

# human resources

## Staffing Out-of-School Time Programs in the 21st Century

by Ron Asher

I am a site manager employed by a small community-based organization (CBO) that provides afterschool programming at a number of school-based sites scattered throughout southern King County in Washington State. As such, I belong to one-half of the afterschool youth development (AYD) workforce: the (for the most part) full-time, salaried site managers and coordinators who supervise the other half of the AYD workforce—the part-time hourly workers who make up the bulk of front-line staffs. One of my greatest challenges as a site manager has been attracting and retaining part-time staff who can be relied on to deliver the high-quality programming our funders expect and our students deserve.

I used the opportunity of a long-term action research writing project to climb out of the trenches of direct service, take a good look around at the current landscape, and gather information that might help me address the difficulties I

was facing as a site manager. I've come away convinced that I'm not alone, that the challenges I've faced in staffing a stable, high-quality afterschool program are the same challenges being faced by out-of-school time (OST) managers every day. My research has left me with the realization that the high level of turnover typical for part-time AYD workers represents a systemic challenge to the entire field. The relatively low wages and few hours we are able to offer these staffers are built into the structure and nature of afterschool work, so that these jobs will inevitably remain entry-level positions subject to high levels of turnover.

So what can be done to mitigate this challenging reality? My interviews with colleagues, combined with a review of published literature on the subject, have generated several recommendations, such as hiring staff already

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working in the school building, encouraging university teaching programs to include AYD and OST internships as part of their required coursework, and concentrating our scarce professional development resources on full-time staffers rather than part-time workers. I wish I could offer a more satisfying or efficacious fix to this vexing problem. I am left instead with the hope that we will continue to explore these questions as more front-line practitioners add their voices to the discussion.

### Quality Staffing: Benefits and Challenges

The linkage between program quality and the quality of the OST workforce seems obvious on its face—hire a great staff, and chances are they'll run a great program. Researchers agree with this assessment. For example, a study of 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) notes, "Center staffing is a crucial factor in the success of afterschool programming" (Naftzger et al., 2007, p. 36). A report by Schools Out Washington (2008) concurs: "For children to have positive outcomes, they must access high-quality programs. High-quality programs require high-quality staff" (p. 12).

However, as a site manager charged with hiring and supervising a part-time front-line staff, I know from experience that putting together a great staff is a lot harder than it sounds. In fact, the biggest challenge I've faced in my three years of managing an afterschool program has been attracting and retaining high-quality workers. I'm not alone. In talks with fellow site managers, the topic of staffing comes up frequently, with the site manager usually saying something along the lines of "I just lost another part-time staff person. Do you know anyone looking for work?"

According to a recent report by The After-School Corporation (TASC, 2010), "Research has shown that, just as good teachers correlate to children's success in school, so too are out-of-school time staff integral to making afterschool an enriching educational space" (p. 1). Other research has found a correlation between the level of staff training and the ability of programs to attract and retain youth (Pearson, Russell, & Reisner, 2007). We also know that continuity and longevity are essential to effective mentoring relationships between staff and youth (Cole, 2006). So the issue of high staff turnover is troubling not only from

a managerial, programmatic, and educational standpoint, but particularly from the standpoint of a young person who watches adult mentors come and go through the revolving door that typifies the staffing situation at many youth development programs.

### Findings: Framing the Challenge and Searching for Solutions

In order to gauge how the challenges I've experienced as an OST site manager compared with the experiences of others in similar positions, I conducted a series of interviews over the course of several weeks with the practitioners to whom I had easy access: the site managers who work for my non-profit CBO. Though at my organization we are called *site managers*, other organizations might call us *site coordinators* or *site supervisors*. In any case, we are the employees responsible for the day-to-day operations at our sites.

During the time that I conducted the interviews, my organization employed 14 site managers, myself included, who ran programs at 16 school-based sites in south King County, Washington. Eight of these programs were funded through a federal 21st CCLC grant. We have programs in eight elementary schools, five middle schools, and three high schools. All of our site managers are full-time employees, except for one manager based in an elementary school who works in her school building during the day as a para-educator and then works for us as a part-time site manager after school.

