after the last bell

The Multiple Roles of Principals in School-based Afterschool Programs

by Lanya Samuelson

For most primary and secondary students, the word *principal* suggests authority and power. The U.S. Department of Education has said that principal leadership is critical to school improvement and to academic achievement (Office of Educational Research & Improvement, 1990).

Meanwhile, extensive research says that afterschool programs are important in the lives of children (Community Network for Youth Development [CNYD], 2001), and recent studies suggest that principals are essential to afterschool program success (Rinehart, 2003). However, formal inquiry into specific roles played by principals in school-based afterschool programs has been limited. As afterschool programs receive increased attention from policymakers and the public (CNYD, 2001; Halpern, 2004), efforts to identify and implement promising practices will greatly serve the field. Clear consensus between school administrators and afterschool providers on their respective roles and responsibilities is crucial for afterschool programs to achieve their desired outcomes. Reaching this consensus requires discussing the role of principals. How do principals' roles in afterschool programs differ from their roles during the regular school day? How should principals be involved in afterschool programs on school sites? This article offers a framework through which principals and afterschool providers can explore these questions and build consensus on effective principal involvement.

This article is based on survey and interview research I conducted in fulfillment of a master's degree in social welfare at the University of California, Berkeley. I first became interested in principal involvement in afterschool programming while working as the afterschool program coordinator in a large urban middle school. Comparing the autonomy I experienced with my

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own principal to the challenges other coordinators encountered with their principals, I concluded that the coordinator's relationship with the principal had the potential to make or break a school-based afterschool program. In my research, I found that the importance of this relationship, and of principal involvement after school generally, is consistent across sites and districts.

This article presents six potential roles played by principals after school, exploring why each is important and how each can be challenging. Can what is known about effective principal leadership be applied to afterschool program management, leadership, and implementation? Since the role of the principal in school sites is central, while afterschool program models are diverse, how can we engage in useful dialogue about principal involvement after school? Investigation of these questions in the existing literatures on principal leadership and afterschool programming is limited. Believing that afterschool programs must be tailored to the distinct needs of school sites, I hope principals and afterschool program staff can use the framework presented in this article as a practical tool with which to understand and delegate roles, thereby increasing the success of their programs. For staff working in programs at community-based organizations, this framework may be useful in designing and assessing program leadership structures and designating responsibilities.

The Importance of Principal Involvement

Several current trends in afterschool programming validate the need to understand principal involvement in afterschool programs. First, as the field continues to professionalize, a set of promising practices has emerged regarding program design, leadership, and implementation. Many of these promising practices confirm the importance of principal involvement and offer insight into ways principals can effectively interact with programs at their sites. For example, to be successful, afterschool programs need teachers, partners, staff, and families to be involved in program design (After-School Summit Committee [ASSC], 2005). The principal, who is the direct supervisor of all teachers and has access to families and the community, can facilitate this involvement. The ASSC cites other promising practices including effective partnerships that promote student learning and adequate compensation for qualified staff (ASSC, 2005). A study of programs of The After-School Corporation includes additional important aspects: a close relationship between the school site and the afterschool program, mutual respect between the principal and site coordinator, and the value the school places on the afterschool program (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005).

More specifically, research illustrates the importance of principals' active involvement in program development and management and of their commitment to afterschool programs (Jordan-Meldrum, 2005). Rinehart (2003) notes that principals should provide opportunity for staff development, encourage collaboration, recognize the academic value of programs, and support program vision. With these promising practices as a launching point, defining tangible actions that demonstrate principal support and commitment can greatly benefit afterschool providers and participants.

A second trend validating the importance of understanding principal involvement is the emphasis in No Child Left Behind on standardized tests to measure achievement (Halpern, 2004). Schools now look to afterschool programs to supplement their efforts or to compensate for students' poor academic performance. Though there is no consistent evidence that program participation increases standardized test scores (Halpern, 2004; Shann, 2001), this climate of benchmarks and strict consequences may lead to principals' increased interest in afterschool programming.

In California, where this research was conducted, principal involvement after school is particularly pertinent at this moment in history. The funds from Proposition 49, approved by voters in 2002, became available for applicants in September 2006. Proposition 49 dedicates $550 million annually for school-based afterschool programs serving children in grades K–8. In the district I researched, the number of state-funded school-based afterschool programs will increase from 32 to approximately 80. The impact of this legislation is not only local but also national, as California's commitment to afterschool programs is seen by many as an indicator of potential future initiatives in other states. Such enormous expansion in school-based programming provides an incredible opportunity to inform principals of the critical role they play in the success of afterschool programs.

