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**Teen Recruitment and Retention Strategy**

A wide body of research shows that consistent participation in high-quality after-school and summer programs, also called out-of-school time or OST, provides substantial benefits to youth and their communities. Teens are more prone to engage in juvenile delinquency, substance abuse and other risky behaviors after 3:00 p.m. if there are few positive OST programs available. Club leaders are also well aware of the impact of high school dropout rates on crime and unemployment, and are increasingly supporting out-of-school learning opportunities as a strategy for promoting school and **career success.** Recruiting, retaining and engaging youth of middle and high school age is challenging work because they are a mobile population that can “vote with their feet,” and programs are not always accessible, interesting, or relevant. Sometimes, older youth do not even know what programs are available after school and over the summer. As the OST field matures, researchers, foundations, advocates and local leaders and providers are paying closer attention to the opportunities and benefits that high-quality programs can provide to youth ages 11-18 and how to overcome the barriers that inhibit their participation.

When youth participate in high quality school- or community-based after school programs like Boys & Girls Clubs, they are likely to benefit in a myriad of ways. Students cannot benefit from after school programs, however, **if they do not attend them**. Unfortunately, due to busy schedules, claims of boredom, or desire for freedom on the part of youth, low attendance is the norm in many programs for middle and high school students. Participation in these programs dwindles during the critical transition from elementary to middle school, though students continue to need caring adult role models and interesting out-of-school activities.

The following strategies are proposed for recruiting and retaining youth participation in after school programs.

**Strategy 1**

**Coordinate Systems To Support Effective Service Delivery.**

To ensure more OST programs meet the needs of older youth, Club leaders may start by identifying what those needs are, work to make programs more accessible and support efforts to market programs to youth. Club leaders may also track participation and the impact of programs to guide their efforts. Club leaders are well positioned to develop a clear, county-wide strategy and bring together key local agencies and community organizations to better coordinate their efforts around common goals.

**Where Should We Recruit?**

The saying "it's not what you know, but who you know," really is the key to finding your targeted population. To walk around the streets looking for kids probably won't yield the results you want. Use your contacts. If you don't have contacts, start establishing them. Ask around, learn about teens in your community, find out where they hang out, research associations and clubs, go to community outreach centers.

Going to the resources available in your community, you can get extra help in finding kids and teens, and finding other people to help. These people will know other people or groups that may benefit from your program.

A number of organizations are actively involved in mentoring, and may be good places to get youth referrals from your community:

* Schools
* Local service organizations
* State agencies
* Churches
* Parents
* Teachers
* School counselors
* Local Big Brothers/Big Sisters agency
* Family physicians
* Local YMCA or community center
* Local PTA chapter
* Local chamber of commerce
* School/student organizations and clubs
* Family Therapists
* Coaches
* Local health department personnel

Of course, you should keep connected to the network of contacts that you establish. Make sure you always update your referral sources of any changes in referral policy or procedure. Keep people informed about your program, constantly remind them that you're recruiting and they'll keep you in mind when there's a recruiting opportunity.

**Strategy 2**

**Reach out Directly to Youth and Their Parents**

Rather than relying on posters, flyers, or referrals to generate interest, programs can benefit from reaching out directly to youth and their families. Phone calls and visits are an effective means of increasing local interest in our BGC programs. Youth participants are often a program’s most effective recruiters or ambassadors. If poor participation is due to youth’s misperceptions about the quality of a program, then current participants may offer an honest account of program activities and of what potential participants can expect. Street outreach has also been touted as particularly effective for recruiting teens, and some programs hire outreach workers specifically for this task.

**Strategy 3**

**OFFER A WIDE VARIETY OF RELEVANT PROGRAM OPTIONS.**

The type of programs available can be modified to better reflect the wants and developmental needs of older youth, who tend to gravitate toward academic, arts, recreation, science and employment training programs. These youth also seek programs that will help them gain useful skills and reach their long-term goals.

