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Removing Barriers: Using a PDS Model to Enable Collaborative Community and School Partnerships to Serve At-Risk Students

S. Michael Putman

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

Jerrell C. Cassady

Ball State University, USA

Lawrence L. Smith

Ball State University, USA

Monica L. Heller

Ball State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to articulate the success of a partnership facilitated by a PDS relationship in serving at-risk students in a collection of schools proximal to a university in the Midwest. The authors begin by describing characteristics of community partnerships, including professional development schools, which both enable and hinder schools and stakeholders when they attempt to build innovative partnerships promoting positive school and community outcomes. They then discuss how they leveraged the resources of the local community, a teacher education program, and the local schools to develop and implement an afterschool academic support program targeting students at-risk for school failure. In addition to explaining the procedural elements that were found to be useful in breaking down traditional barriers to effective partnerships (e.g., space, finance, staff, quality curriculum support), the authors present the results of their study that demonstrate student gains in both math and reading.

INTRODUCTION

After-school supervision for school-age children is an area of importance given the dramatic increases in working parents and concerns about “latchkey” children who are home alone after school. Fashola (2002) highlighted the concern, documenting that unsupervised children are more likely to engage in

harmful behaviors in the hours immediately following school. In response to this growing need, the percentage of schools in the U.S. offering after-school programming increased from just 16% in 1987 to 56% in 2008 (DeAngelis & Rossi, 1997; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The emphases of such programs vary; yet most of these school-based versions can be characterized

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as serving one or more of three primary purposes: supervision; enrichment and socialization experiences; and increasing academic achievement (Fashola, 2002). Regardless of the stated purpose, given the current educational context and the greatly expanded focus on test scores, there is a consistent trend toward an increasing percentage of these programs primarily focusing on increasing academic achievement. Appropriately, this is particularly true of programs that target the at-risk student population.

EFFECTIVE AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

The literature on after-school programming is reasonably established, with several models of effective programming available. However, the empirical data to support the impact of most after-school programs is mixed, particularly when academic achievement gains are the outcome measure. This likely results from the fact that after-school program evaluation faces all the traditional complexities of examining the efficacy of programs implemented in schools with the added threats to internal and external validity that are inherent to out-of-school program implementations. Among the most common added threats to validity are fluctuations in populations served, loose or shifting program goals, instability in program attendance, insufficient outcome variables, and limited expertise among program staff (Lauer et al., 2004; McComb & Scott-Little, 2003; Redd, Cochran, Hair, & Moore, 2002). As a result, definitive conclusions demonstrating academic gains in after school programs are often lacking.

While the collective findings are mixed, after-school programs have shown predominantly positive results when they meet two basic criteria: (a) clear connections between classroom and after-school learning goals, and (b) trained staff implementing a well-structured program (Redd, et al., 2002). Additional characteristics of success

have arisen in recent analyses of programs with at least partial attention to academic gains. The characteristics include:

- Focusing on students most at-risk for academic or social failure;
- High expectations and positive social norms expected of participants;
- Safe environments;
- Partnering with local community resources and the utilization of volunteers as well as stable, trained personnel; and
- Frequent assessment (Beckett, Hawken, & Jacknowitz, 2001; Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Caplan & Calfee, 2006; Huang, Cho, Mostafavi, & Nam, 2010; Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010).

Vandell, Reisner, and Pierce (2007) found convincing support for several of these indices in an evaluation of multiple programs across a variety of states and settings. Their results indicated that children who participated in programs rated high in these criteria exhibited greater pro-social behaviors, higher scores on math achievement tests, better work habits, and lower rates of misconduct when compared to students in low supervision settings after school (see also Fashola, 2002). In a meta-analysis of 34 studies, Lauer et al. (2006) further reinforced the necessity of trained personnel as they examined the effect of after-school programs on at-risk students' achievement, including reading scores. The researchers found the strongest reading gains were found in programs that implemented one-on-one tutoring. This finding is particularly compelling given the growing number of schools attempting to help students reach proficiency in this critical "gateway" skill domain.

Despite the identification of favorable characteristics of and potential benefits associated with after-school programs consistent challenges remain. Sustainability and longevity are problematic, particularly for those programs serving children from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

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