



BUILDING EXEMPLARY AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

Eight Keys to Success

By **Andria J. Fletcher, Ph.D.**
Revised May, 2004

The most successful after school programs have developed strategies that are remarkably consistent in producing positive outcomes for children, families *and* communities. They build the capacity of students to strengthen academic, social and emotional skills and competencies. They construct bridges that reconnect neighborhoods with schools and provide opportunities for parents to become more effective partners in their children's education. They offer enormous child care cost savings, accelerate economic self-sufficiency and improve workplace productivity. They create authentic partnerships and change the way communities do business. In combination, eight practices found in all exemplary programs offer a starting point for creating new partnerships and a guide for strengthening existing programs.

1. CREATE A VISION THAT CLARIFIES PURPOSE AND IGNITES PASSION

Powerful visions are compelling in real life, not

- 1) Create a vision that clarifies purpose and ignites passion
- 2) Integrate leadership, mentorship and management
- 3) Build authentic partnerships
- 4) Make staff development and coaching a top priority
- 5) Expand rather than extend the school day
- 6) Link activities with outcomes
- 7) Measure and manage results

just on paper. They enable us to go beyond *providing* something to *being* a driving force in changing the way things are done. They give meaning and purpose to what we dream about and what we do. They create a sense of urgency that compels us to act. They bring us together by capturing our hearts as well as our minds. They are rooted in reality, achievable and inspiring.

Great visions rarely exceed twenty words and yet speak volumes. They tell us where we are going and *why*. They keep us on track and hold us accountable. They remind us of what is really important and restrain us from getting caught up in the quagmire of daily demands on our time and energy. They inspire, motivate and provide clear direction. They enable us to get over complacency, fear and doing business as usual and on to accomplishing great things.

- Does your vision captivate your heart as well as your mind?
- Does it produce organizational integrity and keep your partnership focused?
- Does it clarify your direction and instill a sense of common commitment?
- Does it act as a living reminder of what is important and what can be achieved?
- Does it mobilize and coordinate your efforts into a single cohesive enterprise?
- Is it focused on the future and grounded in reality?
- Does it get you through the hard times as well as the good?

2. LEAD, MENTOR, AND MANAGE

No matter how exciting a vision may be, it is only as good as its execution. Transforming a vision into reality means blending and aligning unique, divergent and sometimes competing interests and perspectives. This demands strong leadership, continual relationship and capacity building and perseverance. It calls for building a guiding team and pulling people together – not just any people but those who have the credibility, skills, connections and reputation to get things done. It requires communicating for buy-in by developing a gut-level commitment that liberates more and more energy from a critical mass of people.

In the best cases, community leaders, partners, program directors, site coordinators and principals see themselves as *responsible* for ensuring that all of this takes place. Each considers himself or herself a leader, a mentor and a manager at different times and under different circumstances. They are adept at navigating through these roles in ways that bring out the best in people and organizations.

Leaders are charged with building positive relationships, celebrating the independent voices of employees and partners and weaving them into a collective purpose that is bigger than any one of them alone. They keep their partnerships focused on achieving their vision, moving everyone forward toward the accomplishment of shared goals. They motivate people to do their best work by recognizing and building on individual strengths.

- Do you consciously connect your actions to your partnership's vision?
- Do you stay focused on the big picture while continually reexamining priorities?
- Do you make and spend time thinking strategically?

- Do you make a practice of recognizing and building on staff strengths and assets?
- Are you willing and able to embrace change and navigate it successfully?
- Do you create and sustain enthusiasm about the value of everyone's work?
- Do you regularly celebrate individual and partnership successes?
- Would you follow *you*?

Mentors provide resources, support and guidance that build staff skills, ignite passion and align individual values with organizational principles. They meet people where they are and coach them in ways that continually build skills, self-esteem, self-confidence and competence. They insist on open and frank communication, spirited discussions and a willingness to take risks. They encourage and provide opportunities for active participation in problem solving and decision-making. They meet the psychological and social needs and interests of staff as well as their professional needs. They see themselves as *guides-by-the-side*.

