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STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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BACKGROUND

Young people who live in rural areas are less likely to finish high school¹ and to complete college² than their urban and suburban peers. These adolescents are also more likely to use drugs and alcohol.³ In fact, rural adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 have the highest levels of drug use in this age group.⁴ Out-of-school time programs in rural areas can provide healthy and constructive activities that offer productive ways for children and youth to spend their time, build positive relationships, and receive academic support.^{5,6,7,8} This brief highlights the challenges faced by rural out-of-school programs and suggests several strategies that can strengthen these programs.

WHAT ARE RURAL COMMUNITIES?

Rural communities are areas located outside of urbanized or metropolitan areas, with populations of 10,000 or larger.⁹ Rural communities also include non-metropolitan towns¹⁰ of fewer than 2,500 residents.¹¹ These towns are often located in open areas outside of suburban communities¹² and are sparsely populated.¹³ The United States has approximately 2,000 rural counties, which cover 75 percent of U.S. land.¹⁴ Nearly one-fifth of all Americans live in rural areas.¹⁵

WHAT SPECIAL CHALLENGES DO RURAL OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMS FACE?

Out-of-school programs in rural areas share many of the same challenges that programs in other areas face, such as coping with limited funding and addressing staff recruitment and retention issues. But studies have also identified unique challenges that can hinder the success of rural out-of-school programs:

- **Rural programs serve at-risk populations.** Although many rural areas are not impoverished,¹⁶ communities farther away from urban areas have higher poverty rates than those adjacent to urban areas.¹⁷ Nearly one in five rural children lives in poverty, compared with 15 percent of children in urban areas.¹⁸ Socio-economic disadvantages and limited health services put some rural youth at risk of academic failure or participation in “risky behaviors,” such as substance abuse or criminal activity.¹⁹ One in five rural children is food insecure (that is, he or she has limited, uncertain, or no access to nutritious or safe foods²⁰). Geographic isolation can also limit access to health care and other social services. Correspondingly, limited preventive services can contribute to an increased risk of poorer mental health.²¹ Living in a rural area is also associated with higher teen suicide risk, as research links geographic isolation and a heightened risk of suicide among the male teen population.²² Suicide rates in some rural communities are among the highest in the nation.²³
- **Geographic isolation can contribute to poor access to transportation.** Rural communities are often spread over large geographic areas, resulting in long travel distances between children’s homes and program sites.²⁴ Children in impoverished rural households are three times more likely to be without transportation than are children from non-rural households.²⁵ Rural areas often lack public transportation systems, and travel by car or van is adversely affected by rising gas prices.²⁶ As a result,

rural out-of-school programs face immense logistic and financial difficulties in transporting participants to and from program sites.²⁷

- **Rural programs have limited funding.** Most out-of-school-time programs face funding challenges. However, meeting these challenges can be particularly daunting in rural communities, which typically have fewer financial resources to draw from than urban areas.²⁸ Rural communities have smaller populations and fewer businesses, public institutions, and community organizations than their urban and suburban counterparts. Limited local job opportunities in some rural communities contribute to fewer available private-sector partners (e.g., local business and community organizations),²⁹ making it especially difficult for rural out-of-school programs to plan and implement activities requiring substantial resources.³⁰ In addition, rural out-of-school programs face a hurdle in obtaining federal funding, which is often allocated on the basis of population size. Rural communities' small populations tend to be insufficient for many state and federal grant programs.³¹ As it is, the amount of money that rural programs spend on each participant is far lower than the amount spent by their urban and suburban counterparts.³²
- **Rural programs have fewer highly trained staff members.** Low population density, a less-educated workforce, and limited financial resources make recruiting and securing trained staff difficult in some rural communities.³³ Highly competent staff requires specialized training, which is more readily available in suburban and urban areas.³⁴ When staff members in rural out-of-school programs do receive training, many opt to move to urban areas for better job opportunities.³⁵ Such migration deprives program participants of qualified staff and discourages program administrators from offering job training in the future for fear that it will encourage the departure of already-scarce staff.³⁶

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR OBTAINING RESOURCES FOR RURAL OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

A number of approaches may be used by rural programs to attract funding to improve programming. These are described below.

