

*When  
a Job Becomes  
a Profession*

THE **Ten Cs**

By Roberta Newman

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a role to play in  
defining and shaping  
school-age care as  
a truly professional  
endeavor.

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**W**HEN SOMEONE ASKS YOU, "WHAT KIND OF WORK do you do?" how do you respond? When asked that question, I used to fumble around and say something like, "Well...I'm in...child care." I always thought that response made it sound like I was enrolled in a program somewhere! I often talk with staff who struggle with how to define their work. Are they...program leaders? Teachers? Youth workers? Caregivers? Counselors? School-age specialists? Or something else? Can the work we do with school-age children and youth during out-of-school hours be considered a "profession"?

As someone who has visited hundreds of school-age programs across the country, it is evident to me that we do not yet have a clear vision of ourselves as "professionals." Until we have that vision, we can't expect others to see us that way. All the signs indicate that we are an "emerging profession." Recent NSACA national conferences have featured pre-conference sessions for "emerging leaders," which is one sign that we're on the road to professionalism. On this road, each of us has a role to play in defining and shaping school-age care as a truly professional endeavor.

What do we really mean by "professionalism"? Sometimes we think of professionalism in terms of image. Back in 1991, the American Child Care Foundation sponsored a national school-age conference. One of the participants was a federal government official with the Department of Health and Human Services. During a break, she told me enthusiastically that she thought the conference was marvelous because it was "so professional." She laughed and said, "I don't know what makes it feel that way...maybe it's because everybody is wearing earrings!" Now it was true that everyone had gotten all dressed up to attend the conference, but both she and I knew that it takes a lot more than a "dressed-up" image to make a professional. Webster tells us that professionalism is "associated with tangible evidence of education, advanced degrees, and money."

In order to work effectively with others in the field, I have found it useful to create a working definition of "professionalism" in school-age care based on the general qualities and characteristics associated with being a professional in any field. I call my working definition the Ten Cs of Professionalism. What follows is a brief overview of these Ten Cs. They can serve as a useful tool for thinking about where you and your program are located on the road to professionalism.

**Competence**

Competence is certainly the basic building block in any profession. The development of competence in school-age care presents two major challenges. The first challenge relates to the relative newness of this profession and the fact that we are still trying to refine our definition of the meaning of "quality" in this

# OF PROFESSIONALISM

## The Ten Cs of Professionalism:

- |                  |                 |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1) Competence    | 6) Change       |
| 2) Confidence    | 7) Compensation |
| 3) Collaboration | 8) Courage      |
| 4) Communication | 9) Compassion   |
| 5) Creativity    | 10) Commitment  |

field. NSACA has made progress by developing national standards for quality and a national accreditation program. Having a viable accreditation system is an important first step to building a profession.

A second challenge is related to the scarcity of in-depth training opportunities and certificate and degree programs aimed specifically at developing competent school-age care professionals. It is encouraging to see a growing number of networking conferences and college curricula as well as certificate and distance learning programs all focused on developing a field of competent professionals. The continued growth of these opportunities and an increased dialogue on credentialing are critical if we are to develop consistent standards related to competence. It can be argued that a system for accrediting programs is incomplete without a companion system for credentialing individuals who work in programs and are responsible for implementing quality standards.

In most professions, formal credentials for individuals provide evidence that an individual has achieved a high level of competence in the field. An accredited hospital cannot be operated without credentialed physicians and nurses who have demonstrated they know what they are doing. Recognizing this, many regions and states are developing their own credentialing systems, some independently and some with assistance from the Department of Defense, which has taken a leadership role in this area since the early 1990s.

On the road to professionalism, it is up to each of us to define, stimulate, encourage and ensure competence and professionalism in each of our programs and organi-

zations by focusing carefully on two areas: diligently searching for the best available people for the job, and providing the best possible resources for pre-service and in-service training and support.

