



Learning from the Best: Strategies Gained from Teacher Feedback to Recruit and Retain Educators for Out-of-School Time Programs

Executive Summary

Youth-serving organizations, school districts, and camps face a unique set of challenges when the time comes to hire staff for their out-of-school time (OST) programs. Concerns around teacher burnout and dissatisfaction have led to increased anxieties about the ability to find and retain staff. By planning in advance to develop strategies to address the factors that have contributed to feelings of burnout and dissatisfaction, OST providers can help alleviate stressors that educators have experienced over the past two years and attract new talent for their programs.

BellXcel, a national nonprofit organization that partners with OST providers to provide quality, evidence-based academic and enrichment programming, commissioned the Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) to explore qualitative findings from its summer 2021 staff survey. These findings bolster what the research says about finding and retaining high quality staff: stressing the importance of strong relationships and collaboration, promoting a positive teaching environment and culture, ensuring flexibility and autonomy for staff, providing supportive leadership, prioritizing the opportunity for personal and professional growth, and having materials and resources readily available and accessible. Though these findings and respective quotes are the result of staff's summer experiences, they apply to any OST provider looking for strategies to hire and retain staff.

SCRI also developed a companion toolkit, Staff Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention Guide, that helps practitioners implement evidence-based best practices when planning for hiring and retaining OST program staff. The toolkit includes guidance, tip sheets, planning tools, and sample language for successful OST-program staffing.

SCRI recommends the use of the strategies outlined in this paper and the companion toolkit to proactively reduce educator burnout whenever school districts and OST providers develop plans to recruit and hire staff. The pandemic's negative effect on educator mindset and job satisfaction will not only have ramifications for the immediate future, but will also likely prove to be long-lasting and pervasive. By implementing the strategies outlined in this paper, schools districts and OST providers will be able to attract and retain staff for their programs while also helping to combat staff burnout and dissatisfaction.

The Current Landscape

Teachers and students across the country continue to face challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as variant after variant has swept through schools, leading to high absences among both students and staff and further exacerbating burnout and feelings of dissatisfaction among the K-12 workforce.^{1,2,3} As these challenges continue, school districts and out-of-school-time (OST) providers are faced with juggling current staffing shortages while also looking forward to hiring and staffing for future OST programs.⁴

Much has already been said about the burnout and demoralization K-12 teachers have felt, and continue to feel, particularly since the start of the pandemic. We know that the stress of shifting to virtual learning, ongoing fears about contracting the virus themselves or bringing the virus home to vulnerable loved ones, concern for their students and any potential learning disadvantages they may experience, and the role schools have played in political battles amidst mask and vaccine mandates have all played a hand in adding to feelings of burnout and dissatisfaction.^{5,6,7,8} Add recent staff shortages to the mix and these feelings are compounded even further.

There is ample evidence that burnout among the K-12 workforce is leading to concerns about the ability to find and retain staff. In a recent survey of afterschool providers conducted by the Afterschool Alliance, respondents directly connected staff burnout with challenges to hire and/or retain staff. Over half of respondents to the survey said they were extremely concerned about finding staff to hire or staffing shortages; a similar percentage also cited staff burnout and staff well-being as an area they'd like to receive more guidance on. Evidence of the impact of staffing shortages on staff morale comes from a

recent Education Week Research Center survey, in which nearly seventy percent of respondents said that staffing shortages negatively affected their job satisfaction.¹⁰

“My favorite part was being able to have the scholars in person and give them the opportunity to have hands-on learning experiences that they missed out on during the school year due to COVID restrictions...”

