

Core Competencies For Afterschool Educators



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WORKING DOCUMENT

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Introduction



Afterschool Educators

Those who work in the afterschool field are referred to by a range of names from “front-line staff” to “youth workers” to “afterschool professionals.” For purposes of this document, the phrase “afterschool educators” is defined as “someone who supports and teaches young people in their academic, social, emotional and physical development in before-school, afterschool and summer programs.”

What do we mean by professional development? For the purpose of this document, professional development refers to the range of activities and strategies that afterschool programs use to build the competencies of their program staff and volunteers. These competencies are the ability of afterschool educators to apply a specific set of knowledge and skills to their day-to-day practice.

Professional development activities can take many forms. They can be highly structured or flexible, formal or very casual. They can be concentrated at the beginning of a professional’s employment or spread throughout their work in the field. They can occur in the program or be delivered in settings outside of the program.

Why is professional development important?

One of the most important contributors to program quality is the level of knowledge and skills of front-line staff that are working most directly with program participants. Because there are no standard requirements (such as credentials, academic degrees, or pre-service training) for professionals entering the field, they come with a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. Thus, it is incumbent upon program and organizational leaders to consider what competencies, skills and knowledge their staff need prior to and after they are hired into the program, and provide opportunities to strengthen and build their competencies over time. The diversity should be highlighted as a strength and competencies should be recommended to align staff attributes with the needs of children and youth.

Research within the fields of education, early childhood education and afterschool programming affirms professional development activities can have an important impact on program quality and improving youth outcomes. Professional development is also viewed as an effective way to increase job satisfaction and lower staff turnover. For those afterschool educators who do change professions, it is hoped that their experiences in afterschool programs will lead them to pursue related careers, such as teaching.

Core competencies are those capabilities that are critical for afterschool educators who are committed to high quality programs that produce positive participant outcomes. When the core competencies that are important for participant outcomes have been developed for staff and agreed upon by program leaders, they can be utilized to build a professional development plan. Agreements on core competencies are also useful for hiring and other personnel management activities, including the development of job descriptions, the interviewing of new staff, performance reviews of current staff and the creation of longer-term professional development plans.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

Agreeing on the core competencies staff need to effectively do their jobs is a valuable step in making decisions regarding the design and selection of professional development activities. There are a number of organizations in the field of afterschool that have been working to identify these core competencies. While there is not one definitive competencies framework, reviewers will note a striking similarity between them. This document draws from that work and does not seek to supersede or replace those ideas. This document is a guide designed to be used in conjunction with other existing resources to help program staff and supervisors improve their practice and program quality.

About Professional Development

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1. Professional development should create an awareness of new concepts and ideas that are closely linked to core competencies for afterschool staff.
2. Professional development should assist afterschool staff in developing skills in the most effective ways to present material, content and ideas.
3. Professional development should expand knowledge about how children and youth learn and should prepare staff to incorporate new knowledge and real world applications into their practice.
4. Professional development should be rooted in and reflect the best available research on afterschool practices and adult learning theory.
5. Professional development content should be aligned with core competencies for afterschool educators and the specific outcomes of the program.
6. Professional development should contribute to measurable improvement in child and youth outcomes.
7. Professional development should be engaging for a diverse group of afterschool staff and should model the desired practices with children and youth.
8. Professional development should be seen as a process, not an event, and should provide sufficient time, support and resources for afterschool staff to master new content and skills and to integrate these into their practice.
9. Professional development should be based on the needs and input of afterschool staff and the children and youth they serve.
10. Professional development should be delivered in a variety of forms, including some that are innovative and non-traditional, tailored to the diverse needs of the afterschool profession.
11. Professional development should be job-embedded and site specific.
12. Professional development should be designed based on an appropriate scope and sequence for individual and collective program staff, understanding that some knowledge and skills are prerequisites for others.