As we plan the search for potential school-age professionals, it's essential to define what we're looking for in order to find the "best picks." As I talk with school-age leaders across the country, they tell me that competent staff have the following qualifications:

- Knowledge of school-age, family and community development.
- Knowledge of school-age programs or a related field.
- Experience working with children in a group setting that is informal in nature, such as recreation programs, camps and other child and youth programs.
- Special skills and interests to share with children.

In addition to qualifications related to education and experience, school-age leaders say they look for staff with the following qualities:

- A genuine liking for school-age kids and an ability to relate naturally and comfortably with kids of both sexes and different cultural, racial and economic backgrounds.
- Sensitivity to the out-of-school needs of school-age kids.
- Capacity for common sense and good judgment.
- Energy and enthusiasm.
- Ability to handle and respond to simultaneous demands for time and attention.
- Ability to see and bring out the best in each child; interest in working with both "difficult kids" and "easy kids."
- Good sense of humor.
- Capacity for flexibility, patience and understanding.

Once you know what you're looking for, it's important to make a comprehensive recruitment plan. It's also important to design a set of targeted interview questions, specifically keyed to job descriptions. These should be open-ended questions that ask "What would you do if...?" and "How would you handle this situation?"

A training program that builds and supports professional competency includes:

- A thorough orientation.
- An ongoing in-service training program tailored to the needs and characteristics of adult learners and an emphasis on key topics such as those identified in NSACA standards—relationships, environment, health and safety, guiding behavior, involving kids in planning, and connecting with community resources, to mention a few.
- Time for planning.
- Time for problem solving and peer support.
- Time for resource sharing and networking.
- Time and support for attending outside training opportunities.

### **Confidence and Collaboration**

Effective supervision and evaluation are the tools we can use to develop the skills that make confidence and collaboration possible. Supervision that fosters confidence and collaboration:

- Provides clear written statements and discussion of the program's vision, philosophy, goals and objectives, emphasizing a commitment to excellence.
- Develops clear, fair and consistent policies and procedures that support program goals and involve staff in ongoing development and review.
- Encourages staff to share ideas, feelings and feedback.
- Notices and acknowledges good work and good ideas.
- Gives objective, constructive feedback and handles problems and concerns with tact, sensitivity and confidentiality.
- Individualizes supervision based on the staff person's experience and needs, strengths and weaknesses.
- Takes staff concerns seriously and responds to them fairly and directly.
- Provides visible, hands-on management that serves as a role model for staff.

Programs that use evaluation as a tool for building professionalism typically assess staff performance in areas such as:

- Communication
- Relationships
- Accountability
- Planning, preparation and implementation of activities
- Group management skills and skills for guiding behavior
- Responsiveness to children's individual needs
- Skills in using diverse roles such as group leader, facilitator, observer, mediator, helper or participant

- Initiative and resourcefulness
- Flexibility
- Problem solving and conflict resolution
- Basic job requirements
- Family involvement
- Community connections

Evaluation helps staff become more competent, and competence builds strength and self-confidence from within. The better we feel about ourselves and our capabilities, the more willing we are to work and collaborate with others.

### **Communication**

In many ways, communication is the axis of all the other Cs. Without effective communication, we can't fully exhibit our competence. We can't demonstrate our confidence. We can't collaborate well with others. Our ability to communicate well can make us or break us. It can open doors or close them. The way we communicate with others can be our most valuable public relations tool or our worst public relations nightmare. We need to speak and write effectively in many different ways—clearly, passionately, persuasively, gently and powerfully. We also need to remember that we are always communicating by the way we present ourselves to children and youth, parents, colleagues, school personnel and other key players in the community. While it may be appropriate to wear jeans and a sweatshirt when working and playing with kids, the same attire is probably not the best choice for a meeting with a school principal to negotiate space or for an appointment with a potential funder of the program. Like it or not, how we dress can affect the way others perceive our level of professionalism, especially among those in power who often downplay the importance of our work by writing it off as "kid's play."

