

The TASC of After-School Training

An innovative system raises the skills of novice and veteran youth workers alike, by covering everything from homework help to budget design

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by [Patrick Boyle](#)

The Bronx, N.Y.—Belinda Passafaro arrives at Public School 79 dressed like she's here to run a business seminar: heels, crisp slacks and a light sweater. She climbs five flights – there's no elevator – and walks into a classroom where the décor and fashion are strictly youth work casual.

Hovering silently over the chairs is an oscillating fan, one of those floor models found in warehouses. A box of Dunkin' Donuts and two containers of orange juice sit on a table, 10 computers clutter several others, and in one corner sits a blue plastic crate of baseball mitts and various types of balls. The elementary school's gym teacher retired this year with no replacement, and the after-school program is trying to fill the gap with more recreation.

Most of the dozen youth workers on hand are decked out in jeans or casual pants, matched with T-shirts or something close. They've come to hear Passafaro talk about a subject very dear to them: "How to work with kids and not be mean."

That's the subtitle of today's "Positive Discipline" seminar, conducted through one of the nation's most extensive training networks for after-school workers. The staffers discuss the problem behaviors they face with kids in the program here: not listening, teasing, lying, not trying, talking back and stealing. Then they try to figure out what to do about it.

Such discussions are a fundamental part of working in programs overseen by The After-School Corp. (TASC), which last year sponsored more than 300 such training events, with a total attendance of 5,000. That training is one key to success for TASC, which has grown from sponsoring 25 programs at its start in 1998 (with a challenge grant from the Open Society Institute) to more than 300 around the state today, serving more than 55,000 children throughout the year. New Jersey launched a replication last year.

TASC has demonstrated not only how to fund and provide youth worker training for scores of agencies, but also how to persuade staff, from novices to veterans, to attend. Every coordinator at the program sites and more than three-quarters of the front-line staff attended training over the course of a recent year, according to an evaluation of TASC released in November. Evaluators believe the training boosts the quality of the programs, and TASC believes it reduces staff turnover.

"You can find training or professional development in whatever interests you," says Germaine Ruiz, the site coordinator at P.S. 79.

TASC and LA's Best are among several large training programs that are contributing significantly to the "huge movement to professionalize the field," says Ellen Gannett, co-director of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), based at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. "With the new accountability climate we're living in, people are expecting a lot of these programs. You have to know what you're doing. This training is essential."

The Need

On the fifth floor of P.S. 79, the yells and laughter of children waft through the windows from the playground below as the youth workers – 11 women and one man – gather at 11 a.m. After choosing the flavor of their sugar boost, they take their places in a circle of well-worn wooden and plastic students' chairs, several of which are cracked.

Although this is a public school, the after-school program is run by Pius XII Youth and Family Services, a Catholic multiservice agency that specializes in child welfare and substance abuse treatment. TASC chooses the community-based organizations (CBOs) and funds the programs, with several caveats: The programs must be based in schools (most are in elementary and middle schools) and run in cooperation with CBOs. Those include YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, settlement houses and various neighborhood groups.

The programs must run from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. every day during the school year (there are also summer programs), be open to all students in the school, and be managed by a full-time coordinator with an on-site office.

Some of those rules were "a culture change" for the CBOs, says Mary Blieberg, vice president of TASC for policy, planning and fund development. Few had run programs large enough to have a full-time on-site coordinator. "CBOs didn't quite know who to hire," she says. And "some felt uncomfortable being in the clutches of the schools."

To shore up the quality of the staff, TASC estimates that it will spend 5 percent of its \$93 million budget for 2004-2005 on professional development. (The budget includes TASC revenue and matching funds from CBOs.) TASC's largest single funder is the city of New York, whose contributions include about \$500,000 for training, according to Bill Casey, TASC's vice president for education.

The reason for the extensive training becomes clear when Passafaro asks how many of the 11 part-time staffers at P.S. 79 have been in youth work for more than five years. Three raise their hands.

Some 29 percent of front-line staffers at TASC programs are college students and 17 percent are in high school, according to the evaluation released in November by Policy Studies Associates. The site coordinators are more experienced: Policy Studies said 86 percent hold at least a bachelor's degree, 40 percent hold at least a master's, and 20 percent have a teaching certificate.

This wide range of experience among the after-school work force created a challenge for TASC's training in the early years. Many of the staffers are teachers, and TASC President Lucy

Friedman says, “We were finding it pretty difficult to get teachers to come to the training.” They felt they’d get little out of sessions in which they sat next to high schoolers.

Providing training to suit after-school staff with various levels of experience is a common struggle in many communities, says Gannett at NIOST. “Being able to get advanced training is very difficult, because they keep recycling some of the entry-level courses,” she says.

That’s one reason TASC has several types of training. Its centralized training, which draws staff from several agencies at once, includes what Casey calls “critical, essential training for all sites.” The sessions focus on management issues (such as employment law and program budget design), although they also cover some child development and direct youth work (like homework help and working with groups of youth).

One of the main providers is the Partnership for After School Education (PASE), which also teams with TASC to run a mentoring and coaching program for site coordinators.

The site-based training, in which consultants such as Passafaro go to the programs, was created in 2001. Friedman says TASC figured, “If we did it at the sites, we could build team and figure out how to handle people of different backgrounds, experiences and skill sets.”

Also, “the site-based training allowed us to be much more customized” for each site, she says. “We didn’t have people raising their hands and saying, ‘This doesn’t apply to me.’ ”

The site-based training, targeted to front-line staff, is full of sessions about program activities, such as arts and literacy, and includes some management and child development lessons.