Strategy 1: Consider Building Coalitions to Help with Transportation. Improving rural out-of-school-time transportation involves multiple efforts—obtaining funds, building coalitions with stakeholders, and devising an effective course of action. It may be valuable to invite community members and organizations (e.g., parents, schools, community leaders, and funders) to brainstorm about program transportation. This kind of collective effort can help to streamline community resources, identify new funding sources, and maximize transportation options. For example, rural out-of-school programs can apply for support through the Workforce Investment Act, which funds the transportation of older youth to and from job preparation, internships, or other work-related activities.³⁷

Additional transportation strategies include:³⁸

- *Considering school bus route changes.* If the program is held at a school, use school busing if it is available. Perhaps the school district can add an additional route to transport program participants either from school to the program site, or from the program site to home. Depending on the school district, the school may fund all or some of the related transportation costs.³⁹
- *Using existing public transportation resources.* If a public transportation system is already in place, use these resources to cut costs by grouping passengers, having fewer one-way trips, and sharing transportation employees, vehicles, and facilities.⁴⁰ The key to forging partnerships between out-of-school programs and public transit systems is developing strong relationships with transportation officials.⁴¹ These relationships can be established by stressing the importance of out-of-school programs and demonstrating how public transit benefits the whole community.⁴² Public transportation systems may transport youth, donate vans or buses to out-of-school programs, provide drivers, or train out-of-school-time program staff who will provide transportation.⁴³

- *Subsidizing public transportation fares.* If public transportation already exists, subsidizing travel costs can help ease the financial burdens of out-of-school-time program participants and their families. It would be helpful to consider what an appropriate subsidy amount would be, whether subsidy scales should be based on family income, and what subsidy amounts could be offered by the program, the transit provider, and the community.⁴⁴
- *Partnering with other community organizations.* Since community organizations often need transportation services for limited times during the day or week, it may be possible for out-of-school programs to partner with other community organizations to share a van, transportation schedule, or costs. Potential community partners could include child care providers, welfare-to-work agencies, elderly service centers, agencies for the disabled, housing authorities, and religious institutions.⁴⁵ Before partnering, weigh the benefits of a community partnership versus the start-up time required and determine who will be responsible for the vehicle's ownership, maintenance, liability, and related costs.⁴⁶

Strategy 2: Identify Possible Funding Sources. Public service organizations, local private foundations, corporations, and individual contributors can all serve as potential funding sources for rural out-of-school programs.⁴⁷ Municipal and county human services departments, parks, and school systems can also be approached for financial support, as can private organizations, such as the United Way. Rural out-of-school programs should also consider YMCAs, YWCAs, museums, and other local businesses and organizations for in-kind contributions or subsidized services (e.g., reduced rent, discounted utilities, and volunteers).⁴⁸ The following box lists some sources of federal funding relevant to helping youth in rural areas.

SOURCES OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING

- **The U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program** is a source of federal funding devoted to expanding academic opportunities for youth during out-of-school hours, increasing their academic achievement, and reducing their drug use and violent behaviors.⁴⁹ This state block-grant targets low-income students.⁵⁰ Some states even reserve a portion of their CCLC grant funds for rural programs.⁵¹ For details on the grant and application processes, see: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html>.
- **Child and Adult Care Food Program** funds “meals, snacks, and nutrition education” for child care programs serving low-income children. Out-of-school programs with 50 percent or more of participants qualifying for a free or reduced-price lunch are eligible for the grant. Programs do not need to provide evidence of this eligibility; nor do they need to be licensed to apply for funding.⁵² Find out more about this initiative, food providers, the reimbursement process, and programs in your area at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/care/>.
- **U.S. Department of Justice's Tribal Youth Program** offers grants to Native American tribes or coalitions for youth development activities. For more information, see: <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org>.
- **Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP)'s Small, Rural School Grant Program** offers supplemental funding to Title I, Safe and Drug Free schools, which can also be used to fund out-of-school programs. The funds are reserved for school districts located in rural communities. For more information, visit: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/reap.html>.⁵³
- **U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State, Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES)** strives to strengthen youth programming by fostering collaboration among the U.S. Department of Agriculture, land-grant universities, and the 4-H youth development program. This effort seeks to promote information sharing among multiple institutions, broaden the education of rural youth, and attract potential supporters for out-of-school programs in rural communities. Additional information on funding a new or existing program, respectively, is available at: <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/childreneyouthfamiliesnewcommunitiesprojects.cfm> and <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/childreneyouthfamiliesustainablecommunityprojects.cfm>.
- **Rural Business-Cooperative Service** unites private and community organizations to financially and technically support rural businesses and cooperatives. In addition to providing loans and grants to businesses and nonprofit organizations, this private-public collaborative addresses rural developmental concerns. One of these concerns is the need to provide effective child care programs.⁵⁴

A state-by-state database on out-of-school program best practices is available at:

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/nrdp>.

