

**Role of the Education Specialist
in Supporting OST Program Quality**

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As part of ongoing efforts to support and enhance the quality of its Out-of-School Time (OST) programs for elementary- and middle-grades students in New York, starting in the 2012-13 school year the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) required all OST programs to have an education specialist. The education specialist is expected to work with each OST program to identify appropriate curricula, help staff create lesson plans, oversee implementation of program activities, foster continuous quality improvement, and build productive relationships with the schools attended by program participants. This new staffing requirement is grounded in findings from previous evaluations of DYCD youth programs recommending that high-quality programs feature staff with the capacity to successfully implement sequenced, skill-building activities, often supported by a master teacher who helps align program content with learning goals (Russell, Walking Eagle, & Mielke, 2010; Sinclair, Sanzone, Russell & Reisner, 2012).

DYCD envisions the education specialist playing a significant role in supporting the quality of OST programs. To guide programs, DYCD specified that an education specialist should have at least a four-year college degree, experience in curriculum development, and, ideally, teaching credentials. DYCD also expects that the role of the education specialist will constitute at least 25 percent of a full-time position for a single OST program, and that an education specialist can work with up to four OST programs. Programs serving fewer than 90 participants are not required to have a separate position; in these programs, the program director can assume the role of the education specialist. In addition, some OST programs funded through City Council funds are strongly encouraged—but not required—to have an education specialist.

In 2012-13, the first year in which OST programs were required to have an education specialist, Policy Studies Associates (PSA) was asked by DYCD to develop and administer a survey that explored the qualifications and responsibilities of the education specialists working in OST programs. The survey revealed that the education specialists generally met DYCD's stated expectations. However, both the survey and DYCD's own monitoring of OST programs revealed some challenges related to the education specialist role. DYCD staff, for example, found that some programs did not hire anyone to fill this position¹ while other programs were unsure of the benefit of hiring an education specialist. Survey respondents reported that challenges to the education specialist role included finding time to review lesson plans, coordinating with school-day staff, and identifying relevant approaches for assessing youth outcomes and program quality.

In response to these observations, in 2013-14, DYCD asked the PSA research team to conduct a study to explore the role and value-added of the education specialist in OST programs, focusing on the extent to which the education specialist contributes to activities that support the overall quality of programs. This exploratory study, summarized in this report, yielded important findings about the role of the education specialist and the ways in which the position can be used strategically to support program planning and implementation. Findings suggest that:

- All programs, even those not contractually required to have an education specialist, can benefit from having a dedicated staff member with specific skills and knowledge to support program planning and implementation. In programs in

¹ As stated above, not all OST programs are contractually required to hire an education specialist.

this study, education specialists played a key role in supporting lesson planning, staff development, and aligning OST program content with school-day curricula.

- The success of the education specialist position requires consideration of how the role can be effective and add value within the unique contexts of each OST program. Program directors should also consider how their role and that of the education specialist can intersect and complement each other.
- The education specialist may have maximum impact on program quality when that individual works with a single program and does not have other responsibilities within the program.

Study Methodology

To develop a sample of programs for this study, DYCD first identified a pool of 31 OST programs. These programs represented a variety of OST provider organizations, grade-levels and communities served, approaches to staffing the education specialist role, and observed quality. To classify the education specialist role, DYCD used information entered into program budgets and work scopes to determine whether the program included a separate education specialist position in its staffing configuration. In total, DYCD identified 17 programs that had an education specialist; in the other 14 programs, the program director assumed the responsibilities of this role.

Four of these programs—two with a dedicated education specialist and two without—were selected to host exploratory site visits designed to provide foundational knowledge about the roles and contributions of various staff members to activities related to program implementation and quality. PSA researchers conducted visits to these sites in January and February 2014 to interview program staff who were involved in planning activities, selecting curricula, aligning content with school-day learning, and supporting continuous quality improvement practices. On-site interview respondents included program directors and, where in place, education specialists. PSA researchers also spoke with activity leaders to understand their processes for planning and delivering activities.

