

The Site Lead Initiative



- White Paper -



A state-wide, focused
initiative on the increased
support and development
for Out-of-School Time
Site Leads!

Setting the Stage

With so many moving parts, it can be difficult to pinpoint precisely what makes an after school program successful.

Fortunately for our field, we have a number of prolific and dedicated leaders with years of experience who have offered their wisdom on this very topic in a variety of forms.

We have received comprehensive reports, read inspiring books, attended live presentations and panel forums, listened to virtual webinars, conducted program and self-assessments, followed memos, flipped through manuals and promising practice publications from the field. And what we know is that all of these have helped increase the quality of the work we do in after school.

“When you are running program with someone else’s children you want to know that someone has your back and that you are giving those children the best you can. I think that knowing you have a support system makes it easier to support your staff. When you have someone providing you with what you need, it takes some of the pressure off and makes it possible for you to provide the staff with what they need. This is what makes programs successful!”

- Christi, Elementary Site Coordinator

In fact, these efforts have helped drive and shape after school in a way that stock value has grown exponentially over the years. Schools are now seeing the return on investment from high quality programs more than ever before. Moreover, the common themes shared through these efforts on what makes after school programs successful include partnerships, intentionality, support from school administration, hard work, innovation and high quality staff – just to name a few!

So, Let’s Talk High Quality Staff: Why Site Leads?

While after school has worked over the years to prove its worth, show its value and make its name in the field of education, it has often relied on one particular staff member to pull it off at the ground level: the Site Lead; or Site Coordinator; or Site Director; or Program Supervisor; or Program Coordinator; or the million other titles he/she may go by depending on the organization.

The Site Lead often bears most of the responsibility for meeting program outcomes, such as attendance targets, student safety, academic support and growth, academic alignment and enrichment. The Site Lead’s tasks include managing and overseeing the daily operations of the program – much like a school principal. The Site Lead is expected to make sure students are safe physically, socially and emotionally, that students are engaged in high quality learning, and that staff are performing adequately and following policy and procedure – much like a school principal. The Site Lead’s responsibilities include dealing with parents, partnering with

community resources, managing important and sometimes politically-driven relationships, developing reports and finally, answering for the overall quality and impact of their program – much like a school principal.

“I sometimes feel like I’m in this all by myself. My supervisor is extremely busy and I don’t want to bother him with every little thing. The problem is, there are so many issues that arise on site and I just don’t have all the answers all the time. I’m hoping for more support in the future!”

- Rick, Middle School Site Coordinator

So much responsibility is placed on the shoulders of after school Site Leads, and so much of the success and failure of a program relies on their knowledge, skills and ability. But here’s something to ponder - not all Site Leads are created equal, and more importantly not all Site Leads are supported and developed equally! Much of the support and development of a Site Lead depends on variables

such as organizational structure, leadership, and funding. As a result, there are great differences in the the way Site Leads carry out their work, and consequently, great differences in the quality of the programs they lead.

If It’s Quality We Desire, Look Here!

The recently released Learning In Afterschool and Summer (LIAS) Principles are an amazing set of guidelines for programs to grow in quality. These five principles provide a framework in which programs can build and develop structures and systems to increase student learning. The principles support intentional and focused effort on how students learn best, and clearly complement the instructional day and overall educational experience. However, one important ingredient to maximizing the impact of after school learning is high-quality implementation, supported through the structure, operation, and offerings of the program. Depending on the district or organization, this may be done collaboratively with the Program Manager/Director and Site Lead, or may fall primarily to the Site Lead with little support from above.

While LIAS is just one example of all the many initiatives, curriculums, best-practices and program tools that impact the quality of a program, one constant between them all is at some point in the process they will rely on the Site Lead to successfully introduce, incorporate, support and sustain in order to make their deserving impact.

So, if it’s quality we desire, why not focus on the instrument that must account and answer for that quality? Why not focus on that one single most critical piece of our moving puzzle, so that regardless of the initiative, curriculum, best-practice or tool, we’ve given ourselves the best possible return on that investment? According to Roger Ingbretsen, acclaimed author and member of the International Coaching Federation, investing in leadership development is a win-win situation. It’s a cost-effective strategy that is less expensive in the long run and helps

develop a succession plan for an organization. The most important asset an organization has is its people – if organizations focus on people development, product (and profit) will follow!

What Have We Missed And Why?

“It’s tough meeting the expectations of both my principal and organization. They don’t always match up so I’m often left to try and figure it out on my own. I’m not sure I fully realized just how challenging this job would be when I accepted it.”

- Amanda, High School Site Coordinator

Having had the fortune to travel the state - region to region, conference to conference, training and talking side by side with Site Leads, it’s obvious that there are many differences in organizational support and development for Site Leads.

Furthermore, Site Leads express a variety of feelings about their jobs and the support and development they receive. “Working on an island,” is a common phrase used by Site Leads,

even in large organizations where there is a team of Site Leads. Site Leads often wonder if anyone else is experiencing or going through what they are. Site Leads at conferences and workshops light up when they hear similarities from a peer across town or in a neighboring region. But at the end of the day, what I believe we have missed the most is the realization that Site Leads carry a great deal of responsibility and often times come with limited experience, education and skills. Therefore, if the organizational structure provides little support and development, this directly impacts a program’s quality and potential for success.