- **Rural Housing Service** provides funding to create and improve rural community facilities, including out-of-school program sites and child care centers. More details about this funding can be found at: <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rhs>.⁵⁵
- **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) State Program** provides financial support to states for economic and community development. CDBG funds have increasingly been used to support youth development and social services efforts. The CDBG is particularly interested in rural communities that are ineligible for city entitlement grants.⁵⁶ For information visit: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/communitydevelopment/programs/stateadmin/>.

Strategy 3: Increase the Number of Trained Staff Members. Appropriately trained staff can help to ensure that young people are exposed to out-of-school-time activities that benefit their growth and development.

- *Recruit public school teachers.* Rural programs can increase the size of their staffs by seeking out the community's existing certified teachers to work in after-school programs. Public school teachers in rural areas have more teaching experience, on average, than do their urban and suburban counterparts.⁵⁷ Teachers are already qualified to work with students, and they may have established a rapport with program participants and their families.⁵⁸
- *Provide Staff Training.* Staff training has been identified as one of the best ways to improve staff retention. Research identifies poor staff management (e.g., insufficient job training, immediate responsibility without sufficient preparation, and nonexistent or inadequate supervision) as a cause of high staff turnover in out-of-school programs.⁵⁹ Staff training can help clarify job responsibilities and equip staff to support participants effectively. Studies have found that if programs cannot offer training to the entire staff, it can be beneficial to train even one or two staff members, who, in turn, can influence others.⁶⁰ Elements of effective training topics include academic content areas, artistic instruction, child and adolescent development, and strategies for interacting with youth (e.g., conflict resolution and classroom management).⁶¹
- *Recruit retirees.* Culturally, rural communities are often close-knit⁶² and may be successful in recruiting community members to volunteer for various program activities. Retirees and other adults with reduced work hours and/or grown children may have more free time to devote to volunteer activities.⁶³

Strategy 4: Use Existing Volunteer Organizations to Recruit Staff. In addition to area teachers, retirees, and community volunteers, programs can also use work-study employees to help participants with homework, tutoring, or reading.⁶⁴ Programs may also consider recruiting staff from the following volunteer organizations:

- *AmeriCorps.* AmeriCorps is a network of national service programs that enables volunteers to serve in educational, public safety, health, and environmental capacities. AmeriCorps volunteers typically serve for one to two years in exchange for money toward college. For more information on how to become a site for AmeriCorps volunteers, visit: http://www.americorps.org/for_organizations/funding/funding.asp.
- *4-H Afterschool.* 4-H Afterschool helps 4-H and other youth organizations create and improve after-school programs in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the nation. It provides community organizations, such as out-of-school programs, access to 4-H resources, including the Cooperative Extension System of the nation's land-grant universities and the USDA. For additional information, visit: <http://www.4-hafterschool.org/aboutus.aspx>.
- *PTA.* The Parent Teacher Association is a network of local and state organizations that advocates for expanding children's educational opportunities and serves as a resource for families and communities on school issues. PTA promotes after-school programs at the association's host schools. To access PTA information on after-school programs, visit:

http://www.pta.org/local_leadership_subprogram_1117566825703.html. For information on joining or establishing your own local PTA, visit: http://www.pta.org/jp_ways_to_join.html.

- *Experience Corps*. Experience Corps is a program that recruits and places volunteers over the age of 55 to provide services in their communities. Experience Corps members spend between five and 15 hours a week tutoring and mentoring elementary school students. The program provides training in early childhood education and literacy instruction. For information on receiving Experience Corps volunteers or starting your own Experience Corps project, visit: http://www.experiencecorps.org/join_us/guideposts.html.
- Programs should also consider collaborating with existing youth organizations, such as Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, or Boys and Girls Club.

Strategy 5: Maximize Resources. Organizational support, technology, and additional program resources (e.g., art supplies, snacks, books, and tutoring materials) strengthen rural out-of-school programs. Accessing new funding sources (see Strategy 2) can enable out-of-school programs to obtain and maintain program activities.⁶⁵ Rural programs should consider using existing resources, such as local schools and community colleges. Both can offer space, transportation, tutoring materials, and technological expertise and equipment. A community college may even be able to provide career education that may encourage older program participants to attend college or that can prepare them for the workforce.⁶⁶ Moreover, many rural public schools, as with their urban and suburban counterparts, have Internet access.⁶⁷

STRATEGIES FOR OBTAINING RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAM

Strategy 1: Consider building coalitions to help with transportation.

Strategy 2: Identify possible funding sources.

Strategy 3: Increase the number of trained staff members.

Strategy 4: Use existing volunteer organizations to recruit staff.

