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What are some ways that principals and afterschool program directors can strive to build positive relationships? What are the advantages of maintaining positive relationships?

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Building Positive Relationships Between Principals and Afterschool Program Directors and Staff

The beginning of the school year is a time for building new relationships and strengthening pre-existing ones as the promise of a fresh, new year unfolds. Directors often focus on building or creating improved relationships with staff, parents and families, and the children who participate in the afterschool program.

If the program is located within a school building, the director may also want to make it a priority to focus attention on building or improving his or her relationship with the school principal. A strong relationship between the afterschool program and the principal can assist both the principal and the program in innumerable ways such as boosting academic achievement, allowing a program to have access to additional school facilities or equipment, and increasing involvement of parents and families in the school.

A high quality afterschool program brings many benefits to a principal and school according to Dr. Marc Robinson, principal of Fairview Elementary School in Anchorage, Alaska. Fairview Elementary is home to a 21st Century Community Learning Center afterschool program that serves over 110 children and has a waiting list. In addition to his current role as principal, Robinson served as the director of an afterschool program many years ago.

Open and ongoing communication is stressed over and over again by both principals and directors as the main element to achieving a successful relationship. Robinson talks with the director of the Fairview Elementary afterschool program each school day. He has a more formal meeting with both the director and the program staff in the fall, and he meets with staff again at the beginning of the second semester. He suggests that, if a director is struggling to build rapport with the principal, he or she should set an appointment to discuss critical issues. Directors may need to initiate communication and schedule meetings either weekly or monthly. "A scheduled meeting shows that it is important to both the director and the principal," says Robinson.

According to Robinson, a partnership with a quality afterschool program can shine a positive light on both the principal and the school by doing things such as enhancing academic achievement, increasing communication between the school and parents, and increasing parental involvement.

Karen Hickman is the principal of Matthys Elementary of Pasadena, Texas where the Champions Afterschool Program operates under the direction of Dianne Seale. Champions Afterschool Program is a 21st Century Community Learning Center program that operates a clubs program tied to the Texas curriculum.

Seale meets formally with principal Hickman four to five times each year. Topics covered typically include objectives and goals for the program. The principal has informal conversations with Seale regularly

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and frequently visits the clubs and greets the staff. "The key to a successful relationship is open-door communication. Any little concern that I bring to Dianne's attention, she will take care of it. There is no defense mechanism. Whether my concern is perceived or real, Dianne will be sure that the situation is made better," says Hickman.

Both the principal and the director agree that their objective is a safe, high-quality program that offers learning enrichment, fun, and opportunities that children might not otherwise be able to experience outside of the program. Seale recommends that directors should stay on top of things and follow-up on issues. Further, they should talk with their principal to determine what they want from the program. Collaboration allows both parties to be sure "that the high standards and level of quality set for the school day are carried over into the afterschool program," says principal Hickman.

In addition to working to establish open and ongoing communication, there are other things that an afterschool program director can do to build

an improved relationship with both the principal and the school, according to Susan Horton, site director of Care After School, Inc., a non-profit program created by three PTAs and three of the Worthington Public Schools in Worthington, Ohio.

- Get to know the school staff, including the secretaries and the teachers. If you build a relationship with the teachers, they will often drop in to let the staff know if a child has had a bad day. Teachers can also learn from the staff because children behave differently at the afterschool program.
- Host an open house for teachers at your afterschool program right after school. Serve food and offer small token gifts made by the children for the teachers. The teachers will come, stay for a half-hour, and will get to know your staff and learn about your program.
- Help the principal appreciate your program by showing him or her how your program answers the homework, friendship, safety, and emotional needs of the children who attend the school.
- Do things for the school such as helping the custodian break down or set-up for special events such as assemblies and concerts.
- Be a helpful communicator for the school. Remind parents and families of special days on the school calendar such as early dismissals and parent-teacher conferences.
- Try to be a part of special events. If the school celebrates a special theme, extend that with special activities or decorations in your program.

A commitment to work together for the benefit of children can also bring together a principal and an afterschool program, as exemplified by Team 21 Afterschool site coordinator Shatawn Brigham and Jon Blackburn, principal of Taft Elementary in Wyoming, Michigan. Both men acknowledge the nature of the relationship as a partnership. The extra effort that a principal commits to building a solid relationship with an afterschool program will result in benefits for children, according to principal Blackburn. "You have to be open to new things. There may be quirks to overcome in the beginning, but we have seen the results in our students, and it's a win-win situation. I don't mind putting in the extra time if it's all about the kids," says Blackburn.

For a resource on building positive relationships between principals and afterschool program directors and staff, please see the "Resources" section on page 8 of this newsletter.

Kim Friedman is the Special Projects Coordinator for School-Age NOTES.

Upcoming Conference Dates

October 8, 2007

Capital District Child Care Council – School-Age Conference

Best Western Hotel – Albany, NY

Isiebert@cdcccc.org • 518-426-7181 x 322

October 22-23, 2007

The Bridge from School to Afterschool and Back

Hilton Hotel and Conference Center – Vancouver, WA

www.schoolsoutwashington.org • (206) 323-2396

October 25-27, 2007

Virginia School-Age Child Care Association DISCOVER Conference & Expo 2007

Marriot Newport News at City Center – Newport News, VA

www.VirginiaAfterSchool.org

November 3, 2007

Connecticut After School Network Annual Fall Conference

www.ctafterschoolnetwork.org • (203) 483-1846

November 15-17, 2007

Children's Forum: After-School Solutions Conference

Rosen Plaza Hotel – Orlando, FL

www.thechildrensforum.com • (239) 489-4386

December 5-6, 2007

2007 Kids Count in Indiana Conference

Indiana Convention Center – Indianapolis, IN

www.iyi.org