I contacted all of my colleagues by phone or email to set up a face-to-face meeting. I then sat down with each of them for a structured one-on-one interview, with two exceptions. One interview with a high school site manager took place over the phone rather than face-to-face, and another interview involved two middle school site managers at the same time. I used the same set of 18 questions for each interview. Half of the questions were demographic in nature, asking about age, education, years in the respondents' current position, and so on. The other half were open-ended questions, asking managers about their experience in running OST programs, the challenges they faced, and their ideas on how to address those challenges. I took handwritten notes, which I typed out as soon as I could get back to a computer. Later, I pored over my typed notes with

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colored highlighters in order to separate demographic facts from professional opinions and to tease out common themes.

I compiled some biographical information on my fellow site managers to see how we match up with AYD workers across the state and nation. The average age of our 14

site managers was 35 years, with the oldest being 62 and the youngest 23. As shown in Figure 1, ages were distributed between two distinct clusters: half were in their early to mid-20s, and another group was 47 or older. These findings correspond with statistics showing that OST workers tend to enter the field early in their working life, return to the workforce after raising children, or end up in OST after changing careers later in life (School's Out Washington, 2008; Yohalem, Pittman, & Edwards, 2010).

As a group, site managers at my CBO were a bit more educated than AYD workers nationwide. Figure 2 shows that all 14 of us had at least some college education; most had a bachelor's degree, and several had or were working toward more advanced credentials. By way of comparison, a 2009 report on Missouri's AYD workforce found that 60 percent held two-year college degrees or higher, a finding echoed in nationwide data (Craig, 2009; Yohalem et al., 2010).

The 14 site managers in my study were also quite experienced in the field, amassing a total of 96 years in OST programs, an average of nearly seven years per site manager (not counting years in school-day positions). This level of experience mirrors statewide data showing that a majority of AYD workers in senior or leadership positions had worked in the field for more than five years (School's Out Washington, 2008). In their current positions with our organization, site managers averaged nearly 2.5 years of service. The most experienced manager had been in the position for six years, the least experienced for one.

Asked what kind of programs they run, 11 of 14 site managers described their programs as mixed, meaning a combination of academic-based programming with some enrichment, recreation, and leadership activities. The other three managers described their programs as primarily academic. Figure 3 shows that half of the 16 programs served elementary school students.

Eight of our site managers ran 21st CCLC programs. When asked if conforming to the academic mandates of 21st CCLC funding affected staffing decisions, more than half (five of eight) agreed that it did. One mentioned the tension between reaching academic goals while trying to engage kids and hit her enrollment targets. She felt the academic mandates kept her from offering "fun" activities that would keep kids coming back. Another manager said that the strict student-teacher ratios required by the grant, coupled with the requirement to serve a certain number of regular program attendees, resulted in a lot of pressure: "If I enrolled the number of students I needed to hit my attendance requirements while maintaining the proper ratios, I'd have to hire something like eight part-time