- Do you ensure that relationships are interpersonal and lateral, not hierarchical?
- Do you emphasize individuals over organizational structures?
- Do you believe personal as well as professional growth is your responsibility?
- Do your partners, stakeholders and staff feel valued because they *are* valued?
- Do you understand that job performance improves and commitment increases as an alignment between personal and organizational principles comes into being?
- Do you really believe that *your* success depends on the success of others?



Managers realize that management is a tool, not an end in and of itself. They know that its primary purpose is to

make it easier to build a strong partnership and a quality organization. They develop effective support systems, share information, encourage active participation in problem solving and decision making and expect and insist on accountability. They address the social and emotional needs of staff as well as the operational requirements of their programs. They liberate people to do their best work by removing obstacles in the way of successful job performance. They honor and value individuals and relationships, and emphasize people over things. They negotiate one minute and make tough decisions the next. They empower action by removing obstacles, not by “giving power”.

- Do you have, and believe in, a shared set of values, norms and operating principles?
- Do you clearly communicate expectations and the reasons behind them?
- Do you spend more time with people than with things?
- Do you focus on solutions rather than problems?
- Do you provide ongoing opportunities for problem solving and decision-making?
- Do you consistently consult before doing in areas that impact others?
- Do you listen actively and continually check your assumption?
- Do you insist on accountability for yourself and your staff?
- Are your performance reviews really designed to produce improvement?

3. BUILD AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS

All successful programs have built partnerships in which the different perspectives, past experiences and world views of partners are blended into a common vision and shared purpose. They know the value of creating short-term wins that provide credibility, resources and momentum to their overall effort. They understand that without successes, cynics and skeptics can sink any effort. They have overcome turf issues and moved from disparate positions to aligned interests.

They understand the complexity of the environment in which they operate, acknowledge the reality of school reform and accountability for results, value youth development and design programs in ways that meet the comprehensive needs of children, youth, families and the community. They do this by creating and maintaining strong personal and professional relationships among community stakeholders, funders, district offices, school principals, faculty, classified staff and after school staff.



As this happens, barriers are broken down. Cities, counties, districts, schools and community foundations often become financial investors. In school-based programs, shared space (classrooms, computer labs and libraries), resources (homework packets, reading materials, and learning tools) and information (student learning assessments and plans and training) are seen as vital to the achievement of common goals. Community

foundations recognize the value of strategic funding and the return on their investments.

- Do you take time to develop a shared vision among all stakeholders?
- Do you really know what inspires and motivates the people with whom you work?
- Are you able to identify different interests and merge them into a common purpose?
- Have you established regular communication and positive relationships among all stakeholders?
- Do you continually reinforce the importance of working together rather than independently?
- Do you spend more time building relationships than holding meetings?
- Do you consistently identify and share wins?
- Do you celebrate successes and reward team building efforts?

4. MAKE STAFF DEVELOPMENT AN ONGOING PRIORITY

Leaders of successful programs recognize the comprehensive impact that they can and are making. They hire a balanced, diverse staff capable of bringing a wealth of knowledge, enthusiasm and expertise to their sites. They recognize that choices about who is hired will be directly related to the direction their program takes over time and the ability of the partnership to achieve its goals and bring its vision into reality. They know that staff training, coaching *and* mentorship are essential to achieving positive outcomes for young people and that staff succeed to the extent that they are competent, skilled and self-confident. In turn, staff believe their work is meaningful, feel valuable and valued, have influence on decisions that impact them and know they are making a difference.

Exemplary programs provide ongoing coaching, mentoring and other forms of support in addition to workshops and written materials. They are clear about training expectations and willing to make appropriate financial investments in staff development. They build the cost of training hours in staff wages into their budgets and often commit as much as 20 percent of total annual expenditures to this effort. They know that the cost of *not* doing this is staggering – that staff turnover bankrupts programs and undermines opportunities for children and young people to develop positive relationships with adults.