### **Creativity and Change**

Most of us think of creativity as a positive quality. However, change is a different story. Change can be difficult and many people would rather live without it, if that were possible. And yet, creativity and change go hand in hand. Both are critical to school-age care, because without them, our programs would lack the spontaneity and flexibility that school-age kids require. Creativity is the essence of professionalism—where we really can take hold and make things happen, make things change for the better. How do we do it? What can you do if you don't think you're creative? The good news is creative behavior can be learned and developed. Here are some "creativity boosters" for SAC professionals inspired by advice from

Dr. Roger von Oech, who has earned a national reputation as a creativity consultant to the business world:

1. *Avoid the "Right Answer Trap."* A good way to be more creative is to look for the second right answer to difficult problems. According to von Oech, the first answer that comes to mind is just too easy, too automatic, too mechanical. Often the really creative idea is just around the corner. For example: The first right answer to increasing the amount of supplies and equipment for our programs might be to raise parent fees. What are some other right answers? The first right answer to chaos caused by a disruptive child might be to place the child in time out—what's the second and third right answer?

2. *Be playful with the way you phrase questions.* The answers you get depend on the questions you ask. Ask open-ended questions that make people think. For example:

- "What are three school-age child-care issues that you feel absolutely neutral about?"
- "What are three things about your program you would change tomorrow if you were in charge?"
- "What are three things you think staff should never do in your program?"
- "What are three things you think staff should do every day?"

3. *Use analogies to help you get a fresh slant on concerns and problems.* Analogies can be especially useful in communicating with parents, the general public, the media or policy makers and others who may not be knowledgeable about the field. To create an awareness and understanding of the wide range of skills and abilities needed by school-age professionals, you might use analogies to compare their work with another demanding profession. My personal favorite is, "Being a school-age child-care professional is a lot like being an Air Traffic Controller—you have to know who's coming in for a landing, who's in a holding pattern, who's experiencing turbulence, who's running out of fuel, who's on a collision course, and who's been sitting on the runway much too long!"

A SAC program leader once told me she thought working in school-age care was like working as a stand-up comic, "You have to have a good routine, a great delivery, and an ability to deal with hecklers without losing your cool!"

You can learn a lot about the level of professionalism in your colleagues and your program by playing with analogies. Try asking your co-workers to describe your program by using an analogy.

4. *Challenge the rules.* Remember that rules should be based on reasons that make sense. As time passes, things change. Our original reasons for rules may no longer

exist, but we often get stuck in the rules and continue to observe them. To avoid getting stuck, make it a regular practice to ask yourself and your colleagues, "Why did this program, project, concept or idea come to be? Do these reasons still exist?" If the answer is no, some creative change is in order.

5. *Set aside some time each day or each week to ask "what if" questions.* Think about where the following "what if" questions might lead you:

- What if the nation's aging airline fleet was recycled into school-age child-care centers?
- What if all community newspapers had a child-care section that was as big as the sports section?
- What if all school-age programs were "for profit" centers that paid annual stock dividends to child-care workers?
- What if large corporations donated excess frequent flyer miles to school-age programs so that staff would have free flights to training conferences?
- What if Robin Williams, Madonna, Whoopie Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Jacques Cousteau, Queen Elizabeth, George Bush, Hillary Clinton, Colin Powell, Jennifer Lopez and Katie Couric were all kids again and showed up in your program tomorrow?

Remember, if you want to be more professional, believe in the worth of your creative ideas and be persistent in pursuing them.