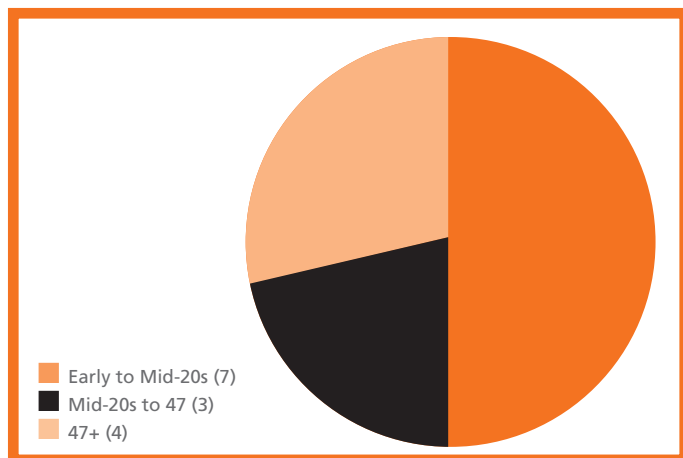


Figure 1. Age of Site Managers

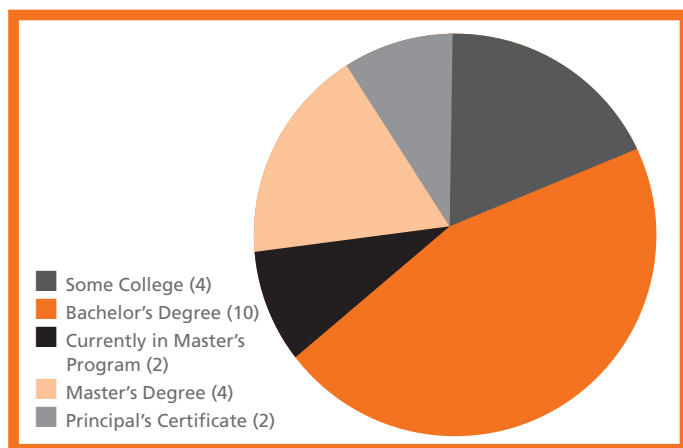


Figure 2. Education Level of Site Managers

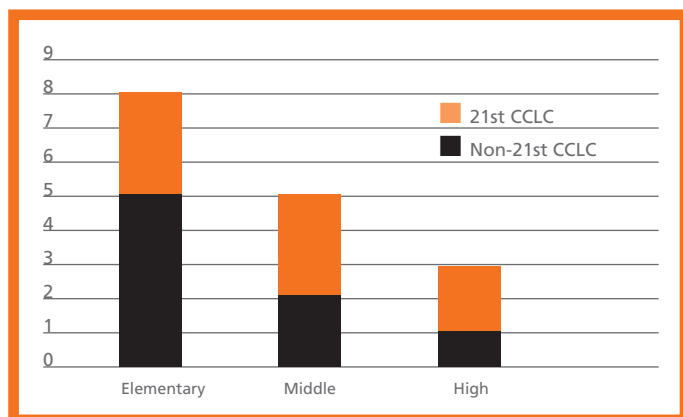


Figure 3. Afterschool Programs by School Type

staff with a budget that only allows me to hire four, tops!” Four site managers whose programs weren’t 21st CCLC sites but who had heard from other managers about the grant requirements responded to the question, “Are you a 21st Century site?” with some variation of “Thank goodness, no!” One responded, “No, and it’s a good thing—I don’t need the added pressure.”

I then moved on to questions related to challenges faced in the OST field. Specifically, I asked the site managers to describe, in order of importance, the challenges they faced in their current positions. The challenges they described as most important are shown in Figure 4. The main challenge cited by the most managers was lack of funding. The next biggest challenge was hiring and retaining quality staff. Clearly lack of funding—a concern mentioned by the vast majority of interviewees, even if they did not cite it as the primary concern—is closely related to the issue of staffing. Since staff salaries and benefits make up the largest line items in our budgets, the inability to attract and retain quality staff can be directly linked to lack of adequate funding. Only four of the 14 managers interviewed failed to mention staffing or lack of resources among the challenges they faced.

Eight of 14 site managers said that recruiting and retaining quality staff was either the biggest or one of the biggest challenges. When drilling down into the specific challenges they faced with regard to staff turnover, everyone I interviewed cited low pay and few hours as the biggest impediments to retaining quality staff. When asked to focus on ways of addressing the issue, they all pointed to systemic problems. The part-time nature of the jobs we offer, along with the relatively low wages paid to part-time staff and the lack of opportunities for advancement, led to a situation where, in the words of one manager, “We hire part-time workers looking for full-time work.” Schools Out Washington, in a 2008 report, found this issue to be a state-wide concern:

Program staff that serve children after school and during the summer, from elementary school through high school, are increasingly expected to improve academic performance and help young people develop the skills and attributes necessary to succeed in a global community. Yet these workers, from whom we now expect so much, may have little experience or education directly related to their jobs, receive low wages and few benefits, and lack a pathway to career advancement. (Schools Out Washington, 2008, p. 5)

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One middle school manager put it this way: “I hire people with career ambitions. When opportunity knocks, they have to take it.” Another complained, “Those people you really want to hire are usually the first to leave when something better comes along.” On average, our site managers were able to offer their part-time employees 12 hours of work per week at an average rate of \$13.80 per hour, slightly higher than the median hourly rate of approximately \$10 per hour reported nationwide (Cole, 2006; Craig, 2009; Yohalem et al., 2010).