Strategy 5: Maximize resources.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR RURAL OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAM

Some additional resources to help strengthen rural out-of-school programs are listed here:

- **SchoolGrants** offers tips for grant writing and provides lists of grant opportunities for public and private schools and for school districts. Out-of-school programs based in schools may benefit from the organization's resources; available at: <http://www.schoolgrants.org>.
- **The Program in Education, Afterschool, & Resiliency (PEAR)** provides rural out-of-school program resources, including research briefs addressing challenges, suggested improvements, and funding sources. To access these materials, visit: <http://www.pearweb.org/research/rural.html>.
- **HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC)** has identified and studied four essential components for strengthening rural communities—leadership, charitable assets, entrepreneurship, and youth. HTC's resources on youth engagement and attraction provide tools for youth entrepreneurship education, leadership programs, and community support (e.g., career education and mentoring). These tools are available at: <http://www.htccommunity.org/youth>.
- **Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development Lending Library** offers literature and videos for out-of-school program administrators, curriculum developers, and parents. Materials cover child rearing, special needs, and other child- and youth-related topics. To access materials, visit: <http://www.coadinc.org/Main.php?page=programs-ece-borrow-parents>. Information for those wanting to start an out-of-school program can be found at: <http://www.coadinc.org/Main.php?page=programs-ece-provider-1>.
- **SEDL** is a nonprofit research corporation that studies teaching and learning. It provides information on subject-specific enrichment activities at: <http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/guide/science/>.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Program: Generacion Diez

Location: Adams County, Pennsylvania

In the following interview, **Howard Rosen, Ph.D.**, the Director of Generacion Diez, discusses his rural out-of-school program and reflects on some of the reasons behind its success.

What is Generacion Diez? *Generacion Diez* is an after-school program that serves the migrant community in Adams County, Pennsylvania.⁶⁸ The program was founded in 1998 with a four-fold purpose: 1) to strengthen young people's academic achievement and school attendance; 2) to improve their study, social, and emotional skills; 3) to provide parents with support and social services; and 4) to increase parents' school involvement and advance parent-teacher cooperation.⁶⁹ Specifically, the program targets second- through fifth-grade students who are two academic years behind and/or have siblings who are in trouble at school or with the law. *Generacion Diez* also provides English as a Second Language classes, social services, and local school support (e.g., offering teachers Spanish courses and helping translate school-parent correspondence).⁷⁰

How are program participants recruited? Students typically are referred to the program. Teachers, principals, school guidance counselors, and youth agencies receive applications to pass along to students who demonstrate the following characteristics:

- Low academic achievement;
- Behavior problems; and
- A lack of parental participation in school.

What does the program offer? The program, which operates after school between 2:30 and 6 p.m., provides students academic support, health and nutrition instruction, social and emotional skill building, homework help, and both a snack and dinner. It also uses two evidence-based curricula—*Reading Recovery* and *Promoting Alternative-THinking Strategies (PATHS)*.

- The *Reading Recovery* curriculum is used to strengthen students' reading skills.
- The *Promoting Alternative-THinking Strategies (PATHS)* curriculum is used to build student's interpersonal, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills and to help them develop empathy.

In addition, the program provides community service opportunities (e.g., reading to senior citizens) and enrichment activities (e.g., math and science projects).

How do participants arrive to and from your program? *Generacion Diez* contracts with bus companies to provide small buses to take participants from their schools to a central meeting place, and then a larger school bus transports participants from the central location to the program site.

How is program staff recruited? Most staff members come from the community or have a background that is similar to that of the participants (e.g., they may be migrants themselves). As a result, staff and participants share ethnic, cultural, and linguistic similarities. In addition to the cultural similarities between staff and participants, the staff's *commitment* to participants is the "secret to the program's success."⁷¹

How active are parents in the program? Initially, we established a parent advisory group to meet the parental involvement requirements of our grant from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Over time, the group has expanded its scope. Parent volunteers teach young people Mexican folkloric dances, songs, and music every Saturday. Parents make costumes for youth performances before audiences that have included Pennsylvania governors and the state Secretary of Education. Parents have also organized cultural celebrations, such as a Las Posadas procession, and a Spanish Festival complete with a pig roast and soccer tournament.

What advice would you offer other rural programs?

- Partner with schools for transportation assistance, program resources, and to develop a joint support network for youth and their families.
- Have an outside evaluator report on program progress; this information that can be used to raise funds.
- Use evidence-based curricula because they have proven results.
- Involve parents, school administrators, board members, and youth in program reflection and improvement.

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