Methods

My research consisted of one-on-one interviews conducted in the spring of 2005 with afterschool coordinators and principals in a large urban school district in the San Francisco Bay Area and of a survey distributed to leaders in the afterschool field throughout California. This mixed-method approach to inquiry is consistent with current trends that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2004).

Logic Model

As a visual framework for my research, I created a logic model that defines six central roles principals can play in afterschool programs and assigns actions, or indicators, to

each role, as shown in Figure 1. The six roles and their associated indicators were devised from extensive observations during my direct service and management experience in the afterschool field, as well as from my review of the literature. The promising practices cited above in the literature on principal involvement after school were most helpful in informing the roles in this logic model that are more ideological or philosophically based: the roles of Liaison, Visionary, and Supporter. On the other hand, my direct experience and observations informed the roles that are more task-based and action-oriented, primarily Communicator, Resource Provider, and Decision Maker.

Recognizing that there is no limit to the potential roles of principals after school, the logic model attempts to incorporate as many opportunities for involvement as possible.

The logic model is based on the premise that a key desired outcome of any afterschool strategy is to provide an effective program that achieves its stated goals. As suggested by the afterschool literature (Rinehart, 2003), the logic model presents the role of the principal as a critical variable to this outcome. I offer this logic model as a starting point, and used it to inform my research, while recognizing that there could be other ways to conceptualize the many roles of principals in afterschool programs. By categorizing roles and assigning tangible actions to each one, the logic model can expand the professional knowledge base and offer a tool for improved practice on school sites.

Interviews and Surveys

One-on-one interviews were conducted at five school-based elementary afterschool programs with four principals and five coordinators. I chose these five from among all the school-based afterschool programs in the city to achieve a mix both of lead agencies—the school or a community-based organization (CBO)—and of principal involvement. One coordinator was hired directly by the principal, while four were employed by CBOs. To achieve a mix in terms of principal involvement, I asked three people in the central district office, whose role was to serve as liaison between school sites and the district and

ROLES OF PRINCIPAL

COMMUNICATOR >
- Maintains ongoing communication with coordinator regarding program needs, challenges, successes, and progress.
- Is accessible to afterschool staff when specific needs arise.
- Facilitates structured communication between afterschool program and regular school day.
- Facilitates communication between program and families.

RESOURCE PROVIDER >
- Provides afterschool program access to adequate space, facilities, materials, & equipment.
- Allocates school resources, reflecting dedication to meeting afterschool goals.
- Shares knowledge of resources with program staff.

LIAISON >
- Integrates afterschool and regular day staff by including them in staff meetings and communication flow.
- Provides program staff access to classroom teachers.
- Shares afterschool information with teachers.
- Assists afterschool program in identifying needs and tracking academic progress of students.

VISIONARY >
- Understands value of afterschool program and its connection to regular school day.
- Communicates vision for program to coordinator and supports movement towards this vision.
- Infuses vision into program design.
- Articulates vision to staff, participants, families, community.

DECISION MAKER >
- Serves as active partner in collaborative decision making.
- Provides support to coordinator in his/her decision making process.
- Shares knowledge and experience with coordinator to inform decision making.