I asked the site managers who mentioned recruitment and retention as a staffing challenge if they had any ideas or best practices they’d like to offer to others facing similar concerns. Having already cited low pay and few hours as systemic problems leading to high staff turnover, they reached near unanimity in describing the most logical solution to the problem: offer more hours and more pay. Schools Out Washington heard similar responses when they asked AYD workers why they left the field. The two most common reasons given were that salaries weren’t high enough and that there weren’t enough full-time opportunities in the community or organization (Schools Out Washington, 2008). “It’s hard to find someone with the skills we need who is willing to work for the pay we offer,” is how one of our site managers framed the challenge. Added another, “We don’t offer enough hours, but at the same time we need people to work in the middle of the day, so it makes it difficult for them to hold another part-time job.” Almost everyone I interviewed followed up by commenting that simply offering more hours or paying higher wages wasn’t possible given the current state of program funding. One high school site manager summed up the retention problem best: “You’re offering peanuts for very challenging work, and the part-time nature of the job is a serious disincentive.”

When it came to addressing the problem of high staff

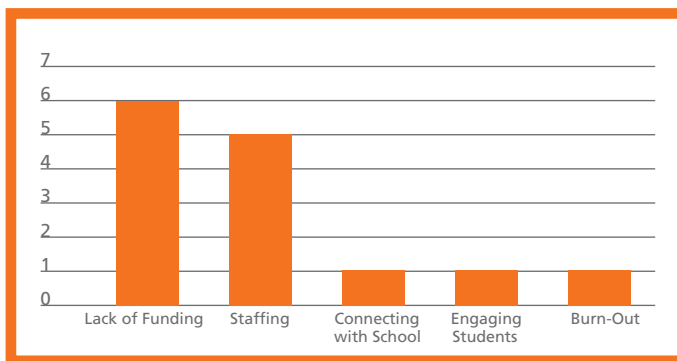


Figure 4. Challenges Cited by Site Managers

turnover, one of the most commonly expressed ideas was to try to hire staff already working in the school building. One long-time site manager solved the problem of high staff turn-over by hiring school-day staff. Another opined that part-time positions worked only for school staff such as para-educators or college students. Another was even more specific about hiring college students, recommending freshmen or sophomores “but not seniors—they leave after graduation.” Another suggested that university teaching programs include OST internships along with school-day internships as options for student teachers.

Finally, in order to gauge how happy our site managers were with their current positions in our organization, I asked them to rate their level of satisfaction with the work they do. Given a choice among “very satisfied,” “satisfied,” “somewhat satisfied,” or “unsatisfied,” 10 out of 14 chose “satisfied,” as shown in Figure 5. Three were “very satisfied,” one was “somewhat satisfied,” and no one claimed to be “unsatisfied.” I followed up by asking what made them answer they way they did. Most said that the thing that brought them into the field in the first place—a passion for working with youth—was what kept them coming back year after year. This feeling was best expressed by a middle school site manager who responded, “It’s satisfying to know your job actually means something. When you make a difference, you can see it.” Another manager said, “I love working with youth. I went to school in this neighborhood. I came back to where I grew up in order to give back to my community.” One of the three site managers who said she was very satisfied in her current position said, “After working in public education for 33 years, I appreciate the flexibility and freedom of working for a nonprofit. I love running my own program!”

When asked what kept them from being “very satisfied,” most returned to themes already expressed in the in-

terview: lack of funding and resources, low pay, not enough help, lack of organizational support. In the words of one elementary school site manager, “Sometimes I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing here. There needs to be more professionalization around what we do.”

### Recommendations

I began this inquiry by looking primarily at strategies for retaining part-time staffers working the front lines of OST programs, thinking that resources put toward professional development should be spent transforming these part-timers into the high-quality workforce we rely on to deliver high-quality programming. But my research has led me to rethink that position. The TASC report encapsulates the dilemma: “High frontline staff turnover limits the incentives of directors to invest in deeper staff training; limited professional development and workplace or career benefits feeds high turnover” (TASC, 2010, p. 3).