Adapted from American Federation of Teachers. (2002). *Principles for Professional Development: AFT's Guidelines for Creating Professional Development Programs That Make a Difference*. Washington, DC.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

It is also useful for stakeholders to identify what they themselves believe these competencies are by first reflecting on their specific programs goals, the kinds of activities they are conducting to achieve those goals, and the specific learning needs and relevant characteristics of their program participants. Questions to consider include:

- ▶ **When we make decisions on the hiring of new staff persons currently, what do we look for?**
- ▶ **When parents and young people decide on whether or not to enroll in an afterschool program, what staff competencies or behaviors do they hope for and look for?**
- ▶ **If the program is based in a school, what do school administrators and teachers look for?**

It is important to note that agreements of core competencies are useful as they inform other related aspects of personnel management, including:

- ▶ **Job descriptions for front-line afterschool staff and program supervisor.**
 - ▶ **Hiring process and decision-making, including interview questions and protocols, ranking candidates on their interviews and/or practice demonstrations.**
 - ▶ **Performance review process, guided by the degree to which workers have demonstrated core competencies in their daily work with program participants and where individuals can strengthen their practice.**
 - ▶ **Development of professional development plans for individuals or the staff at large.**
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Core Competencies for Afterschool Educators



ABOUT THE CORE COMPETENCIES

Each core competency is marked with an arrow-like symbol. By their nature, core competencies are multi-dimensional, thus beneath each competency are “sub-competencies” or competency indicators that, taken together, represent the larger core competency. Finally, below these indicators are examples of observable behaviors that could serve as evidence of how these competencies might be demonstrated.

EXAMPLE



CORE COMPETENCY:

Ability to relate to and work well with diverse children and youth

INDICATOR:

Supports positive relationships between participants.

EXAMPLES OF OBSERVABLE BEHAVIORS:

- Teaches participants conflict resolution and negotiation strategies and gives opportunities to practice these skills.
- Incorporates team-building activities.
- Utilizes knowledge and skills to promote co-operative learning skills.



Supports positive relationships between adults and program participants.

- Demonstrates knowledge of what is going on in participants' lives, neighborhoods and schools.
- Gives full attention to participants when they are speaking.
- When an individual participant is having a problem, staff pay attention and try to assist.

Supports positive relationships between participants.

- Teaches participants conflict resolution and negotiation strategies and gives opportunities to practice these skills.
- Incorporates team-building activities.
- Has knowledge and skills for designing an environment that promotes co-operative learning.

Promotes a sense of physical and emotional safety.

- Promotes positive behavior and discourages inappropriate behavior that can effect the feeling of safety.
- Enforces program rules fairly and consistently.
- Teaches and models conflict resolution techniques.

Promotes the meaningful engagement and leadership of the participants.

- Uses strong facilitation skills to encourage everyone's participation.
- Engages participants in decision-making and leadership opportunities.
- Engages participants in opportunities to provide service to others and improve the community.

Respects and honors cultural and human diversity.

- Promotes acceptance of and respect for diversity among participants (cultural, religious, gender, appearance, etc.).
- Affirms and respects each participant's culture, religion, home language and family values in all verbal and non-verbal exchanges.
- Uses materials that reflect the language, art, music, stories, and games from various cultural traditions.
- Intervenes to explicitly address negative stereotyping and discriminatory statements or practices when they occur.

Core Competencies for Afterschool Educators



Ability to facilitate participants' learning of new knowledge and skills

Deliberately designs and conducts activities that are focused on program goals.

- Articulates program goals and how individual activities support them.
- Develops lesson plans that state the purpose of the activity as it relates to program goals.
- Designs and/or adopts existing materials appropriate for background and experience of participants.

Incorporates academic content and skill development that contributes to the participants' school success.

- Communicates with schools to identify the materials and activities that program staff can offer to complement what happens during the school day.
- Communicates with schools to share information regarding the learning and social needs of participants, effective strategies, and updates regarding participants' progress.
- Conducts activity plans and implements curricula that complement the school day.
- Demonstrates awareness of local and state curriculum frameworks.
- Conducts activities that are linked to topics in the curriculum frameworks.
- Conducts activities that promote effective organizational and study skills.
- Provides support to help participants effectively complete their schoolwork.
- Assists participants in the use of the Internet as a research tool.
- Assists participants in the use of technology to demonstrate their knowledge.