Looking Forward

OST providers and schools have an opportunity to make meaningful changes to ease the stressors educators have experienced over the course of the pandemic when recruiting and hiring for their OST programs. There are many potential strategies for attracting and retaining staff that research shows can also help alleviate teacher burnout: increased salaries, flexible work schedules, the prioritization of professional development and teacher learning, a positive teaching environment and culture that includes trust, respect, and collaboration, supportive leadership, and the hiring of additional staff to take on responsibilities that fall outside of direct instruction.^{11,12,13,14}

Findings from a Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) analysis of qualitative data from surveys administered to summer program staff in 2021 show similar evidence and bolster strategies for attracting and retaining staff while also combating staff burnout and

1 Will, M. (2021, December 20). The Teaching Profession in 2021 (in Charts) EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-teaching-profession-in-2021-in-charts/2021/12>

2 Bever, L. (2022, January 7). Canceled buses and a superintendent in the classroom: How omicron has thrown schools into crisis. The Washington Post. Link: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/01/07/student-teacher-absences-omicron/>

3 Lieberman, M. (2021, December 9). The School Staffing Crisis Won't End Any Time Soon. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-school-staffing-crisis-wont-end-any-time-soon/2021/12>

4 Afterschool Alliance. (2022, January). Where Did All the Afterschool Staff Go? Link: <http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Afterschool-COVID-19-Wave-6-Brief.pdf>

5 Lieberman, M. (2022, January 4). Staffing Shortages are Hurting Students Who Need Extra Reading Support. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/staffing-shortages-are-hurting-students-who-need-extra-reading-support/2022/01>

6 Lieberman, M. (2021, October 15). How Staffing Shortages are Crushing Schools. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/how-staff-shortages-are-crushing-schools/2021/10>

7 Farber, K. (2022, January 24). Stress, Hypervigilance, and Decision Fatigue: Teaching During Omicron. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-stress-hypervigilance-and-decision-fatigue-teaching-during-omicron/2022/01>

8 Diliberti, M.K., Grant, D., Schwartz, H.L. (2021). Stress Topped the Reasons Why Public School Teachers Quit, Even Before COVID-19. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Link: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1121-2.html

9 Afterschool Alliance. (2022, January). Where Did All the Afterschool Staff Go? Link: <http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Afterschool-COVID-19-Wave-6-Brief.pdf>

10 Heubeck, E., Lloyd, S. (2022, January 12). EdRecruiter 2022: What Matters to K-12 Job Seekers and Educators Now. EdWeek. Link: <https://www.edweek.org/events/webinar/edrecruiter-2022-what-matters-to-k-12-job-seekers-and-educators-now-br>

dissatisfaction. These qualitative findings drive home the importance of strong relationships and collaboration, a positive teaching environment and culture, flexibility and autonomy for staff, supportive leadership, the opportunity for personal and professional growth, and having materials and resources readily available and accessible. Though the findings and respective quotes are the result of staff's summer experiences, they should be considered as schools and OST providers consider their own strategies for attracting and retaining staff for their programs, regardless of the time of year they're being implemented.

Zoning in on Positive Educator Experiences

BellXcel, a national nonprofit that empowers its partners to provide high quality, evidence-based OST programming, helps programs implement a suite of evaluation tools, including end-of-program surveys to staff, families, and youth, to gather stories of impact and engage in data-driven continuous improvement. The surveys ask a series of scaled and open-ended questions about program satisfaction and experience.¹⁵

SCRI analyzed educator responses to open-ended questions in the Summer 2021 staff survey; findings presented here are results from an analysis of three open-ended questions asked in the staff survey:

- What was one thing that helped you do your job well?
- What was a favorite or memorable part of your experience working for the summer program?
- Please share one skill that the summer program helped you develop or enhance.

SCRI discovered that the BellXcel summer program provided staff with experiences that closely align with strategies to both attract and retain staff and reduce educator burnout and dissatisfaction.

Relationships Matter and Collaboration is Key

SCRI found that educators overwhelmingly described the importance of relationships when asked what helped them do their job well or what was a favorite or memorable part of their experience working for their program. More specifically, positive relationships between teachers and opportunities for collaboration were mentioned frequently. Research shows that a key indicator of teacher retention is opportunities for meaningful collaboration.¹⁶

“The support from not only upper management but the teachers and other Instructional Aides were very supportive towards each other. That was an AWESOME demonstration of TEAMWORK.”

Another staff member said a favorite or memorable part was *“Having the opportunity to work alongside other professionals to plan and review student progress.”*

A staff member also shared *“Working with other knowledgeable educators and using what resources that we had to get the job done”* was a favorite or memorable part of their experience.