An additional 16 programs were then selected from the pool of 31 programs identified by DYCD to complete the study sample. Telephone interviews with these programs, conducted in March 2014, built on data collected during the exploratory site visits and aimed to provide further insight into the role and value-added of the education specialist in OST programs. PSA researchers interviewed on-site program directors and OST supervisors (i.e., the staff member from the provider organization who oversees the OST program). In addition, researchers asked program directors and OST supervisors to recommend other staff who contributed to program quality improvement, including education specialists, for additional interviews; the research team conducted an average of three interviews per program, and talked with activity leaders in four

programs. The final study sample included a total of 10 programs with an education specialist and nine programs in which the program director assumed the responsibilities of this role.²

Based on information gathered in the interviews and site visits, the research team refined the categorization of the various configurations of the education specialist role (Exhibit 1). For the purposes of this study, a dedicated education specialist is defined as an individual who works with only one OST program and whose primary responsibilities in the program are those outlined for the education specialist position; that is, this individual has no other roles in the program. Five programs in the study sample met this definition of a dedicated education specialist, and an additional four programs retained designated education specialists to work with multiple OST programs. In five programs, the program director assumed the role of the education specialist, and in four programs a staff member from the provider organization carried out the function of the education specialist role in addition to other responsibilities at the organization. In one program included in the study, the education specialist was also in charge of leading activities. The study sample included 10 middle-grades programs and nine elementary-grades programs, and there were no notable differences in the approach to the education specialist position by grade level served.

Exhibit 1
Classification of the education specialist position (n=19)

Dedicated education specialist	Program director assumes responsibilities*	Education specialist works with multiple programs	Provider-level staff member assumes responsibilities	Education specialist is also an activity leader	Total
5	5	4	4	1	19

*All five programs in which the program director functioned as the education specialist were funded to serve fewer than 90 participants and were, therefore, not required to have a dedicated education specialist.

Exhibit reads: Five programs included in the study sample had a dedicated education specialist.

Interview data were transcribed and coded for analysis, using a coding scheme aligned with the priority topics for this study. Codes addressed practices and approaches used to support the following areas: program and activity planning, staff configuration (e.g., hiring processes and staff qualifications), staff professional development, school alignment, and continuous quality improvement. The PSA research team analyzed the coded data to test for patterns in the role and contributions of the education specialist to each area of program implementation and to explore possible differences in response among programs with and without dedicated education specialists.

The Role of the Education Specialist in OST Programs

Analysis suggests that education specialists are playing a key role in supporting intentional lesson planning, staff development, and aligning the OST program content with school-day learning. However, effective use of the education specialist requires program directors to think strategically about how the role can fit into their existing program structure.

² One program did not respond to requests for a telephone interview.

The sections that follow summarize the role and contributions of the education specialist as well as the potential value-added of this role for OST programs.

Program and Activity Planning

Education specialists played an important role in supporting the lesson planning process, usually by reviewing lesson plans and providing feedback to front-line staff (e.g., activity leaders). Program staff relied on a variety of sources to guide activities, including published curricula and online resources. Activity leaders often pulled lesson ideas directly from these curricular materials, albeit with some tailoring based on participants' needs, program goals, or efforts to align curricula with school-day content.

Education specialists across all programs played a role in supporting this lesson planning process, although there was variation in the extent to which specialists helped strengthen lesson plans to meet the needs of program participants. Findings suggest that OST programs with a dedicated education specialist benefit from a deeper and more thoughtful focus on framing a single program's activities. One program director, for example, explained that the education specialist helped "tighten" activities that are drawn from published curricula, intentionally ensuring that the activities (and modifications) fit within the larger goals of the OST program: "Most of our activities are curriculum-based. We never do anything off-hand. It has to mesh with the bigger goal of what we're trying to accomplish. The educational specialist leads this team and reviews the lesson plans, ensuring that we're all going from the same curriculum."