### **Compensation**

It's no secret that child and youth workers are among the lowest paid workers in America. Some of you may be aware of child-care studies that indicate that wage levels are the main predictor of quality in child care. And yet, few school-age wage levels represent the wage due a professional. This often causes bitterness, resentment and staff turnover. Even though wages are low, however, I believe it is up to us as individuals and programs to create an image and a reputation for professionalism that will help others see what we do as a service deserving higher levels of compensation. No one is going to do this for us, and no amount of blaming society's values, parents' attitudes, the media's lack of understanding, the government's misplaced priorities or employer's greed is going to make the difference. It is through building and developing ourselves as professionals that real gains will be achieved. In the meantime, as we are emerging as professionals in the area of compensation, we need to find additional ways to supplement the wages of school-age staff to keep

them in the field. We must create additional incentives that include benefits; increased voice and responsibility for shaping program design and implementation; acknowledgements and award systems; released time for training, consulting and participation in professional organizations; paid tuition and registration fees for training and education; and bonuses.

### **Courage, Compassion and Commitment**

Courage, compassion and commitment are the final "Big Three" Cs of Professionalism.

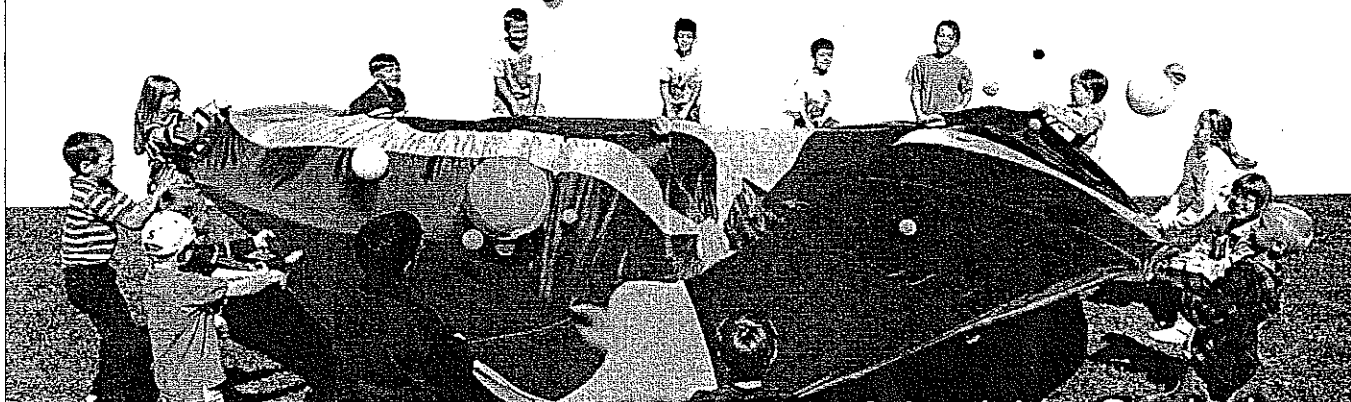
Professional courage means we are willing to take on advocacy roles; to be creative and energetic as we face up to the problem areas of this field; to write letters to the editor and political representatives on behalf of children, youth and their families; to speak up at public hearings to discuss support for school-age programs. Courage makes it possible for us to view problems and conflicts as opportunities for growth and development rather than shying away from them. With courage, we use our knowledge and experience to become leaders in our communities—to think and do what needs to be done, even when it's very challenging and, sometimes, risky.

Compassion lives in the hearts of school-age professionals. It allows us to be respectful and non-judgmental and to continually expand our understanding and acceptance of all those we serve.

Finally, a conscious, inspired commitment means that we find ways to stay focused on the important work we do each day as school-age professionals. We hold ourselves accountable for our words through dedicated, relentless pursuit of high-quality performance for ourselves and our programs. When we are doggedly committed to the critical importance of the work we do, we have the power to change things for the better and we stay the course.

Sometimes people ask me, "How will we know when we've really become professionals?" I know I became one when I started believing it myself. I used to struggle with words when people asked me that old "So, what do you do?" question. Now I tell them without hesitation, "I am a professional who develops quality out-of-school programs for children and youth." I urge you to create an affirmation that describes the professionalism in your work. Then, speak it often—silently and publicly—as you work with others to build a profession truly worthy of our children and youth and their families. ■

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