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During the summer of 2015, the Afterschool Alliance conducted an online survey of rural afterschool program providers to learn more about the challenges they face and opportunities they have discovered as program providers in rural communities. Between June 26 and July 29, 2015, 661 rural afterschool program providers responded to the online survey, giving a program perspective of the state of afterschool in rural communities.

A strong program staff is a vital element for any high-quality afterschool program, no matter its location. Working in an informal educational space, afterschool program staff often become mentors in the eyes of students, helping them feel safe, welcomed and supported during the after school hours. Programs with a strong staff create a positive atmosphere through strong staff-student relationships, hire staff with youth development experience and provide professional development opportunities to support staff growth.

Rural afterschool program providers fully recognize the importance of recruiting and retaining a strong staff, but they are confronted with a number of challenges unique to the circumstances of being located in a rural community. Recruiting qualified staff was one of the most significant challenges reported by rural afterschool program providers, second only to raising a sufficient amount of funding for their program.* When asked about the challenges of recruiting qualified staff and retaining staff, close to 6 in 10 program providers (59 percent) report that recruiting qualified staff is challenging, and half report that retaining staff is challenging. A limited staffing pool, difficulty offering competitive salaries and a location in an isolated region are among the obstacles rural afterschool programs are working to overcome. One rural program provider writes, “...it is almost impossible to recruit and retain quality afterschool staff due to low wages and isolation in rural regions ...[often] staff take jobs and move to larger towns/cities.” Another writes, “Recruiting qualified staff is challenging, as the area has little to attract qualified candidates and their families in the way of parks, public transit, housing, and city services. Retaining staff is also a problem, as when qualified personnel receive better offers, they often leave the area so that they can better provide for their families...We are always scrambling to find money to hire more staff so that we can fill the overwhelming demand from parents.”

Despite the difficulties in finding and keeping staff onboard, many rural afterschool program providers have developed strategies to combat these challenges. For example, most rural afterschool program providers surveyed report offering their staff some form of professional development, including on-site trainings (87 percent), sending staff to attend national or state conferences (79 percent) or sending staff to standalone workshops (71 percent). These professional development opportunities encourage staff growth and can help train staff properly, providing the professional support that staff need to better understand their job responsibilities and feel adequately prepared to take on tasks assigned to them.
Professional development opportunities also help retain staff, showing staff that their growth is important to the program and ensuring that the staff feels supported. An interview with one rural afterschool program provider found that the program makes sure that it is responsive to the needs of their staff by providing professional development opportunities based on the feedback of their staff and where it seems that their staff is struggling.

Working with school-day teachers is another way rural afterschool programs address their staffing challenges. For example, one provider writes, “All of our site coordinators are certificated teachers who are teaching at the school site during the day and coordinate the program after school. This allows us to have access to the schools and makes recruitment easier.” Another program provider says, “Many of our afterschool staff are district teachers from the districts that they were raised in, still live in and now teach in. They have a sense of community pride and want to [pay] it forward. Their dedication to our afterschool programs builds on respect.” One provider shares how employing school-day teachers not only helps with their staffing issues, but also supports their ability to provide professional development for their staff, “…85 percent of our afterschool staff are also our school district day school teachers so many of the training opportunities provided to the day school staff carry over to the afterschool program.” Other programs work closely with school-day staff and bring in teachers to help train afterschool program staff on ways to better align afterschool program activities with school day lessons.

Volunteers often supplement traditional afterschool program staff. For example, one rural program provider works with AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) volunteer teams for their summer learning programs. Another has senior citizens from the community as active volunteers, and others located near two and four-year colleges are able to recruit college students to work with program students. However, more than 6 in 10 rural program providers (61 percent) report that recruiting volunteers is a challenge.
WHAT DO RURAL AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM PROVIDERS SAY ABOUT PARENT ENGAGEMENT?

While parents living in rural communities are more likely than parents outside of these areas to report that their child’s afterschool program offers parent and family activities, and are more likely to report satisfaction with these activities, rural afterschool program providers have mixed feelings about the level of engagement of their students’ parents and families. A significant majority of rural afterschool program providers (59 percent) report that parent engagement is challenging, with 1 in 4 reporting that it is very challenging.* Providers’ explanations for this challenge includes parents’ late work hours, lengthy distances and commute times required to reach the afterschool program, and lack of interest on the part of parents.

Despite the difficult undertaking to foster parent engagement in afterschool programs, many rural afterschool program providers continue to dedicate time and resources toward parent engagement because they view parent involvement as invaluable. In one phone interview with a rural afterschool program provider, the provider said, “…anytime you can get parents involved, it makes a huge difference. In a small rural community, all you have is each other.”