Conducts activities that expand the participants' knowledge and understanding of their own immediate community and the larger global community.

- Uses community resources to expand participants' knowledge and understanding of their home and larger community.
- Provides opportunities for participants to interact with community leaders.
- Encourages community members to share their knowledge and talents with program participants.
- Provides opportunities for participants in activities to contribute positively to their immediate and/or larger global community.

Incorporates activities to promote physical health.

- Promotes an attitude and environment that embraces wellness.
- Incorporates physical activities.
- Conducts activities to expand knowledge and understanding of good nutrition and healthy behavior.
- Conducts activities that promote healthy choices and the avoidance of risky behaviors.

Supports a program environment that is learner-centered.

- Conducts age-appropriate activities and recognizes when an activity is inappropriate and makes necessary adjustments.
- Conducts activities that are motivating, challenging and engaging.
- Conducts activities that allow participants to explore their personal interests and learn about their everyday world.
- Conducts activities that are "hands on" and project-based.
- Conducts activities that promote inquiry.
- Assists participants in the use of technology to demonstrate their knowledge and express their points of view.
- Accepts mistakes as opportunities for new learning.
- Engages participants in assessing their own growth and programs.
- Celebrates the accomplishments of individuals and the larger group.



Ability to respectfully engage the important adults in the participants' lives

Adequately informs, shares information, and collaborates with important adults.

- Communicates to families about individual participant's strengths, successes and achievements.
- Understands and applies guidelines of confidentiality regarding knowledge of participants.
- Looks for opportunities for involving families in activities.
- Fosters good relations between afterschool and school staff through positive interactions (exchanging welcomes, greeting by name, stopping to chat, etc.).

Advocates for the participants' needs, providing referral information when appropriate.

- Can name key organizations in the community where participants can be referred for special needs (depression, substance abuse, etc.) or know who to go to for help.
- Utilizes good judgment in making decisions when a supervisor needs to be involved in referrals to program participants or their families.

Core Competencies for Afterschool Educators



Commitment to one's own learning, skill building and professionalism on the job

Strives for self-improvement.

- Regularly attends professional workshops, trainings, and conferences to increase competency.
- Works to apply new learning to everyday work practices.
- Is open to new ideas and learning opportunities.
- Is actively expanding personal knowledge and educational opportunities.
- Ability to use the Internet as a research tool to access field knowledge and locate appropriate resources.

Demonstrates positive work and team ethic.

- Supports colleagues and shares in staff duties.
- Is punctual and dependable.
- Participates in required meetings.
- Dresses appropriately.
- Respects physical program space, equipment and supplies.
- Works collaboratively with peers, shares program-related information and shares in collective tasks.
- Takes initiative to correct immediate problems.

Communicates effectively with other staff, as well as those outside of the program.

- Protects and appreciates the need for confidentiality when appropriate.
- Participates in program, staff and team meetings.
- Ability to use email to communicate with program staff and stakeholders.



Ability to effectively carry out program operations and policies to achieve program goals and meet needed requirements

Ensures for the health and safety of participants.

- Prepares the program space to be free of foreseeable hazards.
- Intervenes when potentially unsafe situations occur.
- Can perform basic first aid.

Follows safety and emergency procedures.

- Can summarize legal responsibilities for reporting requirements for reporting child abuse or when a person may do harm to him or herself or another.
- Understands when it is appropriate to inform and involve supervisor.
- Can implement key aspects of site safety plan.

Maintains accurate program records and follows reporting procedures.

- Keeps accurate program attendance.
- Follows procedure for reporting incidents, as required by the program policies (e.g., accidents, criminal activity, serious violation of program rules, etc.).

Core Competencies for Afterschool Supervisors



For the purpose of this document, afterschool supervisors are program leaders who are responsible for the supervision, support and professional development of afterschool educators. Supervisors must have a working knowledge of the same competencies needed by their afterschool staff. The core competencies may help create this professional development plan. As managers, program supervisors must possess a set of competencies related to their responsibilities to support their staff. In addition, it is important to note that program supervisors likely have additional operational and administrative duties, such as budget management and record keeping.