In contrast, the director of another program was responsible for the duties of the education specialist. In this program, the director also helped to review staff lesson plans, but explained, "I have to take time out to plan lessons and activities, making sure that the staff understands what the plans are. ... We purchase curriculum and I just kind of oversee what the [activity leader] is going to do, and I okay it." Serving primarily as a program director, this individual, assuming the role of education specialist, did not have as much time to work closely with staff to adapt curricula as did the education specialist in the first example.

Staff Recruitment and Training

Education specialists were rarely involved in recruiting staff, but hiring is a potential area in which education specialists can effectively support program quality. OST programs included in the study used similar criteria to hire and staff; across all programs, OST supervisors and program directors oversaw staff recruitment, and in terms of qualifications focused largely on applicants' prior experience working with youth in an OST or education setting. Although supporting staff recruitment was not a stated expectation for the role of the education specialist, one program provided insight into how the education specialist can be used strategically to support efforts to hire qualified staff (Exhibit 2). In this program, the education specialist, a mathematics coach employed by the host school, used her experience to assess applicants' teaching skills during the hiring process, especially their ability to differentiate between school-day and afterschool instruction.

The involvement of the education specialist in staff recruitment appears to be dependent somewhat on the program director's vision for the role. The preceding example, however, suggests that there may be benefits to using the education specialist in this capacity, particularly for programs that hire school-day teachers and staff. Education specialists at other programs in the study sample had similar qualifications and positions in their school but did not contribute to decisions related to staffing, potentially a missed opportunity for hiring high-quality staff in the program.

Education specialists provided frequent, on-site training and support to program staff. Program leaders across the study sample used orientations, in-house and external trainings, and ongoing staff meetings as opportunities to build staff capacity to deliver activities. Staff meetings provided an additional venue to provide on-site training. Having an additional staff member on site with knowledge and skills as a trainer—the education specialist—increased opportunities for on-site training and coaching in seven of 19 programs. In one program for example, the education specialist, who was also a veteran teacher at the OST program's host school, led on-site trainings with staff to build skills related to lesson planning and classroom management. Because many of the activity leaders are college-age adults with limited teaching experience, the education specialist-led trainings emphasized instructional strategies, which were reinforced through coaching and frequent feedback from the education specialist. The education specialist for this program described an early training she led to help staff develop strong lesson plans:

I expect that [lesson plans] include at least two objectives, questions to guide classroom discussion, a detailed procedure, and that the [activity leaders] take into account different [ability] levels in their class. During my first week, I decided to do a lesson plan training for the staff. We did the training on a Saturday, and [the activity leaders] get feedback from me all the time when they submit lesson plans to make sure they're on target.

The qualifications of program staff—including activity leaders—influenced the role and contributions of the education specialist. OST programs typically hired program directors and education specialists with strong leadership skills as well as prior experience in education, curriculum development, and working with youth in an OST setting. Programs often hired college-age students as front-line staff to implement activities, seeking those with experience working with youth and interest in education and related fields (e.g., social work, psychology).

Exhibit 2
Education specialist's role in staff hiring

One OST program prioritized hiring licensed teachers, typically from the host school, to deliver academic activities. Because there was high demand among teachers to work for the OST program, the program director needed a way to identify the best-fit teachers to work in the program. Therefore, the program director decided to involve the education specialist in staff recruitment and hiring, maximizing her professional background and experience in the school. The education specialist was able to comment on applicants' teaching ability and style, particularly their ability to differentiate school-day and OST instruction. The program director explained, "I'm new [at the school], so I went to her to get a sense of the staff skills to understand whom I can cut and keep. She's a teaching coach in the school, and she knows how the teachers work.... I probably couldn't do that."

One program director explained, “I like to get college students who are in school and who are studying either early childhood education or studying psychology with an interest in young people. I find that they’re usually a better fit.” Two programs in the study also hired high school students.