Because the part-time, low-wage nature of front-line positions is systemic, these positions will inevitably remain entry-level jobs subject to high levels of turnover. After all, front-line AYD jobs are just that—jobs, not careers. A part-time employee is like a renter while a full-time worker is like a home owner. Renters have little incentive to make substantial improve-

ments to the property, since they will eventually be moving on. By contrast, home owners are invested in the long term and will do whatever they can to improve the value of their property. This isn’t to say that our dedicated and caring part-timers aren’t invested in what they do. They are. But they are less likely to be invested in the long-term sustainability of the program than full-time workers because they tend to be a transient workforce.

I’m not recommending that we ignore the professional development needs of the part-time half of the OST workforce. We should provide as many training opportunities for front-line workers as time and resources will allow. However, I would recommend directing the lion’s share of our limited resources toward professionalizing the other half of the workforce: the full-time, salaried site managers (coordinators, supervisors, or whatever they’re called) who see themselves not as youth development *workers* but as youth development *professionals*. These staff members may not stay with their current organizations, but, compared to part-timers, they are more likely to remain in the AYD field. Resources spent training and developing them have the potential to yield substantial returns as these professionals in-

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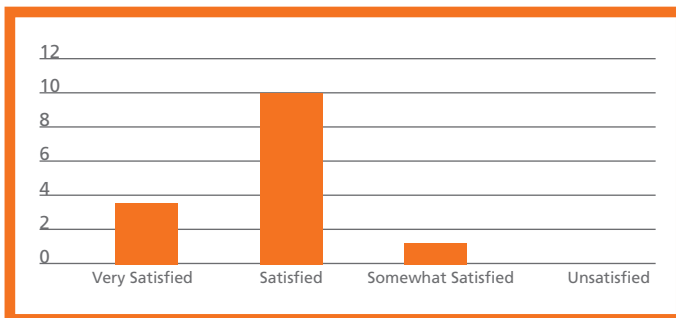


Figure 5. Site Managers’ Job Satisfaction

vest their experience and knowledge in improving outcomes for the ultimate beneficiaries of our work: the children and youth in our programs.

An additional important finding of my research was the suggestion that one of the best ways to mitigate the problem of high turnover was to hire staff already working in the school building. I've shared this finding with others in my CBO, and we've begun the process of making this practice a recommended hiring strategy across our organization.

Another suggestion was to increase the number of AYD and OST internships at university education programs. Indeed, this recommendation was the focus of TASC's 2010 paper, which found that:

[A]s schools increasingly emphasize project-based learning, service learning, experiential, and community-based learning... existing afterschool programs offer valuable sites for teachers and leaders to build skills in these methods, which are not covered in typical teacher education. (TASC, 2010, p. i)

The report ends with a call for leaders in the afterschool movement to seek out partnerships with institutions of higher learning in order to increase the participation of future educators in OST youth development (TASC, 2010).

The data I gathered through interviews with colleagues admittedly focused rather narrowly on one organization in one geographic area delivering a relatively uniform type of OST programming. I directed my attention to a small corner of the AYD landscape with the understanding that a much larger and more diverse world exists outside my immediate frame of reference. I urge other practitioners to conduct their own inquiries into their own programs and organizations so that we can create a mosaic that takes into account the diversity of programs, practices, and people who constitute the OST workforce in the 21st century.

Every field has its own language, its own idiom, a way of talking among its professionals about what they do. In the field of nonprofit CBOs, we've made a conscious effort to shape our language so that, when we talk about the populations we serve, we speak of benefits, not deficits. We want to see students, families, and communities in terms of what they have, not what they lack. However, when we talk about who we are and what we do, we often allow ourselves to be defined not by what we bring to the table but by what we lack in terms of resources. I know that much of this paper had been shaped by a discussion of what we need, not what we have. So I feel compelled to end by noting another theme that bubbled up throughout my research: the passion and dedication of the OST workforce. Even though I was mining my interviews and the literature for data illuminat-

ing the challenges we face, I kept digging up nuggets that reflected a workforce motivated not by fame or fortune, but by the possibility of making the world a better place—one child, one family at a time. It is to that feeling and those people that this paper is dedicated.

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