community-based centers across the country (Auguste, Filler, Hertz, Rigby, & Saint-Ange, 2009). Data collected during the needs assessment can and should be used by the school’s financial officer when filling out grant applications because it provides unique information to the granter about the school and statistically highlights why there is a need for the program.

During the Clinton Administration, federal funding for ASPs increased through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Act (Hirsch, 2011). Securing funds, whether internal or external, is critical to sustaining an ASP once established. Identifying external funds for ASPs can be accomplished by:

- reviewing the website of private and public companies’ community relations departments to gather detailed information on the youth programs they fund;
- reviewing state and federal government websites such as the Department of Health and Human Services for grants available for youth programs; and
- establishing fees to make the program financially self-sufficient and independent from the school’s general operating budget.
Step 6: Marketing the Program

Creating several tools for promoting ASPs throughout the year, including the summer months, helps to ensure that students are aware that the ASP is available each fall. Program information must reach the target audience, so it is best not to rely solely on one mode of communication; rather, all methods at the teacher’s disposal should be used. It is also suggested to secure time on the agenda of special meetings such as the school board, PTA and booster club, among others, to promote and continually advocate for the ASP. Distributing information during school sport or other club competitions is another means of promotion. Program promotion should include multiple marketing venues such as:

- the school website with a dedicated link for program information;
- social media outlets that are interactive and allow immediate feedback on the program;
- flyers to send home with students;
- featured articles in the school/district newsletter or local community newspaper; and
- town hall meetings with formal groups such as the PTA, school board, existing student organizations, and other identified stakeholders.

Step 7: Evaluation

The last step in creating a program is to conduct evaluations in an effort to make the program sustainable. Program evaluation consists of meticulously collecting information to make modifications prior to the next program cycle. Evaluation is the last and most important step and is another form of a needs assessment. Evaluations accomplish several purposes, including determining whether program goals, objectives and the needs of participants and stakeholders were met. Periodic evaluations throughout the program cycle help determine whether specific activities should be continued, modified or dissolved for the remainder of the year. Evaluations can be facilitated by doing the following:

- issuing a general program evaluation form to ASP participants;
- conducting round table discussions with ASP participants; and
- seeking input from school staff impacted by the ASP using a different evaluation form or via face-to-face discussion at general staff meetings.

Methods for ASP improvement include obtaining and utilizing feedback from stakeholders and parents that helps to improve the workforce and communicating other afterschool initiatives (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008).
Conclusion

The initial steps for creating an ASP will require support from school staff, administrators and various stakeholders. Conducting a thorough needs assessment is a major component that provides critical information from potential program participants. Establishing program goals/objectives and formatting the desired program delivery will ensure students are participating in a program they designed and will hopefully lead to large participation numbers. Forming partnerships with agencies that have resources to bolster the program will assist in creating a variety of activities offered and will help supplement the budget.

To create effective and sustainable programs, it is important to stay abreast of what is trending by participating in professional development and joining professional associations. Consulting with professional organizations that offer workshops and trainings for individuals who provide programming for youth, such as the National Afterschool Association (http://www.naaaweb.org), can be very beneficial. Meeting with staff who facilitate ASPs at park districts, recreation centers and other social service/community agencies to observe programs in operation is another great source of information. Lastly, conducting periodic evaluations will provide valuable data and a roadmap to sustaining a quality ASP for participants.

References


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