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HOW PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS CAN SUPPORT OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME STAFF

Part 4 in a Series on Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in Out-of-School Time Programs: The Role of Organizational Context and External Influences

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BACKGROUND

Implementing high-quality out-of-school time programs requires well-trained and well-prepared frontline staff who are supported by informed, competent, and committed program managers and administrators. Research on out-of-school time programs has found that effective program managers—referred to as *facilitative administrators*—promote high-quality implementation in multiple ways: by providing organizational leadership; selecting program staff; ensuring that staff receive training and supervision; and identifying and addressing implementation problems. These activities are critical to achieving intended program outcomes.^{1,2}

To expand what is known about facilitative administration, Child Trends recently conducted a literature review of research on this topic. Additionally, Child Trends collected data on facilitative administration as part of a study on the role of frontline staff in the effective implementation of out-of-school time programs.¹ This brief presents findings from the study and links these findings to effective strategies for facilitative administration in out-of-school time programs.

WHAT IS FACILITATIVE ADMINISTRATION?

In focusing on the fourth driver, *facilitative administration*, this brief describes strategies for cultivating effective facilitative administrative supports in out-of-school time programs.

Facilitative administration refers to the proactive and ongoing measures taken by program managers to minimize implementation barriers and create an environment conducive to high-quality program implementation. For example, managers may include technical assistance or staff mentoring within the program structure to anticipate and provide troubleshooting for arising program challenges.

¹ For this study, Child Trends conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine program managers of evidence-based out-of-school time programs (i.e., programs which have been experimentally evaluated and demonstrated positive outcomes). The purpose of the interviews was to gather information that could shed more light on how program managers can support frontline staff and facilitate the successful implementation of evidence-based, promising, and innovative program models in the out-of-school time field.

Facilitative administration has been identified as one of six core implementation components—*or implementation drivers*—necessary for supporting practitioners’ effective implementation of evidence-based and innovative services. The other drivers include:³

- Staff selection and recruitment
- Pre-service and in-service training
- Coaching, mentoring and supervision
- Facilitative administration
- System-level partnerships
- Decision-support data systems

WHY IS FACILITATIVE ADMINISTRATION IMPORTANT FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

Program managers promote high-quality implementation fidelity, by hiring staff members who can develop positive relationships with program participants, offering stimulating activities, providing professional development, and setting ambitious, yet attainable goals.^{4, 5, 6, 7} Research conducted on facilitative administration in the human services and education fields has found that facilitative administration is related to:

- Goal-setting quality⁸
- Staff motivation and commitment^{9, 10, 11}
- Retention of staff
- Retention of program participants¹²
- Establishment of a positive program environment^{13, 14, 15}
- Staff attitudes and job satisfaction^{16, 17}
- Staff accountability¹⁸
- Achievement of program goals¹⁹
- Program intervention success²⁰

Depending on the program, program managers might be called program directors, administrators, trainers, or coordinators.²¹ Regardless of their particular job titles, *facilitative administrators* manage the program process by:

- Recruiting and selecting appropriate staff members²²
- Allocating resources for ongoing staff training²³
- Identifying challenges to program implementation and making necessary changes in staffing, service delivery, training, or management²⁴
- Creating a program environment that promotes implementation fidelity²⁵

HOW DO FACILITATIVE ADMINISTRATORS SUPPORT STAFF AND PROMOTE HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION?

Child Trends’ research review and study found four components to be critical for program managers in promoting implementation of out-of-school time programs:

- Leadership
- Staff support
- Data-driven decision-making
- Organizational culture and climate

Each of these components is described in more detail below.

#1: Leadership. Program managers are effective leaders in program implementation. They display this leadership by selecting the program infrastructure (which might include selecting curriculum), setting program goals, and gaining support from key stakeholders.

Facilitative administrators are program managers who lead program implementation by ensuring that the program curriculum is implemented with fidelity, relevant program goals are set, and support from program stakeholders (such as program staff, participants, their families, and others invested in program outcomes) is provided.