In OST programs that relied largely on hiring high school and college students as activity leaders, education specialists had a large role in supporting staff capacity to plan and deliver activities. Education specialists in these programs frequently provided guidance and support focused on instructional strategies, lesson planning, and classroom management. As one program director explained, “Most of our activity leaders are college students...so for us to ask them to write lesson plans as if they are teachers is not reasonable. [The education specialist] and I are both former teachers, so it really helps that we were both in that capacity where we can lend expertise in those areas.” In addition to helping staff develop lesson plans, education specialists led trainings and coached staff on instructional strategies, lesson planning, and classroom management.

In contrast, the type and intensity of support provided to staff differed in programs that hired more certified teachers. For certified teachers, for example, education specialists often provided feedback and support to help staff differentiate between instructional strategies used during the school day and those used in the OST program, particularly integrating more hands-on activities into lessons. One education specialist explained, “There are lots of options in afterschool that teachers don’t have in the school day. ... It’s more important to know how to give lessons in a way that makes students motivated to come back [to the program].”

School Alignment

OST programs that are aligned with school-day curricula and instruction can support student learning and complement and reinforce learning that takes place during the school day (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). DYCD expects all OST programs to work with at least one neighborhood school and to outline a clear vision for the OST program, including the contributions of program and school-day staff, involvement of teachers, and how the OST program will complement school-day goals. Overall, OST programs included in the study sample made efforts to open channels of communication between the OST program and school staff; conversations between OST program staff and school staff spanned program logistics (e.g., allocating space) to curriculum alignment.

Education specialists can play a significant role in supporting the alignment of program content with school-day norms and curricula. However, among the OST programs included in the study, the extent to which education specialists contributed to this appeared to depend on whether the education specialist had a dedicated position in the program: education specialists who had a dedicated role and therefore were on site more often played a larger role in coordinating with school-day teachers and administrators; but when designated education specialists worked for multiple programs or had other responsibilities at the provider organization, many of the same activities related to school alignment were led by the program director.

Education specialists worked in coordination with OST supervisors and program directors to serve as a communications liaison between school-day staff and OST program staff. Discussing school curricula, learning goals, and the needs of students with school-day staff can help ensure that OST programs enhance learning activities for program participants and meet their needs. OST staff and school-day staff use a variety of strategies to support communication. A 2014 survey of OST host-school principals, for example, found that the most common strategies to support communication and coordination between the school and OST program included designating a school staff member to serve as the education specialist or advisor for the OST program, holding impromptu meetings between OST and school-day staff, and involving school-day teachers in OST program staffing configurations.

Interview respondents discussed strategies to open communication between the OST program and school-day staff. OST supervisors, program directors, and education specialists established weekly meetings with school administrators in 13 of 19 programs. The goals of these meetings varied to some extent, with some programs using these meetings solely to discuss program logistics. At one program, for example, the education specialist and program director scheduled joint meetings with the principal to discuss program goals and outcomes, and the education specialist played a significant role in supporting alignment between the school and the OST program. Prior to the start of the school year, the education specialist, program director, and principal agreed to incorporate the school's instructional focus and emphasis on higher-order discussion into OST activities. Frequent conversations, including scheduled meetings and informal check-ins between the OST program staff and principal, allowed stakeholders to discuss the progress of the OST program and to develop strategies to ensure that the school's priorities were being addressed. In contrast, at an OST program without a dedicated education specialist (i.e., the program director assumed the role), the program director explained that while she frequently met with the school's principal, conversations most often focused on program logistics. She stated, "If I need to speak to the principal, she's available or I can meet with the assistant principal. I'll ask for anything that I need."

Although there was variation in the extent to which programs aligned content with school-day curricula, OST programs with dedicated education specialists were typically more intentional about alignment. The extent to which programs aligned OST program content with curricula used by the school varied. Among the eight of 19 programs that did not intentionally align their program's content with the curricula used by their program's host or feeder schools, responses suggest the program directors viewed alignment as driven by homework. That is, in these programs, efforts to align OST and school-day content relied solely on reviewing students' homework. The director of one program explained, "As homework help is going on, my tendency is to walk around, see what the kids are doing. ... I'm getting ideas of what it is they're doing at the moment, what the curriculum is up to at that point."

