



right time, right place

Building an Online Learning Community for Afterschool Practitioners

by the You for Youth project team

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a contract to a team of education, youth development, and web development specialists to develop an online professional learning community for grantees in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC). The online community, You for Youth (Y4Y, www.Y4Y.ed.gov)

will support afterschool practitioners' professional development, encourage their discussion and reflection, and support positive change in their professional practice. During the first year of the contract, the team assessed the professional development needs of the 21st CCLC community. Using this input, we designed a prototype for a *user-centered* web portal and learning community, which includes multimedia learning modules in several topic areas. The result will be an efficient system for delivering professional development based on the expressed needs of the afterschool community.

21st Century Community Learning Centers

The 21st CCLC program recently entered its 13th year of operation. This U.S. Department of Education program, which has grown from \$40 million in 1998 to \$1.31 billion in 2009, has contributed significantly to the expansion of formal afterschool programming in the United States.

21st CCLC programs provide safe havens for students in out-of-school time hours while addressing educational enrichment needs. Programs that receive 21st CCLC grants must provide academic enrichment activities, such as tutoring in reading and math, and services that reinforce and complement the regular academic program, such as recreation, technology education, counseling, and character education. Grantees partner with community groups and schools to support students who attend high-poverty,

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low-performing schools. More than 3,300 active grants fund more than 8,900 centers that serve 1.4 million students in 53 states and territories (U.S. Department of Education [Dept. of Ed.], 2009a).

Policymakers at the U.S. Department of Education rely on data from practitioners and evaluators to improve the 21st CCLC program. State coordinators and key stakeholders have indicated a serious need for high-quality, low-cost professional development. In response to this request, the department contracted with two partnering organizations, Synergy Enterprises, Inc. (SEI) and WestEd, to build an online learning community of interactive, multimedia learning modules in areas of critical need, with a focus on areas that will most enhance quality programming.

The Need for Centralized, Customized Afterschool Resources

Most afterschool practitioners are committed to building their skills and finding a professional community that supports their growth. Practitioners at all levels identify a need to increase their knowledge of youth development and resilience and to learn to create an environment that is physically and psychologically safe. A 2006 professional development needs assessment conducted in the Illinois 21st CCLC programs showed that areas of need included conflict management, positive behavior strategies, and student engagement (Billman & Smith, 2007). Building relationships—with students, colleagues, community partners, and school staff members—also emerged as an area in which staff members wanted to build their skills. Program staff also wanted to learn techniques to “make learning fun.” Managers expressed a need for a host of other skills, including grant and financial management; hiring, training, and coaching staff; and using assessments to guide their professional development programs. Finally, practitioners identified a need for shared understanding of the 21st CCLC program’s goals and best practices (Billman & Smith, 2006; U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2009b).

Over the past decade, training opportunities have been created to address the needs of people who work in afterschool programs. The

THE YOU FOR YOUTH PROJECT TEAM

Along with program officers at the U.S. Department of Education, the Y4Y project team consists of staff members from two partnering organizations:

- **SYNERGY ENTERPRISES, INC. (SEI)**, a woman-owned, full-service organization providing research and evaluation services and technical assistance in the fields of health, education, and communication
- **WESTED**, a research, development, and service agency committed to expanding opportunities for education, communication, and collaboration in the public policy arena

The project’s Stakeholder Panel and Technical Working Group have approximately 24 members who are state-level 21st CCLC coordinators, directors of grantee programs, and other practitioner experts from national and policy organizations. More than 500 practitioners from 21st CCLC programs around the country participated in three events during the needs assessment process: an initial stakeholder panel meeting in February 2009; a three-day WebDialogue in June 2009 with invited participation from all staff levels; and focus groups with program directors, site coordinators, and activity leaders conducted at the 2009 21st CCLC Professional Development Summer Institute.

“Although money is an issue, the most important resources in an afterschool setting are the people (staff and youth), and their talents and values should be considered in the change process.... The wisdom and experience of front-line staff should be respected, and opportunities for them to assist each other should be maximized.”

(Durlak, 2008, p. 12)

Y4Y learning community will not replace existing efforts; rather, it is intended to fill gaps identified in the needs assessment and to take advantage of technology changes that offer potent ways to enhance professional development. The Y4Y site will offer learning modules on specific topics requested by the afterschool community, from techniques for working directly with youth to program management strategies.

Here’s a quick summary of what we learned when we asked afterschool practitioners about the specific features of professional development that would work for them (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2009b):

- Practitioners say emphatically that they need a way to connect with their colleagues to share and reflect on what works and what doesn't.
- Practitioners indicate that they need professional development that they can access at any time. Given the short operating hours of most 21st CCLC programs and the part-time status of many staff members, resources and training need to be easy to access.
- Practitioners want to see examples of best practices in real programs, and they want to learn how to use these practices in a combination of self-paced and cohort-driven professional development.