Supportive Leadership Makes a Difference

SCRI found that staff members frequently mentioned supportive leadership as one thing that helped them

11 Afterschool Alliance. (2022, January). Where Did All the Afterschool Staff Go? Link: <http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Afterschool-COVID-19-Wave-6-Brief.pdf>.

12 Heubeck, E., Lloyd, S. (2022, January 12). EdRecruiter 2022: What Matters to K-12 Job Seekers and Educators Now. EdWeek. <https://www.edweek.org/events/webinar/edrecruiter-2022-what-matters-to-k-12-job-seekers-and-educators-now-br>

13 Acosta Price, O., Santoro, D.A. (2021, October). Structural Supports to Promote Teacher Well-Being. EdResearch for Recovery, Brown University. Link: https://annenberglab.brown.edu/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Brief_19.pdf

14 Walker, T. (2021, November 12). Getting Serious About Teacher Burnout. NEA Today. Link: <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/getting-serious-about-teacher-burnout>

15 The staff survey was administered to all staff for whom a valid email address was available. Initial email invitations were sent via SurveyMonkey approximately five days before the end of their summer program, with two follow-up reminders sent 2 and five days after the initial invitation. SCRI analyzed responses received between June 14, 2021 and September 12, 2021. Valid responses were received from 1,798 staff members, which makes up 42% of staff who received the initial survey invitation.

16 Heubeck, E., Lloyd, S. (2022, January 12). EdRecruiter 2022: What Matters to K-12 Job Seekers and Educators Now. EdWeek. <https://www.edweek.org/events/webinar/edrecruiter-2022-what-matters-to-k-12-job-seekers-and-educators-now-br>

do their job well or a favorite or memorable part of their experience. Staff described program leadership providing emotional and professional support, their availability for questions and feedback, and clear communication of expectations and schedules. Research shows that school environments where mutual respect, trust, and communication exist between teachers and leaders can help lessen feelings of burnout and dissatisfaction.¹⁷

One staff member said *“The Instructional Coach and the Program Manager were very available and we always knew where they were in case we had a question”* was one thing that helped them do their job well.

Another staff member shared *“The support. With our instructional coach, I knew they were there to help out when I needed it. She also took time to make videos in the beginning of our...program, to show us how to use the BellXcel program. She was very helpful!”* helped them do their job well.

A staff member also shared that the instructional coach at their program helped them do their job well. They shared *“My coach. She was amazing. After 15 years in public education, I finally had coaching support that made me feel supported and actually improved my classroom management and my direct instruction.”*

Prioritize Professional Development and Opportunities for Personal and Professional Growth

SCRI found that when asked about new skills the program helped enhance or develop, staff most frequently detailed how their experience led to new instructional, leadership, and interpersonal skills. They described, for example, learning new classroom management techniques, skills for building relationships with staff and students, and instructional strategies for teaching populations of students they did not have previous experience instructing. Research shows that school environments where there is a focus on teacher learning can lead to higher levels of teacher satisfaction; OST providers in particular can benefit from prioritizing opportunities for

professional growth, as a recent study by RAND showed that summer programs are an especially great chance for educators to engage in professional learning and skill development due to their less-compliance driven environment.¹⁸

“The program helped me enhance my confidence in the knowledge of pedagogy that I have! It made me want to develop them even further and go back to school!”

One staff member said the program helped them in *“learning new behavior management techniques for a grade level that I haven’t worked with before, and understanding the diversity of the scholars.”*

Another staff member shared that the program *“... helped me enhance my confidence in the knowledge of pedagogy that I have! It made me want to develop them even further and go back to school!”*

A staff member also said the program *“... helped me develop better problem solving skills, empathy and understanding skills, being more intentional, instructional skills, and better leadership strategy.”*

Autonomy and Flexibility to Meet Student Needs

SCRI found that autonomy and flexibility helped staff do their jobs well. Staff described flexibility within their program and how it allowed them to make choices that best served their students’ needs. Research also shows that teachers have higher morale when they are given the freedom to choose how best to teach their students.