**Strategy 4**

**Promote College Attendance and Workplace Readiness.**

Increasing the number of youth attending and completing college and preparing youth for the workplace are increasingly important goals for community. Some city officials are dedicating resources (like MPLOY) to programs that help youth navigate college entrance or provide an authentic work experience. In many cases, local business partners and institutions of higher learning can offer vital support to these programs.

**Strategy 5**

**Match Program Schedules to Youth’s Needs**

While many elementary students and their parents may be able to commit five days a week to out-of-school time activities, this option often does not work for older youth, who have other responsibilities and choices. Five-day-a-week registrations may work if the expectations are clear and attendance is enforced; however, they appear to work best for elementary students. Also, while these programs may increase the overall number of days a student attends, they may simultaneously restrict the number of participants interested in attending.

These problems are particularly acute for older youth in underserved communities, who may participate only when they are offered **a flexible schedule** where they **can drop in for some activities**. A choice of activities, may also increase participation because it offers students the flexibility of participating in the program while continuing to participate in other activities.

Drop-in programs, where there is no expected commitment, are often blamed for low participation levels. But these programs may also offer the flexible programming sought by participants, particularly those most at-risk and unwilling to make commitments. This structure may also prevent a program from unwittingly “creaming off the top” more motivated or advantaged participants. While drop-in programs have certain disadvantages in terms of reaching program goals (e.g., offering participants a high intensity learning environment), they may appeal to students who have busy schedules, or who would otherwise not participate at all.

**Strategy 6**

**Allocate Program Slots for At-Risk Youth**

At-risk students are those with a higher likelihood of school failure. They live in socially disorganized communities and they may have troubled family lives, use drugs, and have higher levels of school absences. These students may need these programs most, but are often disengaged with school.

School-based after school programs have successfully involved at-risk students by (1) working closely with teachers to identify and encourage them to participate, (2) earmarking a certain number of program slots for hard-to-reach children, and (3) hiring staff members who demonstrate an ability to relate well to these youth. Community-based programs are also important because they complement school and family resources in providing at-risk youth the additional support services they need.

**Strategy 7**

**Recruit Pairs or Groups to Join Together**

Research indicates that youth with friends who participate in after school programs are more likely than others to participate themselves (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003). We often overlook this finding as a potential strategy for recruitment and retention. There is little information in the program evaluation literature about ways to increase participation rates by recruiting groups of friends, yet doing so may be an effective way to increase attendance. We have seen this work well in team sports and especially at the Juice Plus+ Technical Training Center. We reached out to several Charter Schools and offered our job training and employments skills classes as an elective course.

**Strategy 8**

**Attract Teens with Energetic, Trustworthy Program Staff**

When teens are happy with their after-school program, they describe it as a family. They develop trusting, caring relationships with the after school staff members. Successful staff members enjoy participating in rather than simply supervising activities, and they are representative of participants in both gender and ethnicity.

**Strategy 9**

**Mix Interesting, Fun Activities with Relaxation Time**

A variety of activities, such as sports, homework help, the arts, or community service, may attract a diverse group of participants. In neighborhoods with few alternatives, a mixture of activities is even more important, because students consistently state that activity choices matter to them.

Variety reduces boredom and encourages regular attendance. Diverse activities may promote academic achievement, physical and mental health, and overall positive development while offering students a break from traditional classroom instruction. Some youth will be more easily drawn to less structured activities, such as pick-up basketball, while other students prefer an organized group activity (e.g., theater production or baseball) with clear goals. Another strategy for engagement is to offer activities that tend to be missing from the school day, such as arts activities that have been eliminated from the traditional school curriculum.

**Strategy 10**

**Link an “Academic Agenda” to an Engaging Project**

The evaluation literature suggests that youth will not tolerate two or three more hours of “school” in the after school setting unless it is highly engaging and relevant. Yet our urban schools feel enormous pressure to provide students with additional academic instruction in preparation for high-stakes exams, often at the expense of artistic or recreational activities. We found, however, that several after school programs (e.g., arts programs and employment “soft skills” classes) offer a “hidden” dose of academic enrichment, while successfully retaining youth through engaging activities.

