

A Network Wide Approach to Professional Development: Mitigating the Impact of Line Staff Turnover through Professional Development

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High front line staff turnover in OST programs, often within a year of hire, can be disruptive to programming for many reasons. The estimated cost of turnover is roughly between 33% and 50% of a youth worker's yearly salary when taking into account basic training and recruitment costs (Wilson, 2009). Additionally, turnover disrupts relationships between youth and staff. These relationships are key elements of an effective OST program that leads to improved outcomes for youth, but are difficult to build when youth see their mentors routinely come and go.

Some site directors are hesitant to invest time into PD for front-line staff because of turnover. However, intentional PD practices can in fact mitigate line staff turnover as well as its impact. The more that programs can both reduce instances of turnover through PD opportunities as well as minimize the impact of turnover on the program, the more

likely it is that youth experience continuity in programming and less disruption.

Experts have claimed that turnover is high, partly due to lack of PD opportunities beyond the basics (Wiseman, 2011). Thus, supporting PD endeavors that push youth workers along their own individual competency progression, whether it be trainings, peer networking events, regular supervision or other methods, is crucial to keeping them in the field.

Stress and burnout also plays a role in staff turnover, as youth workers may feel unprepared to meet the challenges that arise during the programming day, or that they lack the support to meet those challenges. Youth worker focus groups have reported that strong peer networks can help alleviate stress (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006, p.7). The Building Exemplary Systems for Training youth workers (BEST) evaluation found that local intermediaries play an important role in creating peer networking spaces and "reduc[ing] the isolation that is common in youth work" (Center for School and Community Services Academy for Educational Development, 2002, p.13). Allowing youth workers to problem solve collaboratively and share best practices can allow a space and time for them to feel that their knowledge is valuable.

An example of this type of peer networking space can be found in Philadelphia. Public Health Management

Corporation (PHMC) contracted by the City of Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) to provide fiscal and program capacity building support to more than 200 after school and summer programs implemented roundtables as one strategy to address staff turnover. The roundtables are peer networking spaces that provide facilitated problem solving and resource sharing experiences for OST Site Directors. Participants have reported high ratings of satisfaction with this format of professional development. .

Despite access to a wide range of quality professional development strategies and activities, turnover may still be a reality of the field unless there are efforts to effectively address the main reason youth workers leave, which is lack of hours and low pay (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006).

One approach to responding to turnover proactively is by using a differential staffing model. Bob Granger, The president of the William T. Grant Foundation, describes how site directors can employ differential staffing: Hire line staff who have personal characteristics and social skills that will help them to be viewed as significant by the youth. Then help line staff 'deliver' by hiring and retaining a small cadre of staff who can model quality programming and effectively coach line staff on-site. (Little, 2004, p. 18)

In order for this type of differential staffing to work,

agencies need to hire the right kind of people. Youth workers who, themselves, attended OST programs and come from backgrounds similar to the youth they serve are uniquely situated to forge strong relationships with students. The evidence suggests that being intentional in the recruitment phase of knowing the type of candidates you are looking for can help to employ a differential staffing method. If a program retains these youth worker leaders, newer line staff may be able to deliver quality quicker, thus mitigating the impact of turnover.

Furthermore, Yohalem, Pittman and Edwards (2010) emphasize the importance of being aware of various recruitment methods that will yield the best possible candidates for a particular program.

Similarly, The Philadelphia Center for Art and Technology (PCAT) recognizes that turnover is high in this field and employs a consistent influx of college students as Program Assistants from a variety of majors who act as "rotating experts" in their content areas. This year alone, youth at PCAT have benefitted from having a video production and business Program Assistant. Additionally, the Group Supervisor and Assistant Group Supervisor, who are more permanent staff, gain specialized content knowledge from the Program Assistants.

Ultimately, some amount of line staff turnover in the OST field may be inevitable. But by supporting continued staff development, programs can equip staff to face the challenges of their work day, and further their professional

growth. And by considering new staffing models, OST providers can mitigate the impact of staff turnover while furthering innovation in the field of afterschool programming.

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