17 Acosta Price, O., Santoro, D.A. (2021, October). Structural Supports to Promote Teacher Well-Being. EdResearch for Recovery, Brown University. Link: https://annenberg.brown.edu/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Brief_19.pdf

18 Steiner, E.D., Stelitano, L., Bogart, A. & Meyers, S. (2021) The Promise of Summer as a Time for Teacher Professional Learning: Findings from a National Survey and Implications from the BellXcel Program. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Link: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA196-1.html.

19 Acosta Price, O., Santoro, D.A. (2021, October). Structural Supports to Promote Teacher Well-Being. EdResearch for Recovery, Brown University. Link: https://annenberg.brown.edu/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Brief_19.pdf

20 Walker, T. (2021, November 12). Getting Serious About Teacher Burnout. NEA Today. Link: <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/getting-serious-about-teacher-burnout>

One staff member said *“As a licensed teacher, the freedom to actually teach to the children’s needs”* helped them do their job well.

Similarly, another staff member shared that program leadership was *“always available if I had questions, but I appreciated being able to teach the kids the way I felt was best without outside interference.”*

A staff member said that *“Flexibility, the ability to adjust the program to meet the needs of our class”* also helped them do their job well.

Extra Hands Are Essential

SCRI found that staff appreciated having the assistance of classroom aides and support staff available to them. When describing what helped them do their job well, staff frequently mentioned how having additional support relieved stress and led to better instruction. Research also shows that additional support can lead to educators feeling less “time-strapped” and undervalued.^{21,22}

In response to what helped them do their job well, one staff member said *“My classroom helper. She was fantastic. She helped wherever she was needed.”*

Another staff member shared *“The assistance of the Youth Development Professionals in the classroom was extremely helpful. They were pulled every which way to cover for being short staffed and they still managed to check in and make sure I had all the help I needed.”*

A staff member also noted that *“Having an aid/camp counselor in the classroom with me, so I could give proper attention to each student”* helped them do their job well.

Have Materials and Resources Ready-Made and Available

SCRI found that having curricula, materials, and resources already made and available helped staff do their job well. Staff discussed the benefits of having easy and convenient access to materials and resources and specifically mentioned how useful it was having the curriculum and its relevant resources prepared ahead of time. Research indicates that offering an additional layer of support, such as making sure

your programming materials are readily available for your staff, helps staff feel supported and valued.²³

One staff member said having materials and resources ready-made and available *“Takes the hard part out of teaching and I could focus on how to deliver the material.”*

One staff member shared *“The scripted lessons were good and helped eliminate the stress of planning what is needed.”*

A staff member also said that *“Having lesson plans already completed for me was a major plus.”*

“Having materials and resources ready-made and available takes the hard part out of teaching and I could focus on how to deliver the material.”

The Unique Experience of OST programs

Staff also mentioned that working for their summer program provided them with a unique teaching experience. This set of findings and accompanying quotes are specific to summer programs, but can be relevant to OST programs generally.

Some staff compared their in-person summer experience to the previous year and a half of remote learning and noted that being in-person was refreshing and rewarding for them and their scholars. Other staff described how their summer teaching experience gave them the opportunity to teach in new ways or in a more relaxed environment. Staff also mentioned that their experience working in a summer program allowed them to reach students and focus on their needs more than they might be able to in a regular school year setting.

One staff member shared that being in-person was a favorite or memorable part of their summer experience and said *“My favorite part was being able to have the*

21 Heubeck, E., Lloyd, S. (2022, January 12). EdRecruiter 2022: What Matters to K-12 Job Seekers and Educators Now. EdWeek. <https://www.edweek.org/events/webinar/edrecruiter-2022-what-matters-to-k-12-job-seekers-and-educators-now-br>

22 Walker, T. (2021, November 12). Getting Serious About Teacher Burnout. NEA Today. Link: <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/getting-serious-about-teacher-burnout>

23 Heubeck, E., Lloyd, S. (2022, January 12). EdRecruiter 2022: What Matters to K-12 Job Seekers and Educators Now. EdWeek. <https://www.edweek.org/events/webinar/edrecruiter-2022-what-matters-to-k-12-job-seekers-and-educators-now-br>

scholars in person and give them the opportunity to have hands-on learning experiences that they missed out on during the school year due to COVID restrictions.”