Ability to articulate within the organization and to external stakeholders the program's mission and goals, and how program activities align to them.

- Demonstrates awareness of program mission and goals.
- Communicates program goals and mission and cites examples of how program activities align to them formally and informally with senior management and line-staff, as well as parents, teachers and other stakeholders.

Ability to design program activities that support program goals and incorporate needs and interests of program participants, their families and the broader community.

- Articulates the link between specific activities and program goals.
- Articulates a clear scope and sequence of activities that will contribute to the achievement of program goals.
- Regularly gathers information and feedback from program participants and other stakeholders as to their needs and interests.
- Can readily demonstrate ways in which the needs and interests of key stakeholders have been incorporated.

Ability to successfully manage program staff.

- Clearly communicates verbally and in writing the job expectations for frontline staff and how they are linked to the program's goals.
- Provides staff with on-going support and direction to assist them in successfully completing their job responsibilities.
- Creates a positive environment in which the professional development of staff is supported, staff is acknowledged for successes, and feedback is positively delivered and received.
- Regularly observes staff in action and shares feedback in a constructive and respectful manner.
- Utilizes a standardized performance review process that includes assessment of individual staff members, shares formal performance review assessments with individual staff members, incorporates staff member's self-assessment using the same standards or matrix, identifies areas for development and how this will be accomplished.

Ability to promote the professional growth and development of program staff.

- Works together with afterschool educators to develop individual and group learning goals related to the core competencies, and a professional development plan to achieve these goals.
- Implements the professional development plan and supports the learning goals that will advance the skills of all staff.
- Provides useful informal and formal feedback to staff related to professional development goals and activities.
- Continually seeks opportunities and resources that allow self and staff to meet personal and professional growth goals.
- Works with staff to assess the effectiveness of professional development activities and how they might be improved.

Ability to engage, and support afterschool educators in implementing program activities to achieve program goals.

- Provides staff with needed materials, supplies and preparation time.
- Communicates high expectations for staff and program participants.
- Provides coaching and mentorship to staff, as appropriate.
- Leads effective meetings and trainings on select content that models the approach and specific activities and practices staff are expected to use with program participants.

Has a working knowledge of and abilities to use resources within the broader community.

- Finds the resources to expand the array of opportunities within the program.
- Enlists the involvement of multiple stakeholders (e.g., parents, community leaders, school leaders, etc.) in program design, implementation and evaluation.

Ability to gather and review program data for timely program improvement.

- Uses tools to assess the effectiveness of program activities and program impact.
- Uses program data to guide staff and others in program improvement.
- Leads regular staff meetings to review program progress, needs and issues.

Planning for Effective Professional Development



Core competencies are only one part of effective professional development systems and practices. A theory of change helps ensure professional development is intentional and tied to defined outcomes. Once the theory of change is developed, well-designed activities and strategies contribute to success.

Draw the theory of change

A theory of change identifies the desired short and long-term outcomes that are desired and summarizes the key conditions that must be met to achieve these outcomes. Thus, it represents the cause and effect relationships between activities and the outcomes that stakeholders are seeking.

Refine and affirm program goals

By clarifying and identifying the program goals, program leaders ensure that any professional development activities being considered are well aligned with the program goals. Refining and affirming program goals should include program leaders and line staff, other program partners, parents, program participants, community members and other important stakeholders.

Agree on which core competencies are most important to strengthen through professional development

Identify the array of competencies that afterschool educators need to support the achievement of the program's goals. Engage the program stakeholders in identifying the core competencies they believe afterschool educators need to successfully accomplish program goals and outcomes.

Decisions on which competencies to focus the program's professional development resources on can be determined by assessing the competencies of current staff. Assessments can be used to determine strengths and areas of improvement for staff.

Planning for Effective Professional Development

STEPS FOR DESIGNING A SYSTEM OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CONTINUED)

Identify the short and long-term outcomes of professional development

Short-term outcomes are those that are the direct result of the professional development activities and may be expected in the first year. Because they reveal themselves earlier, short-term outcomes serve as positive indicators that the activities are moving everyone closer to the long-term outcomes. There may be changes in daily practice with participants or in program structures.