In contrast, 11 programs were more intentional about alignment; program directors and education specialists in these programs met with school staff to coordinate curricula and planned activities that directly addressed city and state learning standards. One program director explained, "I go to grade meetings, and I've established a great relationship with my principal. We always like to get in touch and get in tune. As far as the Common Core standards, we took the standards and we simplified them. My staff has to do lesson plans. As part of their lesson

plan, they have to include the Common Core standards.” The education specialist in this program has received extensive training on the Common Core standards in her capacity as a teaching fellow for the city, and the program director relies on her skills and knowledge to help staff integrate the standards into planned activities. Exhibit 3 provides a second example of an education specialist’s role in supporting school alignment.

The education specialist in a third program played a large role in liaising with school-day teachers and coordinating alignment between OST and school-day content. As a teacher in the host school, the education specialist used her resources—including access to student grades and report cards—and knowledge to connect OST activities to topics addressed in the school day:

I meet with all of the teachers of all of the grades during the day, so I know what’s going on in the school.... I know the needs of the students and, when we put [the students] in the [activities], we can connect to what they’re working on during the day. I know that the second grade is learning about communities so in art [in the afterschool], they did a community mural.

Although dedicated education specialists were generally more involved in activities related to school alignment compared to education specialists who worked for multiple programs or who had additional roles either at the program or provider levels, there were differences in the extent to which they contributed to activities related to school alignment. In one program, for example, the education specialist had limited interactions with the host school’s staff, and the program did not intentionally align school-day and program curricula. The education specialist explained that, because the program director wanted sole responsibility for communication and coordination with the host school, he had limited involvement in activities related to school alignment and his responsibilities were focused instead on staff support. Although the provider organization that oversees this program had an expectation that education specialists would support school alignment, conflicting responses from a provider-level staff member and the education specialist suggested that there was a disconnect between the provider organization’s expectations for the role of the education specialist and the implementation of the role on-site. The provider-level staff member, for example, explained, “In most of our programs, the education specialists come and work in the school throughout the day. They’re licensed teachers...so we try to make [the program] a continuation of the school day.”

Exhibit 3
Education specialist’s role in school alignment

One program in the study intentionally aligned the OST curriculum with Common Core State Standards and school-day norms. The program director, education specialist, and principal scheduled biweekly meetings to discuss the program and its progress in supporting student learning. The education specialist, who is also a teacher at the school, plays an active role in school alignment and serves as a liaison between OST program staff and school staff. She and the principal, for example, agreed to incorporate the school’s instructional focus into OST lesson plans. The school’s goal of fostering high-level discussion, for example, is integrated into all activities. Activity leaders are expected to include opportunities for discussion and to teach participants strategies for speaking in an academic setting; the education specialist provides frequent training and coaching to activity leaders to ensure the integration of discussion into activities and, generally, to support their capacity to plan and deliver high-quality activities.

In contrast, the education specialist for the program explained:

I wish we could do a little better as far as integrating [the school's curriculum]. I usually gauge what the students are doing during the regular school day by the homework that they're given.... The site director wanted to keep communication between him and the principal and one-on-one, so I never had a formal meeting with the principal here. We met just by chance in the hallway, but we never had a sit-down to talk about goals and expectations.

As the example above suggests, differences in the level of involvement of the education specialist in activities related to school alignment might be driven by the program director's expectations and vision for the role; program leaders, therefore, may benefit from additional guidance to help maximize the benefits of the education specialist position within the contexts of their programs.

Continuous Quality Improvement

DYCD expects all programs to establish continuous quality improvement (CQI) protocols to identify strengths and weaknesses on an ongoing basis, encouraging programs to improve quality through data-driven decision-making. OST programs in the study sample established processes to improve programming, including using program assessment tools (e.g., the NYSAN self-assessment tool), surveying stakeholders (i.e., participants, parents, and school staff), and reviewing student data. In general, education specialists played a limited role in measuring program success but a larger role in staff evaluation and development.