Those are some of the major needs we heard during our year of gathering data from the field. Together, they add up to the creation of an online professional community that takes full advantage of web 2.0 tools. These tools, and the learning experiences they can support, open the door to new ways for people to learn and work together.

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Critical Elements of a High-Quality Program

A broad body of research suggests that high-quality afterschool programs have an important, positive impact on the lives of children and youth (Beckett, et al., 2009; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007; Hall & Gruber, 2007; Hammond & Reimer, 2006; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008; Palmer, Anderson, & Sabatelli, 2009; Vandell, et al., 2006). In a recent synthesis of the literature on program quality, Palmer, Anderson, and Sabatelli (2009) suggest that well-prepared staff with adequate resources and professional development supports can build afterschool programs with a safe, enriching climate; foster positive relationships with the youth they serve; offer focused, intentional programming; and build strong partnerships with families, school leaders, and the larger community to enrich and enhance their work.

Core Competencies

A grassroots movement to define a core set of competencies for practitioners working in youth settings has gained momentum, and several states and professional organizations are organizing to develop a national set of standards (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009; Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, & Pittman, 2008). Defining a set

of competencies may help everyone involved in afterschool and out-of-school time programs to find common ground. Policymakers and program directors can use core competencies as a guide in hiring and promoting staff. Staff members can use core competencies to assess their current qualifications and to determine areas in which they need to grow. Core competencies can also help to define a clear career path.

Findings from recent research and surveys point to the importance of defining core competencies. A descriptive study of 21st CCLC program practices notes that “research . . . suggests that when students receive guidance from instructors with education and experience relevant to their roles, students are more likely to benefit from program activities” (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2009a, p. 25). This same study notes that retaining instructors has been a challenge. Low pay, lack of benefits, desire for full-time work, and completion of an educational program were cited as the major reasons for leaving an afterschool position.

According to the afterschool practitioners who participated in our needs assessment process, “hiring high-quality staff could be facilitated if directors and coordinators had a system to evaluate potential staff based on specific competencies and qualities” (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2009b, p. 8). Practitioners also noted that professionalizing the field is an important goal, one that could be supported by training that leads to professional credentials. A competency-based credential, or possibly continuing education credit, would be a powerful motivating factor for staff to participate in professional development.

The youth work field is moving toward defining a national set of core competencies that would be based, in part, on competencies already outlined by many organizations and individual states. (For an excellent overview and analysis of these existing competencies, see Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). The professional development experiences and learning modules offered through the Y4Y site will align with and support the content and spirit of existing core competency documents.

The 21st CCLC program recognizes the need for a series of competency-related professional development activities that lead to a credential for afterschool practitioners. The 21st CCLC program plans to convene a group of national stakeholders to help shape discus-

sions and build buy-in at local, state, and national levels. This group will advise on the feasibility of aligning the Y4Y professional development modules with a nationally recognized 21st CCLC credential. This initiative is in an early stage of development; it will require federal approval and state commitment.

Y4Y Development Principles

As the Y4Y team sorted and analyzed the data received from practitioners, we envisioned a web portal that offers a dynamic and welcoming working environment for afterschool practitioners. We followed basic user-centered design principles, drawing on an approach that has roots in research on human-computer interaction. A user-centered design ensures that developers do not separate the technology from the people and the content. We intend to test and validate the content, presentation, and interactivity as development proceeds.

Professional Development Standards

The Standards for Professional Development from the National Staff Development Council (NSDC, 2001) were our starting point for designing the learning environment. For example, NSDC's first context standard would have adults organized into learning communities. Another context standard mentions the importance of resources to support adult learning and collaboration. Our online learning community will support both peer-to-peer learning and social networking.

We consulted the Southern Regional Education Board's Standards for Online Professional Development (n.d.), which expanded the NSDC standards to cover online learning. Here, the context standard about learning communities suggests that participants should have opportunities to work in pairs or teams, with access to follow-up discussions to share information. One of the process standards highlights the importance of meeting different learning styles by integrating online and face-to-face delivery. Y4Y learning experiences will offer self-paced "starter" lessons for all staff; these will include guides for site coordinators or program directors who might lead discussions or activities that expand on the content.

Findings from Research

A recent U. S. Department of Education (2009c) meta-analysis and review of online learning studies provided our team with additional guidance on best practices in online adult learning. Although this meta-analysis was intended to explore the use of online learning with K–12 learners, most of the studies that researchers found suitable for review were done with undergraduate and older learners. The authors noted that relatively few rigorous studies have been conducted with any group of learners, and even fewer have documented the most recent advances in technology. Given these caveats, the findings provided useful information for constructing the Y4Y learning environment and supported its key elements:

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- Any script developed for online instruction should offer learners the chance to interact with each other by discussing critical questions.

