



Positive Change Through a Credential Process

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Studies have demonstrated the significance of afterschool staff development and have attempted to show the impacts of staff training on program quality and youth outcomes (New York State Afterschool Network, 2011). Most research focuses on training for direct service or line staff, but training for directors is also critical. Directors often operate in dual roles, serving as both direct service staff and administrators. Professional development can give them the support and resources they need to operate effectively.

For many directors, the critical issue is time. As the director of a locally funded afterschool program in a homeless shelter, I witnessed and experienced this is-

sue firsthand. Juggling administrative responsibilities, staff meetings, and staff assignments along with effective observation and supervision during program time was challenging. Professional development, though necessary, wasn't always a priority for me, especially if training hours conflicted with my afterschool program schedule. When the program was understaffed, as it often was, I had to either find a sub or fill in myself. Although each decision to put the program first made sense in the short term, in the long term, I missed opportunities to strengthen my skills as a director.

The Denial That Became an Opportunity

In fall 2015, everything shifted. At the beginning of the school year, I applied to the local department of health

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to be approved as the director of my program, as I had done several times before. Every few years I sent in the requisite documentation: background check, references, medical paperwork, and proof of the required 30 hours of training I had taken to become a director. I thought of the process as routine.

This time, my undergraduate college transcript was requested. Though this request was a departure from the norm, I was not concerned. But then, to my surprise and chagrin, I learned that my education did not meet the requirements. After reviewing my transcript, the department of health concluded that none of my undergraduate coursework was in child development, elementary education, physical education, recreation, or a related field, as required for afterschool directors in New York State. My 12 years of work experience aside, I did not meet the education requirements. My application was denied.

To say I was devastated is an understatement. “How could this be?” I questioned. I couldn’t understand why I had been approved so many times before but now things were different. I reviewed the state regulations again. I found that the regulations had not changed, but enforcement was stricter. People who did not hold a degree in a related field had to obtain either the School-Age Care (SAC) credential or the Children’s Program Administrator credential. I chose the SAC credential.

The Program

My supervisors gave approval for me to register for a credential program provided by a state-approved host agency. I wasn’t sure what to expect. It had been a while since I had been in formal school, and I was concerned about balancing the demands of course work with full-time operation of an afterschool program. Ultimately, I dug in for a journey that would take a year to complete.

The first phase involved attending eight full-day sessions totaling 60 hours. The topics included director fundamentals from child safety, health, and nutrition to project-based learning. The sessions were fun, dynamic, and interactive, each one more informative than the one before. I felt I was part of a learning community because the other students were directors like me who faced many of the same struggles. I saw that I was not alone. We shared best practices, and I had time

and space to reflect on my program—both its challenges and the potential solutions. For a director mired in the day-to-day running of the operation, such reflection was a luxury.

During the next phase of the SAC course, classes became virtual; I met with the other participants once a month using an online meeting platform. These classes focused on the credentialing process, including the creation of a resource file and portfolio. The portfolio was quite extensive, including 42 one-page journal entries, a program summary, an autobiography, parent recommendation letters—the list goes on and on.

Once I had completed half of my portfolio, I was assigned an advisor to coach me through the rest of the process. In New York’s credentialing process, the advisor plays a critical role, conducting three site visits to each candidate’s program to document competencies and to provide guidance. My advisor, Olando, was a seasoned veteran who ran his own private afterschool program. He was one part coach, one part drill sergeant, and 100 percent supporter. He understood both the value of the credential and the process of obtaining one. He was sensitive to what I was feeling as I tried to navigate the requirements of the credential coursework while balancing my workload.

The Payoff

As the months progressed, I began to see the value of program observation and staff accountability. Before I began the credential program, I was so concerned about my administrative responsibilities that I wasn’t taking time to observe my program in action. I focused on putting out fires rather than on program improvements. The credential program increased my commitment to improving my program. I worked collaboratively with staff to address safety issues in our arrival process and to provide individual support to students with behavior management challenges. We began to incorporate project-based learning in our lesson planning. I found more time to coach and guide my staff in the moment. In short, I became more present to my program and to the needs of staff and participants.

Accomplishing these improvements was not easy. It took many hours of staff meetings, staff professional development, and sheer will on the part of both line staff

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and management to make needed changes. What also became clear was that my staff and I were going through an evolutionary shift in the way we approached such areas as behavior management and participant engagement. Our observation process empowered us to meet our students where they were, crafting individualized responses to students exhibiting difficulties instead of seeking to suspend them from the program.

Once my portfolio and resource file were complete, I requested a site visit by an approved endorser. In this final approval step, the endorser reviews the candidate's portfolio and resource file and observes how the candidate functions in the program. Over the course of my career, I have participated in many visits by funders and regulators, but this visit was probably the most nerve wracking of all. My endorser, Janet, tried to put me at ease, but I still felt as if I was taking my driving test for the first time. Failure was not an option! As Janet observed the program and reviewed my portfolio, I could not help but feel pride in the changes we had made. All the behind-the-scenes trials and tribulations were finally paying off.

Every site visit concludes with the endorser telling the candidate whether she or he has exhibited the com-

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petencies required to run a high-quality program. When Janet indicated to me that I had indeed shown that competency—that is, that I was approved for the SAC credential—I was so overwhelmed that I cried tears of joy.

Though I was initially intimidated by the process, in retrospect, I feel that the credential process was one of the best things that could have happened to me. I grew as a professional, an administrator, and a youth development professional. The lessons I learned throughout this process will stay with me for a lifetime. If you are wondering whether obtaining a professional credential is for you, my answer is a resounding yes. Though the process can be intense, the benefits far outweigh the sacrifice. In the end, youth professionals are not the only ones to benefit from a professional credential like SAC. Our participants, their families, and our staff will benefit as well.

Reference

New York State Afterschool Network. (2011). *Afterschool Professional Development: Resources, Outcomes, and Considerations*. <http://www.expandinglearning.org/sites/default/files/Afterschool%20Professional%20Development-%20Resources%2C%20Outcomes%2C%20and%20Considerations.pdf>