

A Network Wide Approach to Professional Development: Standardizing Professional Development in the OST System

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As the intermediary for the Out-of-School Time System (the OST System) funded by the City of Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS), Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) provides professional development to staff members from the 200 OST programs that are part of the OST System. PHMC strives to provide professional development (PD) opportunities that are responsive, rigorous, and based on the latest evidence about effective practices. By housing professional development in the same organization that also observes and monitors performance and quality, the OST System is able to capitalize on PHMC's institutional knowledge. Additionally, PHMC is able to leverage its relationships, and constant communication with providers to ensure that the PD opportunities offered respond to the needs of providers.

This article details PHMC's approach to professional development for the OST System. Many types of PD

opportunities are offered on a variety of topics, and designed to meet the needs of varying learning styles. PD topics are chosen based on observed needs in the OST system, requests from OST providers, and emerging trends in the field of Out-of-School Time. Although every PHMC facilitator brings a unique style and set of experiences to the delivery of professional development, there are a number of high standards for facilitation that are held in common across all facilitators.

Types of Professional Development at PHMC

Professional development opportunities offered to the OST System vary in format and methodology, as well as content. Recognizing that participants may have different learning styles, a number of different methodological approaches are incorporated into each PD session. Additionally, the PD format may vary from topic to topic, based on the content being delivered.

Workshop

PHMC offers a number of PD opportunities that follow the classic workshop model. These sessions are in-person, and can last between 2-6 hours, although the 3 hour workshop is the most commonly used format. Workshops are as uniform as possible, so they can be easily replicated by different facilitators. Once workshop content is developed it can be delivered multiple times with only

minor edits, and the workshop is reasonably consistent for the participant regardless of who is in attendance and who is facilitating. However, no workshop is delivered from a script, and facilitators retain a certain amount of flexibility when delivering the content (see the Instructional Approach section below).

Roundtable

A Roundtable is similar to a Workshop in some ways. Like workshops, roundtables are one-time, in-person PD sessions. Typically, roundtables are focused on an area of specific interest to the participants. The roundtable format also emphasizes the sharing of best practices among attendees, and robust group discussions. Although the facilitator may prepare some content and activities, a roundtable is more open-ended, and designed to respond to particular needs, and answer specific questions, of participating OST providers. Because of its flexibility, the Roundtable format is less likely to be used for a required or foundational PD session (like a review of the Mandated Reporter law).

Peer Learning Community

Peer Learning Communities offer a self-selected group of providers the opportunity to focus on a specific topic, with specific learning objectives pursued over multiple gatherings. Unlike one-time PD sessions, such as Workshops or Roundtables, a Peer Learning Community

allows providers to reflect on content between sessions, and to use this reflection to inform further discussions. Sessions include some prepared content delivered by PHMC facilitators, but Peer Learning Communities primarily emphasize group discussion and reflection over the course of several gatherings. Typically, a Peer Learning Community is comprised of a small group of providers (fewer than 10) and meets bi-weekly or monthly for a few months (no more than six months).

Webinar

Webinars are live, online events hosted via platforms like Any Meeting or Blackboard Elluminate, that allow the presenters to be heard (and sometimes seen) by participants. This format is ideal for short sessions, one hour or less, where content is presented with minimal interaction among participants. The format is particularly appealing because participants can log-in remotely. Two facilitators are needed for an effective webinar, one to deliver content, and one to answer questions typed in the "chat box" and to help participants troubleshoot technical difficulties.

Online Training

Some PD sessions may be pre-recorded, and offered at a participant's convenience on a Learning Management System, such as LearnUpon. These sessions tend to be shorter, often lasting less than 30 minutes. Because this

format offers little opportunity for interaction, Online Trainings are primarily used to deliver straightforward content (rather than information that would prompt discussion or require critical thinking or analysis).

However, scenarios, on-screen matching activities, and other techniques can be used to keep participants engaged, and a final quiz or assessment should be included to check for understanding.

Professional Development Topic Selection

PHMC Program and Compliance Specialists have direct contact with OST providers on a daily basis. Through this regular contact, PD needs emerge. PHMC strives to be responsive to these needs. DHS hosts a PD Workgroup made up of key partners, including PHMC, who provide PD oversight to the OST System. PHMC presents identified PD needs to this Workgroup and the group determines which areas of PD should be pursued based on DHS priorities and available resources. Additionally, when a professional development need is outside the scope or expertise of PHMC, the need may be met by another member of the Workgroup, or an external trainer may be brought in to facilitate.

PHMC identifies professional development needs primarily through formal and informal observations of OST programs, and during regular, ongoing conversations with site staff. In particular, these needs are identified during

the goal-setting phase of the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process. Typically a PD session is developed only if the need appears to be widespread. Needs that are isolated to a particular OST program are typically addressed through other supports such as resource sharing or technical assistance.