Education specialists' role in CQI activities focused on supporting program efforts to use student achievement data to improve programs. While all programs included in the study sample used a combination of “hard” (e.g., student achievement data) and “soft” measures (e.g., informal feedback from students and parents) to guide program improvement, programs with dedicated education specialists used the knowledge and skills of these staff members to collect and analyze student achievement data as part of CQI activities. In two programs, education specialists—using their backgrounds in education—proctored youth assessments to gauge knowledge and skill acquisition and helped program directors interpret the data. The OST supervisor of one of these programs explained, “[The education specialist] has been involved with assessing the students and identifying those kids having the greatest problems.... [She] monitors the progress of those kids.” In seven programs where the education specialist was also a school-day staff member, education specialists supported efforts to use student grades and standardized achievement data to improve programming. One education specialist explained, “We use their report cards and...take a look at where every student's needs are. We also get teacher input from the school, and we use state test scores from the previous year to help us.”

Education specialists played a significant role in CQI activities related to staff evaluation and development. All programs in this study had processes in place to observe and formally evaluate program staff, and education specialists were heavily involved in CQI activities related to staff evaluation and development. Evaluations used to build staff capacity to

deliver programming occurred throughout the year, with program directors, education specialists, and in some cases, OST supervisors observing and providing feedback to staff. Generally, observations and evaluations of staff focused on two areas: professionalism and ability to carry out responsibilities. One director, for example, described her program's evaluation process for staff:

We have a form that is given to us by the agency that we have to fill out in terms of attendance, tardiness, knowledge of the lesson plans they present.... I walk around the rooms daily. [The education specialist] comes in the class and walks around and looks at how staff are delivering lessons.

Education specialists also played a significant role in using staff evaluation data to plan coaching and professional development. Often, these responsibilities were carried out in partnership with the program director. One program director explained:

What happens is that [the education specialist] and I both sit down and do the observations, then we come together to see the scores and if we're close to [each other's ratings].... After we observe we debrief each other, then we'll debrief with the staff member, and [the education specialist and I] will go over what the staff need to work on.

At another program, while the education specialist and program director worked in partnership to monitor the quality of instruction and program implementation, the education specialist took a greater role in supporting staff who delivered academic activities. The education specialist explained, “[The program director] and I do formal observations together to check if the staff are meeting expectations and what areas need work. I sit in for the whole lesson and debrief with the teacher after.”

Comments from respondents suggest that OST programs with dedicated education specialists skilled as trainers were more likely to provide immediate coaching and professional development to staff following their evaluations. As previously discussed, the type of coaching and professional development offered appears to vary based on the knowledge and qualifications of program staff. Exhibit 4 provides examples of the education specialists' contributions to staff development in two programs. Both programs used similar approaches to staff evaluation and development but differed in the types of support provided to staff in response to evaluations, further highlighting how program contexts influence the role and contributions of the education specialist.

Exhibit 4
Education specialist role in supporting staff development in two programs

Program 1	Program 2
<p>The education specialist plays a significant role supporting and evaluating staff who implement academic activities. In addition to reviewing lesson plans and providing feedback, the education specialist works with the program director to observe and evaluate program staff throughout the year. Drawing on her background as an educator, the education specialist's observations and evaluations are used to improve content delivery, youth engagement, and lesson quality. Following observations, the education specialist and program director meet with staff to provide feedback on how to improve. Because many of the academic activity leaders are teachers, the education specialist rarely does direct coaching; instead, she works with teachers to differentiate activity content and delivery from instructional strategies used during the school day.</p>	<p>The education specialist draws on her background as an experienced educator to train and coach activity leaders, many of whom are college-aged adults. In addition to reviewing and providing extensive feedback on lesson plans, the education specialist leads on-site training to support activity delivery. Together, the program director and the education specialist frequently observe and evaluate staff using a tool developed by the provider organization. Informal notes are also used. After observations, the program director and the education specialist meet with each staff member to provide recommendations. The results of these evaluations are used to determine areas for staff development, which is provided either by the education specialist, the provider organization, or an external vendor.</p>