SUPPORTER >
- Presents afterschool program as integral part of school.
- Participates in program meetings and events.
- Advocates for program within and outside school.
- Dedicates time to creating effective working relationship with coordinator and moving program towards its goals.
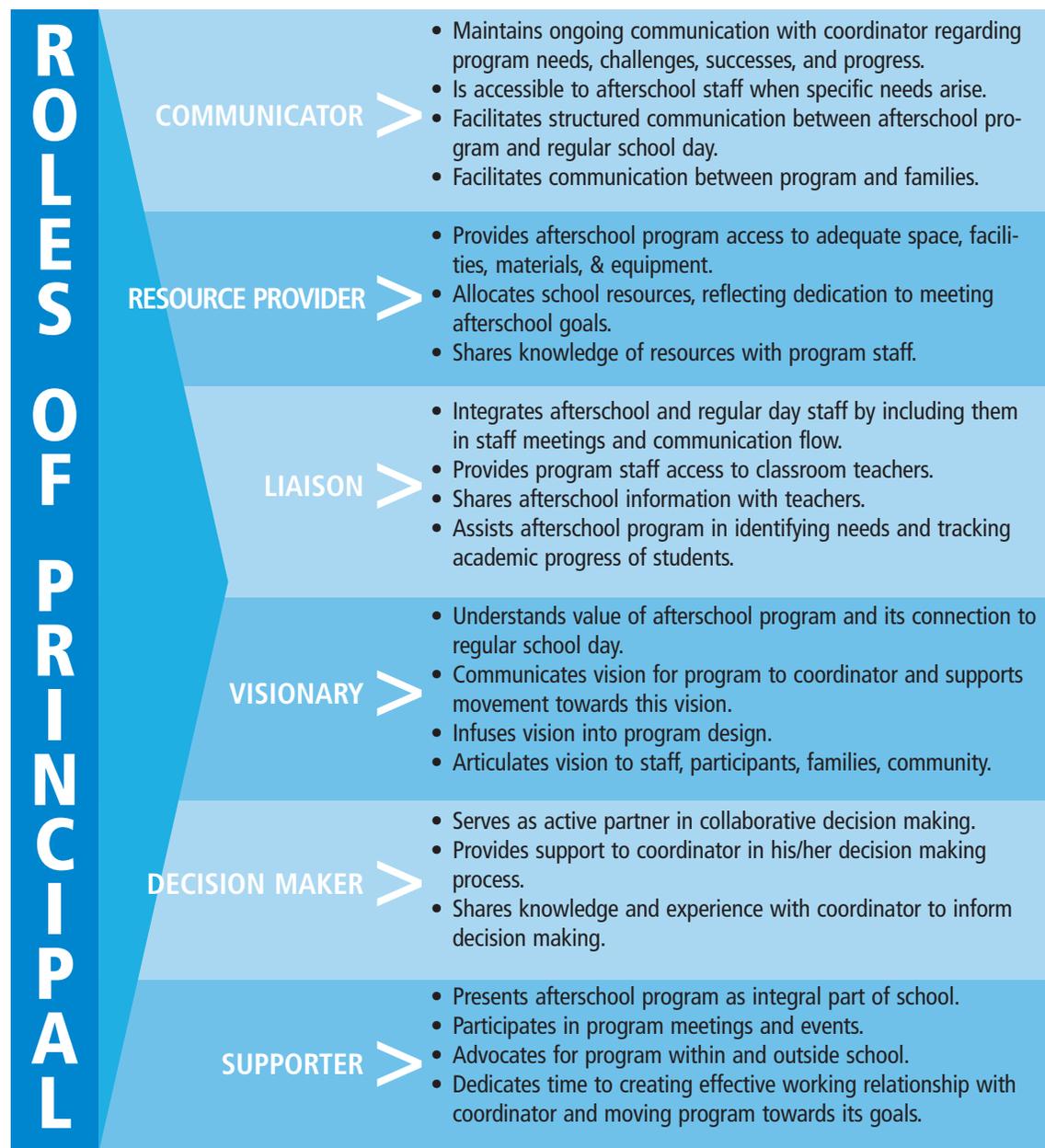
Figure 1. Roles of Principal

state, to evaluate how involved the principals were. I incorporated a full range of levels of involvement in choosing the programs for this study. The schools also varied in terms of size, cultural demographics, and surrounding neighborhood characteristics, though all served a majority of low-income students. Finally, to a certain extent this was a convenience sample, because another criterion was simply whether the principals responded that they were willing to participate in my study.

The survey was completed by 24 leading afterschool professionals involved in policy and program management across California. They served in school districts and CBOs as well as state offices. The survey asked for their perspectives on the six principal roles defined by the logic model. Respondents rated each role in terms of its importance and the frequency with which it is played by principals. The survey also posed open-ended questions on the challenges of principal roles and on strategies for effective principal involvement.

Six Roles of Principals after School

I used the interviews and surveys to refine the logic model presented in Figure 1. This section presents my findings, organized around the six roles defined in the logic model and the indicators associated with each. These findings contain valuable insights from study participants on the reality of each potential role on school sites.

Principal as Communicator

> The [former] principal would leave right when the bell rings. You never [saw] her after the bell. [The current principal] stays here till 6 pm, 6:30 pm. It's like she's always available. —*Coordinator*

Communication among afterschool staff, school day staff, and families is an essential component of well-implemented afterschool programs (Birmingham et al., 2005; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001). Though this seems like a given, establishing systems of effective and productive communication is a common challenge voiced by school-based afterschool programmers. The role of communicator has at least two parts:
- Communicating with the coordinator
- Facilitating communication between the afterschool program and other school groups

Both principals and coordinators described experiences that confirm the importance of ongoing communication between them. Such communication can range from holding regularly scheduled weekly meetings with set agendas to checking in informally every day. Depending on the site's needs, various models of communication can be effective, but both principal and coordinator must agree on and be satisfied with the model they use. Because principals hold ultimate authority in their schools, they must be accessible to their coordinators and respond to their needs. Furthermore, principals should directly communicate the schools' needs and student performance goals to coordinators and afterschool program staff.