To increase parent involvement, rural afterschool program providers employ a variety of approaches to connect with and engage their students’ parents. Some programs offer classes specifically for parents, such as adult literacy classes, whereas others hold classes for parents to participate in a learning activity side-by-side with their child. Hosting family nights, holiday parties, fun walk/runs and events showcasing students’ work are additional ways programs encourage parents to become more involved in the program.

Programs also find ways to incorporate parent engagement into their organizational and programmatic structures. One rural program includes parents on the program’s advisory board, giving them a forum to share their ideas and thoughts about the program with other board members, including program staff, school day staff and business leaders in the community. Another rural program has a parent advisory committee—comprised solely of parents—who provide the program with input about the current activities offered and the programming they would like to see. A program with a large Hispanic and Somalian population has staff from those communities on board to help make parents feel more welcome in the program. Staff at another program are trained to check in with parents each time they pick up their child, speaking with parents about the progress their son or daughter is making. The program makes sure that interactions with parents are not only about problem behavior, but their child’s successes.

Perseverance and patience are common threads throughout programs’ continuous efforts to build rapport between parents and program providers. As one rural program provider stated in a phone interview, “Get moms and dads involved, even if it’s a daunting task. Be willing to work together because it’s worth it.”**

*Survey responses are based on an Afterschool Alliance online survey of rural afterschool program providers, conducted between June 26 and July 29, 2015.

**Phone interviews with rural afterschool program providers were conducted by the Afterschool Alliance between September 21 and October 13, 2015.
PROMISING PRACTICE: STRUCTURED PROGRAM DESIGN

Integral structural and programmatic features of promising afterschool programs include clearly stated and organizationally internalized goals, the appropriate amount of time and resources dedicated to instruction and skill development, sequenced and coordinated activities to master specific skill sets, and a variety of active forms of learning and hands-on exercises. Although many rural afterschool program providers report difficulties securing the resources they need, such as specific curricula—like STEM programming or a diverse or new set of activities, overall, providers are finding ways to engage their students in varied and experiential learning activities.

Parents in rural communities are predominantly satisfied with their child’s afterschool program, including the variety of activities offered by the program. Altoona Campus Kids Klub in Iowa provides a fitting example of structured programming in a rural setting. The program helps with homework and tutoring, offers snacks, dedicates time each day to a STEAM enrichment activity—like constructing a roller coaster and building a ramp to launch marbles—and incorporates physical activity for students into the daily routine.

Systems are also being developed to support rural afterschool program providers in delivering quality programming. In Nebraska, the afterschool statewide network Beyond School Bells developed a statewide coalition of city-wide afterschool systems to support sustainability and capacity development across the state. One goal of these systems is to help raise funding and provide technical assistance to support community outreach efforts and STEM programming in rural communities.

Photos courtesy of Camp Fire Iowa
WHAT DO RURAL AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM PROVIDERS SAY ABOUT PROGRAM COST?

According to rural afterschool providers, the single biggest challenge in operating a rural program is raising enough funds to run and sustain their program.* Rural afterschool program providers surveyed overwhelmingly report funding is a challenge for them (68 percent), and close to half of program providers (47 percent) say that it is “very challenging.” Although many programs report making the most of the funding that they have, the everyday expenses of running a program add up. Providers look to a variety of funding sources, but programs in rural communities do not typically have many local businesses or philanthropic organizations to solicit, and the business and philanthropic organizations they can access often have limited available funds themselves.

Costs related to providing a safe and secure space, employing staff who serve as mentors and role models to students and providing transportation to make the program more accessible are a few of the primary expenses rural afterschool program providers report. In a phone interview, a staff member of a rural afterschool program shared that her biggest challenge is funding, with a large part of her funding dedicated to staff and staff development in order to deliver quality programming. Another rural program provider discussed how finding sufficient funding for staffing and transportation are “...keeping [the program] from doing so much more in the community.”

Program fees are part and parcel of afterschool programs’ constant struggle to meet the needs of their students and families. As program providers do their best to keep their doors open, they also are challenged to keep program costs at an affordable rate for the families in their community. More than 4 in 10 rural program providers (45 percent) say that it is challenging for them to keep program costs affordable for families. One program provider writes, “We have established funds to support afterschool programming from the district...however, that only covers about 1/3 of the actual programming costs. We continue to increase fees to help support programming and search out partners, donations and fundraising opportunities to continue to support our program at the same level.” On the other end of the spectrum, a program provider shares how keeping the program affordable for its families impacts their services, stating, “We do not charge a fee for students to attend. Costs limit resources we can provide. Volunteers are hard to find and [it] is costly to hire staff to maintain [the] state required ratio.”

Although many rural afterschool program providers surveyed report the challenges of funding, many share their strategies for maintaining both their services’ affordability and quality. A program provider says, “I think in a small community such as ours, we do what we can to make our program affordable and maintain our numbers. We offer so much flexibility in our contract options, such as providing discounts for multiple children and allowing families to flex their schedules without holding them to a minimum. As a result of our flexibility, we do not take in the fee income that we should be; however, we feel having a program that families feel is accessible is more important.”