In contrast, school principals spend years in college and beyond, and receive countless hours of training and targeted support from their districts. Site Leads in some districts and organizations need only to be NCLB compliant and have some supervision experience, but yet manage programs and staff to serve 200-300 students a day. All this in a less structured and secured environment and with far less on-site and organizational support than an administrator. Now, I’m not implying that the responsibility of an after school Site Lead directly mirrors that of a school principal, but nevertheless, these are tall orders to fill with limited experience, education, skills and/or support and development. Mike Snell, Executive Director for The California Teaching Fellows Foundation in Fresno, Ca., expresses what his organization has learned over many years of experience: place the highest of priority on supporting and developing Site Leads. “We here at The California Teaching Fellows Foundation invest a tremendous amount of resources into our site lead training programs, and we remain in constant contact with our site leads. The regular support and ongoing professional development of our site leads has become the pillar of our infrastructure and likewise our success.” The California Teaching Fellows Foundation serves 130 school-sites within 14 school districts across Central California and is known as a leader in the professional development practice amongst its peers.

Another important piece we miss is an accurate perception of a Site Lead and their position and role within the school community. In many ways, as noted above, Site Leads carry out administrative-like responsibilities on a daily basis, but rarely are viewed by the school (and even sometimes after school) community as an administrator. Site Leads are expected to lead, manage, structure, coach, support and communicate in much the same way as a school administrator, but are still viewed in a very different light. The perception is that a Site Lead simply oversees some “activities” after school with minimal accountability, responsibility and deliverables. But, those of us who work in the after school field know that is far from the truth!

So, Where Is Support & Development Needed?

Let’s start with the basics: a genuine understanding of what’s at stake under the Site Lead’s

watch. Many Site Leads have little idea of the history and evolution of after school (in California), and know little about how the state and federal funding systems are structured and managed. Additionally, we’ve found that very few Site Leads are well versed in the expectations laid out by the state and federal grants, including the California Education Code as it pertains to before and after school programs. Now, one might say that context is not as critically

“If there was one thing I wished was different about this job it would be more people understanding all that goes into being a Site Coordinator. There is so much responsibility, so many expectations and it moves so fast. I’m only part-time and I feel like sometimes I just can’t keep up!”

- David, Elementary Site Coordinator

important as a Site Lead’s daily tasks and responsibilities, but research has proven otherwise.

What motivates adults to perform at high levels in complex working roles ties heavily to their ability to understand the landscape and purpose of what they do. This idea is reinforced in Daniel Pink’s book, “Drive,” where he indicates what recent research has uncovered about what truly motivates us to produce. Pink refers to three primary findings, which include Autonomy, Mastery and **Purpose**. If Site Leads understand the true nature of the field, its history and its impact on the future, their drive to develop the skills they need to be successful will increase. How similar that is to what we know helps children and youth be successful! The point is, we find that Site Leads do not often have that kind of foundational background understanding, nor are they sitting at tables in their organizations that will help them develop that understanding. Rather, they are tossed into the daily grind of managing and operating a program with little thought as to how important that knowledge can be. When I first joined the after school community in 2006, I was warned this job would be the “hardest job I’d ever love.” It took less than six months to realize how true that statement was! While the love for the work has certainly grown over the years, so have the challenges. Running after school programs, whether at the site level or at an administrative level, is just plain hard work, and no one knows this better than Site Leads. The pace of their day is fast and furious, and often they are part-

time employees who have less time to achieve their work. Add to the plate a lot of moving pieces, and in many cases, serving multiple masters, and it's a wonder Site Leads last as long as they do. Trying to balance the expectations and requests from the school site, while also delivering on outcomes driven by their own organization is a task difficult for any administrator, no matter how qualified and trained. Simply put, the work of a Site Lead is ever-demanding, rich with high expectations, yet sorely undercompensated and underappreciated.

So How Do We Help?

A thoughtful system of support for Site Leads could help balance these challenges. I propose the launch of a focused **Site Lead Initiative**, supported by leaders and leading organizations within the field, to help after school providers increase their support and development for their Site Leads. Each organization's internal capacity to support such initiatives would be complemented by a state-wide system of support. Working hand-in-hand with Regional Leads and Technical Assistance Providers, a state-wide committee of experienced and passionate leaders in this area could closely collaborate and coordinate efforts across the state. The after school field is "rich" in experience and expertise in this area and if asked, there's a good chance many with those traits would excitedly step forward.

A state-wide, focused initiative to help build this understanding with districts and organizations could go a long way for developing the knowledge, tools and strategies in the field. The work of the bodies involved in supporting the initiative would help the field dig deeper and ultimately drive strategies to produce the desired outcomes. It is well known that leaders still need leadership development and through a strategic effort, we can increase the capacity of our after school providers in supporting and developing one of their most important assets – their Site Leads.

The (Short) Closing Argument:

At the end of the day, those who love this work and care deeply about serving youth and children know that it is not programs that make the difference in their lives, it's the people that run them. Along with our great investments in areas like STEM, LIAS, and alignment with the school day, let's consider adding another – intentional support and development for our Site Leads. After all, the quality of an after school program is **only** as strong as the quality of the people running it.

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