The staffing context in these two examples affected the extent to which the education specialists needed to coach staff members, suggesting that the education specialist role in programs varies depending on the qualifications and experiences of other staff members. In the first program, the education specialist did not have to provide direct coaching to staff under her supervision because they were certified teachers; in the second program, the education specialist took on a greater role directly coaching staff, most of whom were students.

Value-Added of the Education Specialist

As described above, education specialists played key roles in supporting activities related to program planning and implementation. While not all programs are required to have an education specialist, interviews with staff at programs with and without a dedicated education specialist suggest that there may be benefits to integrating the position into program staffing structures. The section that follows summarizes findings about the value-added of the education specialist position in OST programs.

In programs without a dedicated education specialist, staff members reported common challenges related to planning programming, coordinating with school-day staff, and implementing continuous quality improvement strategies. One program without a dedicated education specialist, for example, struggled to get access to student data to use in program planning, in part because of limited staff capacity to communicate with school-day staff. The program director explained, “I’m going to be honest, time is so difficult. When we’re here, teachers are at the end of their day. We have to come up with a system for communication that’s sustainable.” A second program director in a program without a dedicated education specialist similarly explained, “The education specialist would have had time to review and set up

evaluations. We're not funded [for the time it takes] to get data from the school and from teachers about the students."

In contrast, in other programs in the study sample, dedicated education specialists took on significant roles in supporting these challenges. One OST supervisor explained what she perceived as the primary benefit of the education specialist position: additional support to program directors as they oversee the planning and implementation of programming.

I think [the education specialist position] was a rather broad based description when it was put out there; I personally think it's beneficial. [The education specialist] assists the program directors who have so much on their plate, as far as the relationship with the school, the relationship with parents and children, designing activities, and staff issues.

Program staff also highlighted the benefits of the position in supporting the alignment of OST content and school-learning. In one OST supervisor's words, "I think, historically, afterschool programs had this kind of underlying expectation or need to enhance academics. And I think we've tried to do it even before the education specialists, via the college students, but they just didn't have the skills to execute certain things with the kids. The infusion of an education specialist has allowed us the opportunity to really enhance our work in a real way."

Education specialists who were experienced educators played an important role in strengthening the academic content of programs. The position was especially beneficial when the education specialist was hired from within the host school. As one program director explained, "To have somebody with that expertise would definitely help. The activities that we do here are generally based on what's going on in schools.... But, if you wanted to incorporate more math or actually get the level of where [the students] are reading...we really can't support that [without the education specialist]." Similarly, a second program director found that the benefits of the education specialist position in his program relates to setting specific academic goals for students: "It's a great way for me and [the education specialist] to talk about specific goals that we have for the kids based on their academics.... In terms of planning and having someone look over report cards, to have someone specifically in that role to think about how we can help these kids academically...was a blessing."

The knowledge and skills of education specialists was especially useful in supporting program staff who weren't experienced educators. As described above, programs that primarily hired college-age adults with limited teaching experience benefitted from having an additional staff member (i.e., the education specialist) with skills to build staff capacity to deliver activities. One OST program that is currently working to integrate the Common Core State Standards into its activities explained that the education specialist has played a crucial role in preparing all staff to align content with the new standards. "It's hard for all of our program staff to have that kind of exposure and training.... You have to be specially trained for these Common Core Standards or the education policy changes, and everyone is teaching DOE people, but no one's teaching the afterschool center staff how to do it.... I'm lucky to have a good [education specialist]."