- Has your staff really bought into a shared vision and common purpose?
- Are you, your staff and credentialed teachers working together to successfully align after school components with state and district standards and a school curricula?
- Do afterschool staff *and* teachers recognize the importance of embedding principles and practices of youth development into everyday approaches and activities?
- Does staff training and development include ongoing coaching and mentoring for *everyone* who works in your program?
- Does your staff have the resources and support systems needed for them to succeed?
- Do you have an academic coach (a certificated teacher) who is able to facilitate and strengthen positive relationships with the school staff and coach your staff?
- Does your district and school actively participate in the measurement and management program and student outcomes?

5. EXPAND RATHER THAN EXTEND THE SCHOOL DAY

Successful programs provide invaluable resources and relationships for children and young people. They address multiple learning styles, inspire an enthusiasm for learning, offer academic support, and provide ongoing opportunities for children to experience success. They open doors to new worlds and lessen divisions that result from economic disparities. They address multiple learning styles and integrate disguised learning approaches. They provide opportunities not otherwise available, broaden experiences and ensure that activities are exciting, engaging and fun *and* they reinforce learning by aligning educational components with state and district standards and the school curricula.

They offer important opportunities for students to reinforce what is learned during the school day, to accelerate their acquisition of language and math skills and to strengthen their social and emotional competencies. Blending these goals in ways that are student-centered, exciting, engaging, appropriately challenging, and fun is critical.



Practicing what is learned during the school day takes place afterschool through hands-on processes. These make learning relevant to the school day *and* to students' personal experiences and interests. Greater expansion of the day occurs when community partners are directly involved, and when field trips and special events broaden and reinforce learning. Most importantly, students like the program,

remain in it, and learn. In short, exemplary programs *expand* rather than extend the day.

- Does your staff understand what is going on during the school day?
- Is your staff familiar with multiple intelligences and learning styles?
- Is disguised learning a primary approach used on a consistent basis?
- Are students in your program really excited, engaged and eager to learn?
- Do students feel emotionally as well as physically safe?
- Do children and young people have a wide range of opportunities to experience things that otherwise would not be available to them?
- Do students attend regularly and stay in your program over time?

6. LINK ACTIVITIES TO OUTCOMES

All too many partnerships focus on activities rather than outcomes. They mistake the number of meetings for what might change as a result of people coming together. They spend more time on agendas than purpose, expend more effort on discussions than actions and place greater emphasis on what is urgent than what is important. This is more than a missed opportunity. It often ends in a lack of interest and enthusiasm on the part of the very people who may have the most to offer. Connections between the present and the future are forfeited and dreams devolve into routines. Ultimately, the passion that originally brought people together dies.

The same is true for most after school programs. Successful programs, like powerful partnerships, focus on results and structure activities and approaches in ways that will lead to these by *consciously* linking activities with outcomes. They recognize that almost any activity is capable of producing positive

changes in cognitive, social and emotional skills and competences. Rather than leaving this to chance, they focus on changes they would like to see come into being and create ongoing opportunities for children and young people to experience success in identified areas. The value of this approach should not be underestimated. With a little additional effort, activities become the means for children and young people to acquire and strengthen *life-long* skills and an enthusiasm for learning – and for partners to stay excited about their work.

- Do you and your partners consciously link how you are spending your time with what happens as a result of the time spent?
- Do you, your stakeholders and your staff know *why* you are doing what you are doing?
- Have you and your staff taken the time to learn how to connect activities with outcomes?
- Do you spend more time on what is important than what is urgent?
- Do you really know what an outcome is?

7. CONTINUALLY MEASURE AND MANAGE RESULTS

The most outstanding programs are adept at navigating change. They *know* what is happening rather than guessing because they continually measure and manage outcomes. They determine target objectives in advance. They establish baselines and benchmarks to track progress. They focus on what has changed, how much change has occurred, for whom it has occurred, and what difference this makes. They understand the value of having as much information as possible – and importance of being certain that this is the *right* information. They are unrelenting in their commitment to the kind of continual quality

improvement that *only* comes from a true partnership among *all* stakeholders.