Having arranged all this, TASC doesn’t just make it easy to attend training; it makes it hard, even costly, not to.

The Lures

Everyone in the classroom at P.S. 79 is being paid to attend. For coordinators like Ruiz, it’s part of their full-time jobs, for which they are paid an average of \$45,000 a year. For the part-time, front-line staffers – Ruiz says she has 22, most of whom are college students – TASC pays stipends of \$45 to \$55 per session.

Coordinators must attend a one-week orientation their first year. They are then expected to attend centralized training on a regular basis, and arrange site-based training at their programs, according to the program’s needs.

For the staff, the training is all but mandatory. The state requires 30 hours of training every two years for regular employees and volunteers in after-school programs, and the TASC sessions fulfill those requirements. Also, TASC sites go through a self-assessment process that measures them on 10 “program quality categories,” such as “youth participation/engagement,” “staffing/professional development,” and “programming/activities.” Every training course is targeted to at least one of those categories.

The positive discipline course, for instance, covers five of them, including “environment/climate” and “relationships.” Casey, the TASC vice president, says if an agency hasn’t been sending its staff to training in areas where the agency is weak, TASC will know.

That’s because the trainings are arranged through TASC, although they are conducted by contractors. Each site gets a \$2,500 credit for training each year, Casey says. For the session at P.S. 79, TASC deducted \$800 from the training credit for Pius XII.

The cost is listed in the book: a 203-page catalog of TASC’s Site-based Professional Development Program. Inside, site coordinator Ruiz can find not only descriptions for scores of courses – ranging from literacy and civic participation to dealing with trauma in children and “essential skills for new youth workers” – but the target audience (such as K-5 practitioners), the number of hours required, space and supply requirements (such as a classroom and a flip chart), and the TASC program quality categories and state training regulations that the session helps to fulfill.

Some funders have also provided money for training and activities on specific subjects. A group called 100 Women in Hedge Funds contributed \$480,000 for a literacy program this year, including training, activities and materials. The Picower Foundation gave \$175,000 for sports and fitness activities, including training and materials.

The effort to create different levels of training appears to have paid off. In one of several evaluations over the past several years, Policy Studies Associates said site coordinators particularly value sessions focused on “the nuts and bolts of project management and operations.” Other staffers “were most interested in learning how to design activities to engage, involve and teach after-school students.”

“We get a lot of different ideas from the training,” says Glenn Diaz, a staffer on hand for the session with Passafaro.

Her colleague, Ingrid Cabrera, says a session on science activities was especially useful, because it gave her hands-on experience in trying things she can do with kids. “When you go to these trainings, they make it so much fun, you know the kids will enjoy it,” she says.

Also fun was a recent workshop on using theater games with kids. In one game, kids act out a conflict in gibberish, and the onlookers try to guess what they’re arguing about. Gibberish is not on the agenda with Passafaro.

Impact on Youth and Staff

For the three-hour positive discipline session, the workers repeatedly split into small groups for exercises in introspection and empathy. They talk about themselves and about what might be going on in the lives of the kids they work with.

When Passafaro asks what qualities they want to nurture in young people, the most popular answers are “respectful,” “honest,” “caring” and “self-esteem.”

When she asks them to discuss, “in a few minutes, what are the misbehaviors you’re experiencing in your group?” the lone man, Richard, draws laughs when he responds, “You said in a few minutes?”

Discussing the lying and disrespect they sometimes encounter leads the workers to what Passafaro wants them to focus on: “What’s happening in their world that’s creating these misbehaviors?”

A former teacher and program director at PASE, Passafaro started her own consulting business several years ago. At P.S. 79, she is working for one of the TASC training providers, Development Without Limits. Its director, Eric Gurna finds most of his session facilitators through his contacts and word of mouth. He and Passafaro met a few years ago when PASE did some work with LA’s Best, where he was director of staff development.

Gurna and Passafaro are benefiting from the growth in after-school programs and training in recent years, especially in New York City. TASC is Gurna’s cornerstone client. Passafaro says she has eight clients. She notes that 10 years ago, there would not have been enough business for her to break out on her own.

Other training consultants for TASC include the American Red Cross (which does CPR and First Aid training), the Children’s Aid Society, Girls Inc., WAVE (the dropout prevention and job skills program), the Brooklyn Arts Council and the Wildlife Conservation Society at the Bronx Zoo.

Like a lot of youth work training, Positive Discipline provides not so much a new education as a refresher in fundamental child development, and a chance to talk about how to apply concepts that you’ve pushed to the back of your mind.

Passafaro leads the workers through different forms of misbehavior, such as seeking attention by yelling or seeking revenge through verbal abuse. She then discusses the “coded messages” communicated through such behavior, like “notice me” or “I feel like no one likes me.” The workers discuss proper responses, such as acknowledging hurt feelings and offering choices, and act out scenarios.

Also like a lot of youth worker training, it’s difficult to pinpoint the impact of these sessions. One Policy Studies report said more than half the staffers who had gone through training reported having implemented strategies they’d learned.

The evaluations have shown various levels of academic impacts on youth, differing according to the subject, the ages of the youth and their frequency of program attendance. But Casey bluntly says, “Could I draw a line from professional development to kids’ academic achievement? No.”

He does see direct value to the staff, through the range of training designed to suit workers of different experience levels. He says the annual staff retention rate at TASC programs is 70 percent. “We think having some customized, targeted training helps with that staff retention rate,” he says.

“One of the reasons people turn over in the field as much as they do is that they’re not being trained,” says Gannett at NIOST. “These systems like TASC that wrap themselves around these young people with all kinds of quality supports are exactly what people need in order to stay in the work and be good at the work.”

Resources

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