Noting the difference between their summer and school year experiences, one staff member said a favorite or memorable part of their summer was that their summer experience was *“so much more laidback than a normal school year.”*

Another staff member shared that they *“really liked the focus of incorporating math in literacy and literacy in math. I do this at times during the school year, but I think I would like to try it more.”*

Conclusion and Recommendations

Schools and OST providers have an opportunity to proactively reduce educator burnout when they plan for hiring and retaining staff for future OST programs. Using findings from the qualitative analysis of staff responses, SCRI recommends using the following strategies.

- **Gather and utilize teacher feedback to highlight program successes and attract talent** Positive feedback from staff is a powerful resource to showcase your program and attract qualified candidates. Gathering staff feedback using quantitative and qualitative findings from surveys or other evaluation tools can be an effective way to tell stories in staff’s own words about job satisfaction, enriching experiences, and professional opportunities. Include staff feedback on positive experiences in all hiring and marketing efforts and materials.
- **Promote the unique experience of summer and other OST programs in marketing materials** Summer and other OST programs can offer opportunities and experiences that are unique from those in the standard school year setting, such as a more relaxed environment, the chance to try out new teaching strategies, or a break from remote learning. Summer and other OST programs should highlight these differences in their marketing and hiring materials and strategies as a way to attract new staff.
- **Encourage supportive relationships** Program and school leadership can boost staff morale by encouraging positive and supportive relationships among staff and providing space for meaningful interaction and collaboration. Opportunities for meaningful interaction and collaboration can include meeting regularly as teams to discuss instructional strategies or the needs of specific youth, co-teaching, and peer observations.
- **Make time for relevant and intentional professional learning** When staff feel that there is a focus on their own professional and personal growth, they are more likely to feel higher job satisfaction. Where possible, allow for staff to have a choice in their professional development so they feel empowered and supported to prioritize their own learning.
- **Find ways to reduce stress for staff** Provide extra support to educators for tasks that might be time-consuming and take away from direct instruction. Hiring additional support staff, removing unnecessary paperwork, or strategically focusing on the most important job responsibilities are ways to lessen stress so that teachers can focus on doing the best for their students.
- **Create a climate of trust, support, and respect** When staff feel supported by their leaders and work in a trusting and respectful environment, they are more likely to stay in the workforce. Prioritize strong communication, clear expectations, and mutual respect so that staff feel safe, confident, and empowered in their day-to-day job responsibilities.
- **Utilize SCRI’s Staffing Toolkit** Make the most of SCRI’s Staffing Toolkit as you plan and implement your OST program. The toolkit covers topics such as planning for success, targeted recruitment and hiring, and training, support, and retention, and includes evidence-based best practices when planning for hiring and retaining program staff.

Conclusion

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth, their families, and educators will be long-lasting and pervasive. While many of the ramifications have yet to be revealed, the pandemic's effect on educator well-being and mindset are happening right now. And as the nation reels from yet another wave of COVID-19 cases, resulting in widespread absences among students and staff, educator burnout is even more prevalent. Schools and OST providers must address the causes of educator burnout and make every effort to attract and retain staff so that the youth of America can learn in a stable, positive learning environment, despite the upheaval of the world around them.

About Sperling Center for Research and Innovation

Sperling Center for Research and Innovation, SCRI, blends practical experience with research insights to help educators and youth development professionals turn evidence into action. We meet partners where they are, helping them optimize quality, improve outcomes, deepen knowledge, and strengthen systems to achieve their goals. We have unique expertise in summer and afterschool — rooted in proven approaches for equitable and engaging experiences for young people. Through coaching, intentional design, strategy development, growth planning, evaluation, and targeted tools and resources, SCRI offers evidence-based, actionable guidance and practical steps to advance partners' priorities.

About BellXcel

BellXcel is the engine for youth programs. With BellXcel youth program providers can access time saving digital tools so they can spend less time dealing with program logistics and paperwork, and more time focused on what truly matters most — elevating the potential of youth.

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