Some measures of student progress can be determined through tests that are easy to administer and assess. Others are more complex. These draw on a variety of sources of information that are both quantitative and anecdotal. They include classroom teacher, program leader and parent evaluations; student self-assessments; student grades; standardized tests; and, stakeholder and community leader focus groups to ensure a variety of perspectives. They use this information to make appropriate changes and build on strengths.

- Have you developed and implemented an effective baseline assessment tool?
- Do you have a system in place that establishes meaningful benchmarks?
- Are you really aware of what is happening at all levels?
- Are you truly committed to continual quality improvement?
- Do you manage as well as measure change?
- Are all of your stakeholders, partners and staff on board with these processes?
- Do you widely publicize positive results and act quickly to make changes where they are needed?



information to make wise choices?

- Do your stakeholders readily provide information and input?
- Do you have enough

8. BUILD A BALANCED AND DIVERSIFIED FUNDING BASE

Partnerships and the programs they support that are experiencing long-term success understand that sustainability is primarily a *local responsibility*. They are proactive in planning for and ensuring sustainability by securing state and federal support *and* strong, ongoing local financial investments. They communicate regularly and effectively with actual and potential stakeholders, including cities, counties, school districts, individual schools, private foundations and corporations through face-to-face meetings, telephone calls and written progress reports. Communication strategies are broad-based and integrated.

Sustainability is approached from a variety of perspectives that combine in a powerful way. In the most successful programs, stakeholders adopt a formula that requires that at least 50 percent of all funding for the operational costs of programs be secured at the local level. Each stakeholder (preferably a city, county, school district and private corporations and foundations) invests approximately 20 percent of the total local funding required, in unrestricted cash, from sources that can be maintained over time. If a program costs \$100,000 to operate, the local investment should total 50 percent, or \$50,000. With a diversified funding base, each stakeholder invests 20 percent of this, or \$10,000. With ten sites the amount increases to \$100,000 for each investor, and so on. As programs grow, the formula remains the same. Funding is pooled with state and federal resources to cover all operating costs. In-kind contributions are reserved for other uses.

This approach secures a balanced budget *and* pays immediate and long-term returns to investors. It is equitable and affordable. It redefines community roles and responsibilities. It creates significant economic efficiencies and produces positive social outcomes. It substantially improves prospects for additional

state, federal, and private funding. It provides a solid foundation for growth and an assurance that quality programs will continue to operate and expand over time.

- Have you been developing strong professional relationships with all potential funders?
- Does the city, county, school district and foundation community really understand the value of your partnership and program from each of their *own* perspectives?
- Do you arrange regular site visits for key stakeholders and policy makers?
- Do you invite community leaders to serve as facilitators for student and parent focus groups in program evaluations?
- Do you work closely with community champions to continually promote your goals?
- Is your funding base balanced, diversified and sustainable?
- If one of your major funding sources were cut, would you still be able to operate your program effectively?
- Do you keep partners, staff and funders informed about your progress?

CONCLUSION: MOVING TOWARD EXCELLENCE

Programs that succeed in reaching goals that produce consistently positive outcomes for children, families and communities do so by design, not chance. Every program is inherently capable of becoming exemplary. Whether this occurs depends largely on the willingness of those in leadership positions to take the kinds of actions described above. Based on the experiences of programs that have achieved this level, the process is complex and challenging. And, it is well worth the effort.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Andria (Andi) J. Fletcher is regarded as one of the leading experts in the United States in afterschool program and policy development. Her experience includes working with hundreds of communities and programs throughout California. She is the former director of Sacramento START and Chief Consultant for the Center for Collaborative Solutions. She initiated and wrote much of the legislation that has led to California's \$550 million investment in afterschool programs and currently leads a team that has provided training, coaching and mentorship to more than 3,000 after school programs in the state. She is the author of numerous articles. She holds a doctorate in Political Science from UCLA.

**Center for
Collaborative Solutions
1329 Howe Avenue,
Suite 200
Sacramento, CA 95825
Website:
www.CCSCenter.org**

**Center for
Collaborative Solutions
1329 Howe Avenue,
Suite 200
Sacramento, CA 95825
Website:
www.CCSCenter.org**