**Strategy 11**

**Offer Opportunities for Leadership, Community Service, and Paid Employment**

After school programs struggle to keep teens interested and involved. Participation in teen programs typically plummets when teens reach 15 or 16 and start having opportunities for paid employment. Some programs have found that leadership opportunities help teens to know that their contributions are important to the organization. Rewards for strong leadership, such as opportunities to travel to teen conferences, are especially effective. Teen programs that sustain student interest and have positive effects for teens often include community service or employment.

Participation depends on whether youth are sufficiently engaged to stay involved in a program long enough to reap its potential benefits. Practitioners, parents, and communities should seek to understand promising strategies for recruiting and retaining youth participation in after-school programs so that youth can reap the benefits from these programs.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Memphis has pioneered a program to help train and place hardworking teens in part-time jobs and graduates in productive careers. Our Juice Plus+ Technical Training Center was the first of its kind in the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Here, students choose a career track from logistics, automotive, culinary, welding, and IT. They learn the skills they will need to enter the workforce while receiving training in the areas of customer service, money management, computer soft-skills and personal goal setting that will make them employees of choice.

**Strategy 12:**

**Coordinate Systems to Support Effective Service Delivery**

In order for youth to reap the full benefits of participation in OST programs, the programs must be of high quality, and youth must participate regularly, with frequent attendance in the same program for at least a year.

A growing body of research suggests that cities should carefully consider how their various resources and approaches work together to reduce barriers to participation and encourage youth to attend OST programs. These recommendations draw upon findings from the Engaging Older Youth study and RAND Corporation’s recently released Hours of Opportunity report, which both highlight the importance of strategic, coordinated, data-driven approaches to reduce barriers to program attendance, such as transportation or the location of activities. Since older youth make their own decisions on which OST programs to attend, we can also boost participation by aligning communications efforts and marketing programs directly to youth. The strategy of strategically aligning and coordinating systems to support effective service delivery may involve a variety of action steps that foster consistent participation by older youth. These action steps include:

• Conducting market research to identify programming needs and wants: Older youth are especially selective about the types of programs they will attend. When adults seek their input about desired program offerings, they will be more likely to participate. Information from focus groups, surveys and existing data can help cities more efficiently allocate resources to support the OST programs that best meet the needs of older youth. Such information can also be used to engage key stakeholders.

• Providing transportation and offering programs in accessible locations: Youth are more likely to attend programs that they can easily reach and where they feel safe. Providing transportation to and from programs can expand access and increase participation. Locating programs where youth feel most comfortable, where more youth are present, and where youth can easily attend can also increase participation.

• Aligning data collection systems to provide information about program effectiveness: Clubs can collect data from youth-serving agencies and nonprofits to understand local trends in youth program participation. A management information system provides valuable insight into which programs and locations are the most popular.

• Strategically marketing programs to increase awareness and recruitment: There are many things competing for the time and attention of older youth. To ensure that youth are aware of the full range of OST alternatives, Club officials can use their existing communication channels, partner with stakeholders to raise awareness of program options, and conduct recruitment campaigns.

**Strategy 13**

**Ensure Programs are of High Quality**

Research suggests that the quality of OST programs can be an important factor in helping older youth graduate high school and achieve postsecondary and career success. Action steps for improving program quality and thereby encouraging youth participation include:

• Establishing standards of quality programming: Commonly accepted standards of quality offer guidelines for safety, program operations and staffing and help ensure consistency across programs.

• Supporting ongoing professional development for OST staff: Highly trained staff who sustain positive relationships with older youth play a critical role in enhancing program quality.

• Providing leadership opportunities for youth: Including older youth input into program design can increase their interest in participation. Establish Standards of Quality Programming High-quality programs support the sustained participation of youth, which enables those youth to fully reap the benefits that OST programs can provide. National organizations such as the National Afterschool Association (NAA) have established program quality standards that many cities and states adapt to meet their local needs. In general, OST program quality standards offer detailed guidelines for the following categories:

• Stable and well-organized program administration;

• Safe physical space and equipment;

• Age-appropriate program curricula and design;

• Well-trained and supervised staff; and

• Parent and community engagement.