Findings from this exploratory study suggest that the education specialist can have the most impact when the specialist works with a single program site and does not have other responsibilities within the program. Interviews suggest that the amount of funding available for this position might prohibit some OST providers and programs from hiring a dedicated education specialist for every contract. Funding limitations may mean that an education specialist is shared across programs overseen by a single provider or that the education specialist assumes additional roles in the OST program. Comments from interviews, however, highlight some of the challenges that arise when the education specialist is not in a dedicated position. In one program, the education specialist is allotted eight hours per week, some of which is spent on her responsibilities as an activity leader. “It’s a delicate balance,” she explained. “I come in earlier. . . . I have another staff member who teaches with me and I feel confident leaving him with the group so that I can walk around and observe. There are days when it works. Other days, it’s a little bit much for me.”

A second program director described challenges related to education specialists “floating” from one program to another. “We like the person that’s been coming through here, but it is one person for multiple sites. To schedule a time and get them here exactly when you want them. . . . isn’t always feasible.” Several programs highlighted similar concerns, although interviews suggest that bolstering the expertise of other staff—including hiring certified teachers—can balance the challenge of limited time with an education specialist. In one program director’s words, “It all comes down to money at the end of the day, right? Since [our education specialist] is multi-school, you need the teachers because they serve as an anchor. Even when he’s here, he’s still doing 15 different things.” For this program, the DOE teachers on staff also serve a role in supporting activity specialists, most often college students who are studying education.

Interviews with program staff suggest that, when the education specialist works for multiple programs, the skills and qualifications of line staff can be used strategically to increase leaders’ capacity to provide ongoing training and support to less experienced staff. In a small number of programs that hired certified teachers, these staff members were used to support other areas of program quality. In one OST program for which the education specialist worked for multiple programs, for example, certified teachers played a significant role in coaching college-age activity leaders. A teacher who works for the program explained, “What’ll happen is, we’ll get approval from the program director and then we’ll go to the activity leaders and show them how [an activity] is supposed to be run, how it works, and then they go based upon our direction. We stay with them until they feel comfortable with the lesson.” Similarly, in a second program, prior to the introduction of the education specialist position, the program director relied on school-day teachers employed by the program to support staff development; one of these teachers later became the program’s education specialist. “I used [the teacher] in our family literacy program, and I also used her to help me train the staff, to nurture them.”

Summary of Findings and Lessons Learned

This exploratory study revealed that, when used strategically, education specialists can play key roles in supporting lesson planning, staff development, and aligning OST program content with school-day curricula. In addition to providing insight into the role of the education

specialist in OST programs, the study yielded important findings that can help programs maximize the role of the education specialist in their programs:

- It is not sufficient for programs to simply fill the education specialist role to meet DYCD's staffing requirement; instead, they must consider how the education specialist can be most effective within the specific contexts of their programs.
- Even when the education specialist has the requisite qualifications, the successful implementation of the role appears dependent on the program director's vision for how the education specialist's role can intersect and complement that of the director.
- The education specialist may have the most impact when the specialist works with a single program and does not have other responsibilities within the program.

OST programs would benefit from the following guidance and support from DYCD as they work to integrate the education specialist position into their program's staffing configuration:

- ***Manage expectations within the context of OST programs.*** The context and realities within which OST programs operate need to be taken into consideration when communicating expectations for the role of the education specialist and program quality in general. One OST supervisor noted that there is often a disconnect between expectations and what is feasible on-site; this is particularly true when limited funding prevents hiring of staff and improvement activities. A program director echoed this concern: "The challenge was definitely funding. There are benefits [to the education specialist position], but I think the challenge is that you're not going to be able to find this person for every program, and they shouldn't be penalized for it." Understanding program contexts and constraints can help programs plan ways to identify qualified education specialists and to structure their role in a way that best supports program quality.
- ***Offer guidance on how the education specialist can complement or support the program director.*** In programs that successfully used the education specialist to support quality, the education specialists' responsibilities were most often related to program and activity planning, school alignment, and staff support. These responsibilities allowed the program director to focus on program operations and management. Providing additional guidance on how the role of the education specialist can complement the program director might encourage programs determine how this position can work best within the contexts of their programs.

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