What positive results or outcomes, in the long-term, might be expected from professional development efforts? Long-term outcomes are changes that can be expected after one year or longer.

Agree on the organizational resources needed to ensure the achievement of outcomes: staff time, financial resources, and the explicit support of executive leaders, among others

Improving staff practice and program quality requires the full support of the larger organization and its leaders. It is the role of leaders to declare professional development and program quality as organizational priorities, and to allocate the resources (e.g., staff time for planning and delivery of professional development activities, necessary funding, etc.) that are needed for success. It is the role of those developing a professional development plan to identify these resources.

Create a professional development plan that:

- Aligns with program goals and targets specific competencies
- Incorporates features and attributes of effective professional development
- Draws on an array of approaches and methods best suited to specific competencies
- Draws on outside resources

Identify data sources to assess the achievement of short and long-term outcomes

In order to assess the success of professional development, identify data sources and implement methods to evaluate the success of professional development and its impact on short and long-term outcomes.

Using a theory of change for planning

A theory of change is a progression of thinking and planning that identifies the conditions and resources that are necessary to achieve specific short and long-term outcomes. An important feature of developing a theory of change is the engagement of multiple stakeholders, which may include input from program staff, provider partners, program participants, as well as parents, teachers and others from the larger community.

The following is a description of a theory of change approach that can assist program leaders as they consider a professional development plan for their staff. It suggests that participants identify:

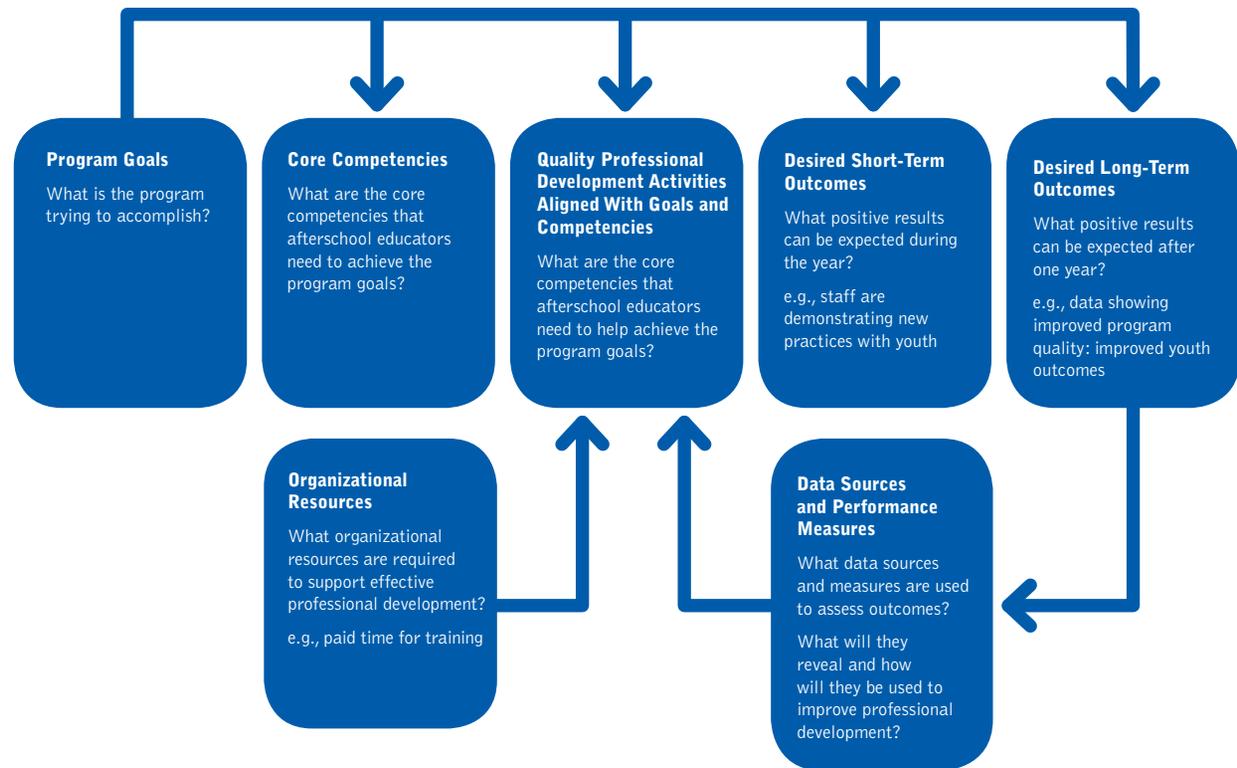
Program goals that can be supported through professional development.