Elements of Effective Workshops

Currently, the majority of Professional Development sessions offered by PHMC use the Workshop format. Because workshops represent the bulk of PHMC's PD offerings, and because the elements of an effective workshop often translate to other PD formats, PHMC has taken care to enumerate the key components of an effective workshop, and to ensure they are present throughout our professional development.

Each workshop should include a combination of the following elements:

- Assessment of prior knowledge. This will usually come in the form of a conversation at the beginning of the workshop, an "ice breaker" activity that requires participants to use prior knowledge, or through specific questions asked of participants evaluating their understanding of foundational material. This rarely comes in the form of a written evaluation of knowledge or understanding.
- Foundational content. Some workshops include

specific content that a participant is expected to learn, for example, the definition of a new term, or a particular classroom management approach or technique.

- Application of content. Some workshops emphasize the application of content knowledge. If participants in a Project-Based Learning workshop have learned, or perhaps already knew, the definition of a Driving Question, they would then craft sample questions, and consider what makes these questions effective. In general, activities that encourage application are more likely to be engaging and hands-on than facilitator-directed lecture, and promote lasting learning.
- Participant peer learning. Another way to avoid a facilitator-focused approach to workshop delivery is to encourage small or large group discussions that empower participants to share ideas with one another. This promotes participant engagement, and also deepens the pool of ideas from which a participant can draw.
- Opportunities for reflection. Many of the listed elements of an effective workshop will encourage reflection, for example, applying content or peer learning opportunities. Reflection is important, because as participants reflect back on workshop content, they are more likely to retain this information, and more able to apply it going forward.
- Tests of participant understanding. Many of the listed

elements of an effective workshop also offer facilitators the opportunity to test participants' understanding. This should not be a written evaluation at the end of the workshop. This should be an ongoing process of assessing participants' understanding and knowledge based on their discussions with one another, and their participation in activities.

When designing a new workshop, the facilitator should consider what balance of the above elements is needed for a given training. An introductory workshop about the Project-Based Learning method, for example, will require significant foundational content. Participants will be introduced to the method, relevant terms will be defined, and sample activities may be provided.

On the other hand, a workshop focused on Effective Project Planning and geared to participants who have already taken the introductory course, will place less emphasis on foundational content and more on application.

Regardless of the specific balance of these various elements, all workshops should incorporate all of the elements above. Without some foundational (or theoretical) understanding of the topic area, participants may only be able to parrot what was presented by the facilitator without truly understanding the elements that make a strategy or activity successful. Likewise, when foundational content is presented without opportunities

for application or reflection, it is less likely to be retained.

Instructional Approach

PHMC has developed a methodology for delivering large-group professional development that is shared by all PHMC facilitators. Informed by many years of experience and best practices in the professional development literature, PHMC's instructional approach emphasizes discussion and participation, is driven by inquiry, and utilizes activities and peer feedback.

PHMC facilitators utilize a common, student-centered instructional methodology. Facilitators are expected to engage PD participants through a combination of discussion, small-and-large group activities, and rigorous individual work supported by peer and instructor feedback. In a student-focused, inquiry driven classroom, lecture is generally minimized in favor of more engaging techniques that promote deeper thinking, and lasting learning. While all PHMC facilitators utilize a common instructional approach, this approach is fundamentally flexible, and permits each facilitator to bring a unique style and set of personal experiences to the classroom.

PHMC has developed a set of written materials to support each workshop, including PowerPoint and "Prezi" slides. These slides incorporate the fixed content that is addressed in a given workshop, but do not act as a script for that workshop. For example, in an introductory

workshop about Project-Based Learning, a slide might include a sample Driving Question, followed by a revised, preferred version of that Driving Question. No PHMC facilitator would read the first question, then the second question, explain to the participants why the second is preferred, and move on. However, one facilitator might break the participants into groups to discuss the merits of the second question, while another facilitator might stage a debate between two participants, each arguing for a different question, and a third facilitator might ask a student to write his or her own revised version of the question. Therefore, while all facilitators will address the same content, and all facilitators will employ student-centered instruction, each facilitator may ultimately implement different activities and conduct different discussions in pursuit of this common goal.

Additionally, all PHMC facilitators agree that assessing participant knowledge and understanding is an essential part of effective workshop facilitation. This assessment is an ongoing part of the question-and-answer process that is at the heart of an inquiry and discussion-driven method of instruction. Any time participants are called on to answer questions or provide their feedback, they provide the facilitator with the opportunity to evaluate their understanding of the material. In addition, participants are called on to apply their knowledge by creating sample project plans and sample activities, and to further demonstrate their understanding of the concepts by

offering feedback to their peers. This also allows facilitators to further assess a student's understanding.

Conclusion

Ultimately, PHMC provides professional development to the OST System that remains responsive and needs-focused. By capitalizing on its close relationships with OST providers, PHMC can offer workshops that meet the needs of the OST System. And by continuing to train facilitators in professional development best practices, PHMC can simultaneously ensure a comprehensive array of high quality professional development opportunities are offered to the OST System.