**Strategy 14**

**Offer a Wide Variety of Relevant Program Options**

According to the Engaging Older Youth study, “choice is an important program component and a key feature of youth development.” Research further suggests that presenting older youth with a variety of choices may not be enough to recruit and retain participants. For example, programs that are culturally sensitive are most likely to retain older youth. Also, programs for middle school youth may not be of interest to high school students, who may want to build skills in specific areas rather than “try out” different types of activities. The most popular programs for older youth focus on academics, sports and recreation, arts and science. Older youth can also benefit from programs that help them overcome the challenging transition between middle and high school. Programs that provide information, skills and emotional support during this key transitional period can help prevent students from dropping out of high school. This section describes each of these options for offering relevant programs for older youth. Academic Support Programs One way to help older youth achieve their college and career goals is to provide them with extra time and support for academics. Additional academic support in the summer months can prove particularly beneficial for older youth who are at risk of falling behind, including those who need to recover credits in order to graduate on time. City leaders can advocate for tutoring and mentoring programs, provide city employees with paid time off to volunteer or mentor in schools, work with school district leaders to offer programming at school facilities after the bell rings, and provide funding for quality programs. City leaders can also work with community partners to ensure that students have access to enrichment opportunities as well as remedial support. Debate leagues, chess clubs and science fairs help students build skills and enhance learning in the non-school hours.

**Sports and Recreation Programs**

The impact that sports and recreation programs can have on health and academic achievement should not be overlooked. Many programs combine physical activity with learning opportunities and teach leadership, teamwork, and self-discipline. Municipal leaders across the country partner with community organizations and schools to provide structured opportunities for youth to compete in a range of sports activities. In many cities, parks and recreation departments run a variety of programs; some work with citywide collaboratives to ensure their programs meet high standards. Other local agencies such as police departments may also devote resources to sports programs. Municipal leaders can encourage cross-departmental partnerships to ensure that youth have multiple sports and recreation options.

**Science, Technology, Engineering and Math Programs**

In recent years, policymakers have focused greater attention on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education. Clubs are working with other community-based organizations, universities and businesses to provide OST opportunities focused on STEM learning. In other locales, municipal parks and recreation departments are partnering with environmental groups to expand OST opportunities to study nature, environmental issues, and green industries. Likewise, projects that create community gardens and animal sanctuaries can engage youth in exploring new career options.

**Visual and Performing Arts Programs**

Older youth may have limited opportunities to explore painting, dance, music or theater during the regular school day. OST programs that support visual and performing arts education provide a critical service. By building on existing community resources, Clubs can improve programs, introduce new options, and maximize scarce resources. For instance, Clubs can:

• Engage local businesses, from dance studios to music halls, to support programs for youth. Often these studios or theater spaces are unused during the day when they could serve as the venue for an OST program under the supervision of local artists and experts.

• Create partnerships with arts organizations, museums, theater troupes and other local organizations to expand the number of older youth program options.

• Use existing Club or city facilities, such as cultural centers, museums and theaters, recreation and community centers, and libraries to provide space for arts learning after the school day and during the summer months.

• Support efforts to embed artists and other arts organizations into youth services and programs that are already provided by the city.

**Programs that Support Transitions to High School**

The transition from middle school to high school represents a significant milestone in the lives of adolescents. High schools are usually larger and more impersonal environments than the schools that students attend in the middle grades. In addition, new high school students are often exposed to a greater diversity of peers and teachers, as well as an expanded choice of classes and extracurricular activities. Most students successfully complete the ninth grade. However, a significant group of students will struggle in this grade, and their success in navigating the transition will make or break their high school experience. In fact, a 23 City Strategies to Engage Older Youth in Afterschool Programs growing body of research shows that difficult transitions to high school contribute to high dropout rates, low on-time graduation rates, and low achievement in American high schools.