A number of rural afterschool program providers also enjoy resources provided by a statewide afterschool network. Many statewide afterschool networks—networks established to develop systems of support for afterschool programs—provide a variety of services to help afterschool programs with sustainability challenges. For instance, to address the needs of afterschool programs in Kansas, including rural programs, the Kansas Enrichment Network offers regional roundtable discussions, technical assistance sessions, and hosts three conferences a year that include sessions covering sustainability and quality. These offerings provide professional development and networking opportunities, spur new ideas and potential partnerships, and create a close-knit community that can leverage the resources and expertise of those involved.

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WHAT DO RURAL AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM PROVIDERS SAY ABOUT ACCESSIBILITY?

A survey of rural afterschool program providers found that they recognize the accessibility challenges facing the families they serve, and it is an area of concern as well as an issue they struggle with in their day-to-day operations.* When asked about the unique challenges they face as rural afterschool program providers, a large number of responses were related to transportation issues. For example, one respondent wrote, “When it is not possible to offer transportation home from [the] program, attendance is often lower...being rural means that everything is much more spread out than in an urban setting. Students often do not have the option to walk home, and parents cannot justify the extra cost of picking their children up.” Another provider writes, “Students from outlying towns are less likely to participate due to transportation restrictions. Because of the transportation issues and program costs, when students get older, some parents opt to have them stay home alone rather than have them attend [the program].”

Close to 4 in 10 rural afterschool program providers surveyed (39 percent) say that providing transportation from the program is challenging and approximately 3 in 10 (29 percent) say that providing transportation to the program is a challenge. A provider writes, “…transportation is a huge barrier. The limited resources available for the program don’t stretch far enough to provide the buses needed to get children home after the program.” Another says, “…one of the unique challenges we have is being able to provide the afterschool program to ALL the students who attend our school. Some of these are 30-50 miles from our school. The majority of our students come from low-income families, who often do not have transportation at home. We provide transportation for our students every night, and since we have a limited budget, we can only provide transportation one night a week to the different communities. This limits students who may need extra help in certain areas from attending more than one night of afterschool a week.”

However, there are rural program providers that have come up with innovative ways to help their students and families address the gaps in transportation. Partnerships with schools and other community organizations, such as churches, is one way programs are providing transportation for their students. Vouchers for transportation, including gas and county transit service vouchers for families, is another resourceful alternative programs have used to address transportation issues. Many programs’ partnerships with the local schools also involve retaining a room or meeting space in the school, mitigating transportation costs and tackling difficulties with bringing students to the program.

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PROMISING PRACTICE: STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

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Strong partnerships, particularly in rural communities, are crucial to afterschool program providers. Building and securing relationships with families, the community and schools is a promising practice for rural afterschool programs that often struggle with securing resources and funding due to the limited options available to them. From acquiring program space to strengthening program offerings to filling staffing needs to obtaining transportation, partnerships are helping rural afterschool programs make ends meet and serve the children and families in their community to the best of their ability.

When asked in an online survey how they sustain their program offerings, rural afterschool program providers shared the various ways they leverage partnerships to ensure that their students enjoy a fun and academically enriching variety of activities. One provider wrote, “We have been able to partner with a local nature conservancy, a community music school, the state college extension service, school staff volunteers and 4-H to bring quality enrichment activities to our program.”

Finding an adequate program space was another challenge that good partnerships could help overcome, according to a number of rural afterschool program providers. Schools, community centers and churches oftentimes work with afterschool programs to provide their existing space free of charge or at a discounted rate.

Partnerships are also a tool rural afterschool program providers use to staff their program. For example, a program provider shared, “We try to keep the whole community involved by offering events, classes and volunteer opportunities for all ages. We use a vacant classroom in the school to host a weekly gathering for senior citizens who are now active volunteers in our school and community.” Another provider shared the benefits of partnering with the local school, stating, “All of our site coordinators are certificated teachers who are teaching at the school site during the day and coordinate the program after school. This allows us to have access to the schools and makes recruitment easier. We have the support of our school district, which makes our program successful.”

As integral as partnerships are for rural afterschool program providers, they can also be difficult to form and maintain in rural communities. A limited number of local businesses; a lack of institutions of higher education, museums, science centers and other cultural institutions in the area; and the strained resources of community partners are a few of the challenges rural afterschool program providers report facing. By dedicating the time to build personal relationships, inviting the community into the program, inviting community members onto advisory boards, and being flexible and open to various types of support—in-kind or monetary—from community partners, rural afterschool program providers are making the most out their circumstances. One rural program provider discussed the importance of developing a sense of shared ownership over the program, voicing the opinion that it is easier to build support in rural communities strengthened by a connectedness and closeness that other communities may lack.