In a Child Trends study on program implementation, directors of successful out-of-school time programs reported leading out-of-school time programs by:²⁶

- **Hiring qualified staff.** Program managers reported hiring staff from related fields (such as education or youth development) because such individuals possess experience and training related to children, youth, and program-related topics. However, managers cautioned against relying on these qualifications alone to ensure the hiring of competent staff members.²⁷ Instead, among the most critical qualities they felt potential staff members needed was “with-it-ness”—the ability to effectively connect with the program participants, their families, and the greater community.²⁸
- **Providing staff training.** Program managers also reported providing staff with on-the-job training and ongoing professional development opportunities to equip them with the research and program knowledge necessary to oversee program activities effectively. Programs that placed a high priority on providing training and professional development to all of its full-time staff members noted the added benefit of both retaining and developing future program managers, since many of their managers began as frontline staff. Some program managers found that offering individualized staff development programs helped to ensure that staff received training tailored to their needs. For example, one program manager reported offering professional development allowances, so that staff members could select trainings that were best aligned with their own needs and interests.
- **Setting goals.** Program managers observed that orienting new staff members to the program’s goals and mission can help them understand their role in the organization and can ensure that staff members convey common program goals to funders and other stakeholders. Successful program goals are clear, relevant, participant-centered, and establish high staff and program standards.²⁹ Successful program managers reported aligning activities with goals and using progress toward goals as a gauge for areas needing improvement.³⁰ One program manager mentioned surveying program youth to determine the amount of violence they were exposed to in their community. The survey findings led the program to establish goals and activities centered on conflict resolution and anger management, in an effort to prevent future community violence.³¹
- **Gaining support from key stakeholders.** Program managers found that effective managers partner with program staff, participants, and other key stakeholders (for example, community partners, funders, policymakers) to set program goals collaboratively.^{32, 33} Program managers reported the importance of gaining the support of policymakers and leaders of private organizations to serve as “public or private champions”—advocates for their program interests in policymaking and the private sector.³⁴ Managers noted that such partnerships were among the most important to promoting positive outcomes for children and their communities.³⁵ Program managers also noted that successful program outcomes, participant retention, and participants’ program investment are more likely when all stakeholders “buy into” both the necessity and feasibility of program implementation.^{36, 37}

#2: Support Program Staff. Program managers ensure effective program implementation by supporting staff members. Program managers listen attentively and respond to staff concerns, instill a sense of shared goals among staff and participants, use staff members effectively, and validate staff contributions.^{38, 39, 40}

Facilitative administrators listen and respond to staff concerns, validate staff efforts, and provide high quality training and ongoing technical assistance (such as coaching and consultation).

In the Child Trends program implementation study, effective program administrators ensure that staff receives the following resources:

- **High-quality and ongoing training.** Effective managers ensure that staff have access to opportunities to practice training content and receive related feedback. Such training gives staff members the opportunity to practice what they learn in training, so that they are better able to incorporate newly learned skills into their everyday program tasks.⁴¹ Program staff members report that, in addition to providing training on evidence-based strategies for interacting with youth, it is helpful for administrators to conduct regular staff observations and provide coaching in the field.⁴² For example, one program had staff members whose job responsibilities included assessing the training needs of staff, helping devise appropriate training opportunities, and providing staff coaching.⁴³
- **Ongoing technical assistance.** Managers can support staff members by providing them access to technical assistance when challenges arise. This help can be provided through a variety of means, including outside consultants, peers and mentors, written documentation, and additional training. Technical assistance can help programs obtain the knowledge necessary to institute program changes, build community partnerships, and strategize on the best methods for implementing new program practices.⁴⁴
- **Information on program changes.** Program managers put in place procedures to ensure that staff members are informed of program changes in the following ways:
 - Providing e-mail or telephone updates on new program policies (written and verbal methods should be provided);
 - Eliciting feedback from frontline staff on program implementation procedures during staff meetings and retreats;
 - Conducting meetings or conference calls with all program implementers to discuss program successes and problems; and
 - Providing technical assistance through site visits, written materials, and/or coaching.

While program managers acknowledge the prevalence of technology, several administrators emphasize that there is no substitution for face-to-face communication with staff members. Such “face time,” including periodic one-on-one meetings between program managers and staff members, can ensure that staff are invested in program activities.

#3: Decision-Support Data Systems. Program managers develop and implement data systems that store program data critical for decision making. They use data from these systems to identify participant needs, evaluate the achievement of goals, track the effects of professional development, and keep stakeholders informed of program success.⁴⁵

Data-driven decision-making systems collect program evaluation data, analyze the collected data, and use the analysis to help program managers make decisions related to program improvement. The program evaluation data collected may include data related to: quality improvement, program fidelity, participant outcomes, and staff performance assessments.