Outcomes that may result from professional development.

Competencies that afterschool educators need to be successful and those competencies that professional development opportunities will target.

Organizational resources that are needed to ensure the success of professional development efforts.

THEORY OF CHANGE FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Planning for Effective Professional Development

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES

Different kinds of activities are more suited to achieving different outcomes. Here are some examples of professional development activities that are matched to the intended outcomes:

Awareness and knowledge:

Program orientation: Orientations often provide an overview of the program vision, mission, values, policies and procedures when afterschool educators are newly hired. They commonly address the competencies related to carrying out organizational responsibilities and procedures, as well working with a team. They tend to last one to three days or occur over a period of time.

One-time time educational or instructional session: This kind of activity is common in afterschool programs. This type of instruction promotes new knowledge and an introduction to new skills, but depending on the competency, may not result in afterschool educators applying new learnings to their practice. This approach may be very effective for some competencies, such as those related to safety (e.g., understands rules of mandated reporting of child abuse or first aid/CPR) or engaging important adults (e.g., understands guidelines for confidentiality).

Readiness to apply knowledge to practice:

A sequence of training sessions: These are on-going sessions that focus on building the participant's knowledge and readiness to apply in practice. For example, a 6-10 session training series could focus on competencies related to supporting a learner-centered program environment, which includes the ability to incorporate project-based learning, strategies to involve participants in assessing their own growth and progress, and utilize knowledge of child development and age appropriate behavior. These are competencies that would benefit from reinforcement and support at the program sites, such as coaching, mentoring and frequent reflections in staff meetings, as described below.

Self-directed learning: This learning is self-directed and requires both time and access to relevant and useful resource materials that may include multi-media Web sites, videos, curriculum and activity guides.

Strategies for on-going support:

Staff meetings: Regularly scheduled staff meetings are an excellent time for afterschool educators to reflect on their own practices—what's working and what is not—through peer exchange discussions and for supervisors to reinforce concepts that were introduced in recent professional development activities.

Observation and feedback: This is when a supervisor, coach or mentor offers specific feedback to a staff member based on observations of that person in action. This is often done with specific competencies in mind and possibly using a rubric identifying behavior indicators to guide the observation.

Other strategies to increase staff knowledge and generate new ideas for integrating into practice:

Site visits: It is very useful for program staff to observe practitioners and activities outside of their own program. This can be accomplished by arranging a site visit to another program. This allows afterschool educators to observe how others demonstrate their competencies and later reflect on specific practices they observed and the resulting implications for their own program and individual practice.

Learning communities: A learning community is an approach to learning and professional development whereby members who do similar work jointly agree on areas of practice that are important to them and they wish to study. Members agree to explore and learn together through group sessions. This may include workshops followed with time to focus on ways to integrate knowledge into practice and later, report what worked and what did not. It is democratic in nature and relies heavily on trust and open exchange between peers. A learning community approach works well with competencies that are more multi-dimensional and contextual such as: ability to relate to and work well with diverse children and youth and ability to facilitate participants' learning of new knowledge and skills.

Mentoring: Mentoring refers to an ongoing, formal relationship between a supervisor or more experienced staff person and a less experienced staff person. For example, this relationship can be between a program supervisor and a line staff member. Mentoring support allows workers to integrate and master the multi-dimensional competencies over time.