- Learning a complex body of knowledge requires a *community of learners*; online technologies can be used to expand and support such communities.
- Video alone does not necessarily enhance learning. For video to produce learning results, it should be interactive—the learner must be able to control it.

The Y4Y infrastructure is holistic in the way that its technology and design support an adult learning community. The user-centered design flexibly accommodates team building as well as individualized, student-centered teaching and learning opportunities.

The Site Takes Shape

The working vision of the Y4Y team is to build a community of caring and competent afterschool professionals who nurture, motivate, and engage children and youth in 21st CCLC programs. In this vision, every child has access to quality afterschool experiences, and every afterschool staff member has access to quality training.

This vision was the genesis for our name. *You for Youth* represents our commitment to empowering after-

school practitioners through the delivery of interactive online training and materials based on research and best practice. Afterschool educators and experts will meet at this site to learn and reflect together.

Our Audience

Although we intend to make 21st CCLC program directors and site coordinators our initial priority, Y4Y will welcome everyone who works with young people in formal or informal learning programs. The site can support activity leaders who want to become afterschool professionals and program directors who want to use data for improvement. It can help site managers, program staff, and volunteers grow their skills. Youth group leaders, summer program directors, and museum educators can learn from and add to the information they find here.

Our Passion

Quality afterschool and out-of-school time programs can offer powerful ways for young people to grow both academically and developmentally. Afterschool programs create opportunities for students to work together, share ideas, and develop positive relationships with adults. Best of all, youth can discover, explore, and act on their dreams and passions.

Y4Y Topics and Learning Modules

The Y4Y site will focus on five topic areas that 21st CCLC practitioners identified as critical professional development needs:

- **Working with youth.** Youth thrive in healthy environments that promote positive relationships. With a commitment to youth development, resilience, and strengths-based practices, this section will present concrete strategies that help program staff demonstrate genuine concern for students, effectively communicate messages of high expectations, and provide meaningful opportunities for youth to contribute and participate.
- **Creating engaging learning environments.** In this section of the website, 21st CCLC staff will explore instructional strategies that enrich student learning and maximize student participation in an afterschool environment. Topics will include project-based learning, service learning, and ways to create academically enriching environments for youth.

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- **Creating partnerships with schools, families, and communities.** Effective partnerships can dramatically enhance a program's impact on students' lives. This section of the site will help visitors learn how to align their programs to the school day, to effectively market their programs to multiple communities, and to promote parent participation.
- **Managing a 21st CCLC program.** Program directors and site coordinators want tools and strategies to streamline their management practices. This section of the site will help managers align program assessment tools with relevant professional development offered on the site. We will offer additional assistance in strategic planning, grant management, and financial management.
- **Leading program staff.** Managers need to build a team of individuals committed to learning and growing professionally and collegially. At this site, afterschool professionals will find effective strategies for recruiting talented individuals and will learn strategies for providing quality professional development despite limited resources and time. This section of the Y4Y site will offer managers opportunities to learn and share best practices related to maintaining and supporting their staffs.

Within each topic area, Y4Y content will feature a series of learning modules complemented by a variety of activities and resources. The modules will introduce concepts and best practices, often demonstrated by video clips from quality afterschool programs in a variety of settings. The learning modules will provide discussion guides and suggestions for program leaders to extend the learning with program staff. The complementary resources may include targeted discussion rooms and webinars, ready-to-use tools—for example tools for assessing individual knowledge and program practices—and relevant findings from research.

Commitment on Both Sides

As this article is published, the Y4Y team is refining the website and planning its online professional development modules. One of the first modules available on the site will focus on project-based learning, a powerful strategy to engage youth in educational enrichment and community service activities. The project team will

need solid community support to implement and test the effectiveness of the professional development available on the Y4Y site.

Y4Y requires continued commitment from users and the afterschool community. Its design must continue to be based on input and buy-in from users, and it must reflect the major results from research on youth development and resilience practices (Benard, 2004). It also needs commitment from leaders in the U.S. Department of Education, because the vision for this learning environment is a long-term one. Since building a technology-based systemic approach to training and professional development requires a commitment of resources, future work will require a long-term commitment.

Community buy-in and use of the Y4Y portal are essential for it to thrive. Throughout the development of Y4Y, stakeholders have been engaged in a number of ways. When implementation occurs, continued leadership support for the project will rely heavily on the use of the system by those it is designed to help. Continuous improvement must reflect the needs of users. Extensive evaluation of its technology and content will make the Y4Y portal fluid, changing with the needs of the users and with education reforms.

Y4Y's return on investment should demonstrate a streamlined, cost-efficient, systemic approach to delivering training and professional development. While the Y4Y site is not intended to replace all of the training opportunities that are offered across the 21st CCLC program at the state and local levels, we want the site to serve as a tremendous resource for its users, freeing up dollars that can be used to expand other afterschool activities across the program.

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