Many cities and school districts have begun implementing programs to address issues that arise at this critical juncture in adolescent development. Effective transition programs include some of the following elements:

• Activities to provide students with information about their new schools and the social and academic support they may need to succeed;

• Programming during summers between grades to promote readiness for the next grade level;

• Strategies to promote parent involvement and communication with middle school and high school faculty; and

• OST programs led by caring adults who help ensure that ninth graders stay on track. Club partnerships with school districts and community organizations can support OST programs that facilitate successful transitions to high school for incoming ninth-grade students. Club leaders can also broker relationships with schools and other youth-serving agencies to reach youth who are particularly vulnerable and in need of support.

**Strategy 15**

**Promote College Entrance and Workplace Readiness**

A growing research base shows that older youth respond best to OST experiences focusing on choice, leadership opportunities, cultural enrichment, a chance to give back to their communities, college preparation and access to higher education opportunities, health and wellness, and exposure to careers and workforce training.

Clubs can wield their influence and resources to support OST programs that connect older youth to opportunities beyond high school. In particular, Club leaders can bring business, postsecondary and school district stakeholders together to help students make a smooth transition from high school to college or work.

Below are three action steps for supporting the efforts of older youth to attend college and join the workforce:

• Help youth navigate college enrollment and financing: To increase the number of youth entering and graduating from college, OST programs can provide information about college choices and financial planning.

• Develop workforce and college readiness skills through mentoring: High-quality mentoring programs help prepare youth for postsecondary education and the workforce by enhancing life skills, providing opportunities for youth to make a valuable contribution to their communities and promoting positive youth development.

• Support workforce and postsecondary success initiatives: Clubs can provide youth with internship and apprenticeship experiences that provide work readiness skills and exposure to careers. Club officials can also mobilize the business community and other partners to help youth gain a foothold in the labor force, and can work with colleges and universities to create supportive postsecondary success programs.

Help Youth Navigate College Enrollment and Financing Prospective college students are frequently overwhelmed by the process of identifying colleges and other postsecondary institutions they are interested in attending and to which they might be admitted.  College hopefuls must also navigate a complex set of steps as part of the application process.  Taking the SATs, meeting deadlines, completing financial aid applications, finding scholarship opportunities, writing essays, gathering recommendations and paying application fees can pose barriers to college entry. Many students, particularly those whose parents did not go to college, need extra support in navigating the many hurdles to successfully applying to and seeking financial aid for postsecondary education. Institutions of higher education, community-based organizations and libraries can promote postsecondary access and readiness by providing financial aid information, assistance in identifying schools and completing applications, and job training.

**Conclusion**

The examples above highlight some of the strategies that Boys & Girls Club leaders can use to provide high-quality OST opportunities for older youth. These programs play an important role in helping youth develop the skills and confidence that will lead to success in school and beyond. It is important to note that a system of programs for older youth will naturally look different from programs for younger children because of the unique developmental needs of older youth. The challenge for Club leaders and other community officials is to identify what programs youth need and want and to then build a system of opportunities reflecting their interests.

This strategy guide identified four key strategies for engaging older youth in OST programs:

• Coordinate systems to support effective service delivery, so that Club resources, program approaches and program activities are aligned;

• Ensure programs are of high quality, with standards in place to assess program structure, operations, and staff training;

• Prioritize relevant and rigorous programming for older youth, which can build skills, increase participation and promote youth development; and

• Promote college attendance and workplace readiness by supporting youth in navigating the college planning and application process and offering hands-on career exploration opportunities.

These strategies do not necessarily require much additional spending. Instead, Club leaders can often connect existing community resources to widen the range of high-quality OST programs available for older youth. By working with business leaders, universities, the arts and technology sectors, and many other partners, Club leaders can create a more cohesive and sustainable system of supports that help older youth succeed. When older youth are positively engaged in OST programs that enable them to fulfill their potential, both youth and their communities are more likely to thrive.

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