

OSTRC Focus Group Summary

Overview

The Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC) conducted a series of five Focus Groups in December 2004 and January 2005. The purpose of the Focus Groups was to determine what participants like and don't like in professional development and what works/does not work. Two of the Focus Groups were offered to out-of-school time (OST) administrative staff, and three were offered to OST direct-service staff. A total of fifty staff participated in this series of Focus Groups, each of which was three hours long.

Focus Group Questions

During the Focus Groups, professional development was defined as "Workshops, conferences, technical assistance, resource centers, peer mentoring, electronic listservs, and other supports designed to promote improvement, enrichment, and achievement in OST staff, programs and students." Participants were asked to consider their professional "needs," experiences, and preferences. Their responses to each question are summarized below:

1. What do you need to do your job better?

- More staff members in programs (including volunteers or tutors)
- Increased communication with parents
- Increased communication between direct-service staff and administrators
- More funding
- More opportunities to network with other OST staff
- Participation in certification programs (cited mainly by direct-service staff)
- More opportunities to observe other programs (cited mainly by administrators)

2. What is your preferred method of meeting these needs?

- Get involved in a formal networking group of peers (i.e. separate groups for OST direct-service staff and administrators)
- Hold onsite trainings during staff meetings so all can attend
- Participate in team-building activities with other program staff
- Participate in formal education
- Observe other programs
- Get involved in peer mentoring

3. What are some characteristics of "good workshops"?*

- Incorporates physical / hands-on activities
- Provides new activity ideas
- Models new activities
- Provides relevant material and covers relevant content
- Presenter offers some form of follow-up assistance to help participants apply what they learned

*** The above characteristics were all associated with an increased tendency to apply what is learned in a workshop, to share this new knowledge with others, and to benefit program youth.**

4. What are some characteristics of “bad workshops”?

- Does not incorporate interactive activities
- Is not informative
- Is mandatory
- Presenter uses poor presentation skills:
 - o Does not portray expertise in the topic
 - o Does not gain the respect of the audience
 - o Is not well prepared or organized
 - o Does not maintain a safe environment
 - o Does not provide time to ask questions
 - o Does not provide enough materials for all participants
 - o Allows audience members to exhibit negative behaviors (including makes negative comments, one audience member dominates workshop, others are sleeping, etc.)

5. What are some reasons you do not apply what you learn in workshops?

- Lack of time
- Lack of support from other staff and/or supervisor(s)
- Not accountable to anyone to apply what was learned
- Presenter does not provide follow-up assistance
- Material sits in “To Do” box or on office shelf

6. What makes a workshop beneficial?

Workshops can promote changes in knowledge, changes in skill, and/or changes in attitude toward or appreciation of a topic. Focus Group participants were asked which of these workshop outcomes have most positively affected the youth in their programs. Participants most often cited changes in their attitude, and then changes in their level of skill using new information.

7. What recommendations do you have for policymakers and/or funders?

- Increase communication between OST staff and policymakers and/or funders
- Have more Focus Groups
- Have more networking opportunities
- Have advocates represent OST program needs and situations to policymakers and/or funders
- Balance the need for continuous learning with an appropriate amount of professional development
- Increase youth participation: One participant responded, “Don’t forget the kids – they always have good ideas too; a program should be run by the kids and for the kids.”

Next Steps

The OSTRC Focus Groups are part of a larger study which evaluates professional development and ultimately recommends changes on national as well as local levels. These preliminary findings have been incorporated into several survey instruments as well as specific conference and workshop activities. For additional information, please contact Jennifer Buher-Kane, OSTRC Research Coordinator, at (215) 898-2505 or jbuher@ssw.upenn.edu.



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The Out-of-School Time Resource Center thanks all Focus Group participants for their input and enthusiasm. Their involvement represents a significant contribution to enhanced OST professional development and positive youth outcomes.