Coaching: Coaching is focused, short-term support from a coach, often the supervisor, or external peer or consultant to support skill integration. Often this work is based on learning goals developed in partnership with the staff person involved and is geared to support mastery.

Professional associations, networks, conferences and meetings: Afterschool educators can join and serve in leadership roles in local, state and national professional membership associations and networks. Attending, presenting at, and helping develop state and national conferences provides afterschool educators with an opportunity to share expertise and make connections beyond the local program.

Acknowledgements

In Spring 2006, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation invited a group of afterschool leaders from across the county to consider the skills and knowledge needed by afterschool educators and the role of professional development in promoting the quality of afterschool programs. To guide this work, the group focused on three questions:

- ▶ **What are the core competencies that afterschool educators need in order to contribute to the achievement of the program outcomes and to positively affect young people's learning and healthy development in an afterschool environment?**
- ▶ **What are the supports needed by staff and supervisors to develop the skills and knowledge needed for quality programs?**
- ▶ **What are the guidelines that can help afterschool educators identify and access appropriate professional development?**

The afterschool professional development working group used research and existing efforts in the field to develop a set of guiding core competencies. Staff supporting the working group conducted focus groups, a survey of nearly 1,000 afterschool professionals and a scan of competencies developed for a range of professions beyond afterschool.

These core competencies for afterschool educators were developed by the working group (members listed on page 21). Several key leaders made significant contributions. Sam Piha of Temescal Associates provided extensive drafting of the competencies in shaping the working group's ideas. Claudia Weisburd of Foundations, Inc. provided valuable insights and advice in shaping the document. Judy Nee of the National AfterSchool Association reviewed and refined the competencies. Judy Caplan provided early guidance and led focus groups that help shaped the work.

Afterschool Professional/Staff Development Working Group

PARTICIPANTS

(Positions and organizations as of Spring 2007)

Rebkha Atnafou

Director
The After-School Institute

Cynthia Billings

CEO
Plus Time New Hampshire

Suzanne Birdsall

21st CCLC Coordinator
New Hampshire Department
of Education

Tommy E. Brewer, II

Director of Staff
Development
LA's BEST After School
Enrichment Program

Judith Caplan

Lead Consultant
Afterschool Professional/
Staff Development Project

Gail Daughtry

Director
North Carolina Center for
Afterschool Programs

Ron Fairchild

Executive Director
National Center for
Summer Learning

Steve Fowler

Partner
Fowler Hoffman, LLC

Ayeola Fortune

Project Director
Council of Chief State School
Officers

Lucy Friedman

President
The After-School Corporation

Ellen S. Gannett

Co-Director
National Institute on
Out-of-School Time (NIOST)
Wellesley College

Adrian K. Haugabrook

Executive Director
Public Policy Alliances
and Innovation
Citizen Schools

Catherine Jordan

Project Manager
Southwest Educational
Development
Laboratory (SEDL)

Rhonda H. Lauer

Chief Executive Officer
Foundations, Inc.

Eddie L. Locklear

National Director
4-H Afterschool
National 4-H Council

Jennifer Becker Mouhcine

Director
Illinois After-school
Partnership

Judy Nee

President
National AfterSchool
Association

Patricia Olshefski

Director
AFT Paraprofessional and
School Related Personnel
Department
American Federation
of Teachers

Sam Piha

Consultant
Temescal Associates

Delia Pompa

Vice President, Education
National Council of La Raza

Robert Stonehill

Director
21st Century Community
Learning Centers
U.S. Department
of Education

Myrna Torres

Community Schools Consultant
The Children's Aid Society
National Technical Assistance
Center for Community Schools

Carmen Vega-Rivera

Director
Say Yes to Education

Robert Weil

Deputy Director,
Educational Issues
American Federation
of Teachers

Mim Wilkey

Technical Assistance
Coordinator
Kansas Enrichment Network

Bernie Zubrowski

Education Development
Center, Inc.
Center for Science Education

C.S. MOTT FOUNDATION

An-Me Chung

Program Officer
C.S. Mott Foundation

Eugene Hillsman

Program Assistant
C.S. Mott Foundation