Data-driven decision-making systems can help administrators:

- **Devise goals collaboratively.** Using program data to make decisions can enhance program buy-in by including practitioners and other stakeholders in setting goals. Such collaboration can pool the diverse and relevant perspectives of program stakeholders (including participants’ families, community partners, and program staff) and allow stakeholders to select the most appropriate performance measures for assessing program implementation from among their various experiences.^{46, 47}
- **Develop program improvement strategies.** Information on program implementation, participants, and staff should be collected to assess the achievement of outcomes and determine

the needs of staff for additional training or technical assistance.⁴⁸ To gather data and make key decisions, out-of-school time programs use a variety of collection methods, including surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, program observations, assessments, and data reviews.⁴⁹ One program manager reported that her program assessed new strategies by trying them out in small pilot programs and carefully monitoring which approaches were most successful.

Program managers should consider costs of data systems and analysis. Data collection materials may require additional funds, staff training (including training program managers in program evaluation), or time.⁵⁰ There are additional costs to consider if programs choose to use a management information system (MIS), which stores multiple forms of data, or use external evaluators to gather and interpret program data.^{51,52}

#4: Positive Organizational Culture and Climate. Program managers create a positive organizational culture and climate by ensuring program participants feel safe, that they are supported, and that both program participants and staff members understand what is expected of them.⁵³

Organizational culture refers to an organization's norms, values, and expectations. Organizational climate pertains to the conditions of the program environment that affect staff member's psychological health and socio-emotional response to their work environment.

Facilitative administrators promote a positive work environment by:

- **Hiring staff members who have positive relationships with program participants.** It is critical to hire (and retain) staff who are able to build positive relationships with participants.^{54, 55} Such practitioners are also enthusiastic, respectful of colleagues, and enjoy staff camaraderie.⁵⁶ Some program administrators have found it beneficial to recruit staff members from the community their program serves, because they already value, understand, and can communicate effectively with participants, their parents, and community leaders.⁵⁷ Additionally, program administrators found that hiring directors with prior or related program experience were able to establish an immediate rapport with frontline staff members and promote a positive organizational culture.⁵⁸
- **Encouraging program administrators to support staff members.** Programs with a positive organizational culture and climate have administrators who are responsive to staff concerns and suggestions and committed to program improvement.⁵⁹ Program managers interviewed also shared ideas on building positive interactions between program managers and frontline staff by:
 - Performing the roles of frontline staff members when necessary to alleviate staff stress and demonstrate a commitment to the program's collaborative work environment; and
 - Cultivating a relationship-driven environment by promoting staff camaraderie through retreats, arranging for new hires to shadow veteran staff members, and having an "open-door" policy that welcomes the sharing of ideas or concerns.
- **Administering high quality programming.** High-performing out-of-school time programs offer:
 - An assortment of enriching activities and experiences;
 - Intentional opportunities for children and youth to build relationships with staff and other participants; and
 - Effective use of staff (such as identifying strong managers, purposefully matching staff to tasks, and providing staff support).⁶⁰
- **Providing for staff members' employment needs.** Managers of programs with a positive culture and climate promote the physical and psychological well-being of their staff members by ensuring that staff members' employment benefits are provided.⁶¹ Program managers noted that programs can have the most well-intentioned staff members, but if the program fails to take care of details, such as staff members' payroll taxes or filing their insurance in a timely manner, then they can undermine

staff morale and interfere with staff members' ability to effectively meet their program responsibilities.⁶²

CONCLUSION

Despite the need for additional research, there is emerging consensus in the field that supportive program managers—or *facilitative administrators*—are a necessary component of effective out-of-school time programs. Facilitative administrators ensure that the program procedures, environment, and staff are conducive for promoting positive program outcomes. The limited empirical research in the out-of-school time field suggests that the critical elements of effective program administration are leadership, staff support, the institution of a decision-support data system, and the establishment of a positive program environment. The following recommendations summarize these findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACILITATIVE ADMINISTRATORS IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

#1: Lead program implementation by:

- Being knowledgeable about program curriculum;
- Setting goals; and
- Gaining support from key stakeholders for program implementation.

#2: Support program staff by:

- Offering high-quality and ongoing training;
- Providing ready access to technical assistance; and
- Sharing information on program changes.

#3: Use data as tools for:

- Guiding program decisions;
- Devising goals collaboratively; and
- Developing program improvement strategies.

#4: Establish a positive organizational culture and climate by:

- Hiring staff members who have positive relationships with program participants;
- Encouraging program administrators to support staff members; and
- Administering high quality programming.

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