Because principals have access to both school day staff and families, they can facilitate communication between these groups and the afterschool program. Since the extensive demands on principals can hinder their ability to facilitate this communication, time spent creating communication systems that can function independently of the principal is a good investment. The sites in my study shared several models by which principals facilitated communication. For example, principals put afterschool program news in their weekly family newsletter or dedicated a permanent item on staff meeting agendas to the afterschool program. Other recommendations included highlighting afterschool programs in school-wide events such as parent nights and giving programs an easy and clear means of corresponding with other school staff, such as a mailbox in the school office.

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Principal as Resource Provider

> Five or six mentors, we all use the same space, so I'm telling the principal, "Look, we can have this whole room to ourselves. We need our own space." —*Coordinator*

Anyone who has worked in afterschool programs on school sites can attest to a consistent concern about the adequacy of resources and funding. At a minimum, afterschool programs need sufficient and appropriate space in which to hold their activities. Often, this means using teachers' classrooms. In the district where I conducted research, some coordinators had their own offices and meeting spaces, while others operated out of file boxes stored in the cafete-

ria closet. Some coordinators had their own computers, while others slipped onto the office secretary's computer between other tasks. This range of access to basic resources has a great effect on the efficacy of management and service delivery.

To varying extents, all programs rely on shared facilities and materials. The principals and coordinators in this study viewed the principal as the individual with the most capacity to share school resources, especially facilities. At the same time, participants acknowledged the multiple demands on limited space. As Resource Providers, principals must be aware of the real needs of afterschool programs. They must understand, for example, that tutoring sixty students in the cafeteria is not conducive to learning or that their coordinator needs a computer in order to submit grant reports. Principals who understand the requirements of program management and facilitation are better able to allocate limited resources fairly. Thus, program managers, grant administrators, and afterschool staff, including coordinators, must ensure that principals have ongoing access to this crucial information.

Principal as Liaison

We build our own relationships with each other even though the principal hasn't brought us together in the same room. We're saying it and the teachers are saying it. —*Coordinator*

This coordinator speaks of the importance of linking the afterschool program and the regular school day. In extended-day programs, this link may happen organically because the same teachers and students are involved. When afterschool staff are employed by an outside agency and arrive as classroom teachers are leaving, building connections between the school day and the afterschool program is more challenging, but no less important. As supervisor of regular day staff, the principal is key to integrating school and afterschool. Study participants suggested the following ways in which the principal can serve as Liaison: inviting afterschool program staff to all-staff orientation, incorporating afterschool staff into teachers' professional development, providing opportunities for both entities to share information about student progress, contributing to afterschool staff training meetings, and encouraging afterschool staff and students to participate in regular school day events.

> As Liaisons, principals can ensure that curricula and expectations of students are consistent both before and after the bell rings.

The coordinators I spoke with said that classroom teachers must understand and support the afterschool program's purpose in order for the program to be effective. They viewed the principal as having the ability to address this support. In one success story, a coordinator attributed recent improvements in her program's relationship with school staff to the principal's advocacy for the program, in response to classroom teachers' criticisms of the afterschool program. This principal assumed the role of Liaison by explaining the program's challenges to the teachers and successfully facilitating a positive connection between school and afterschool.

Disconnect between the school day and the afterschool program can be frustrating for both entities and hinders the afterschool program's ability to meet its goals, especially academic goals. As Liaisons, principals can ensure that curricula and expectations of students are consistent both before and after the bell rings.

Principal as Visionary

I have the big-picture idea of the afterschool program, whereas during the day, sweetie, every last blink, I take care of. —*Principal*

While defining tangible responsibilities for the role of Visionary is difficult, the limited literature on principal involvement after school suggests the role is significant. For example, a 2005 case study of principals' experiences in afterschool programs highlights the importance of the principal's ability to see the afterschool program as an asset and to communicate this view to others (Jordan-Meldrum, 2005). Rinehart (2003) emphasizes the critical value of the principal's support of the program vision. If, for example, a principal has a standards-based, academics-only vision of the program while the lead community-based organization has a more holistic and creative approach, the program cannot be effective. In such cases, the lead agencies, particularly through coordinators, need to secure principals' buy-in. Principals and coordinators must be aligned in their vision and goals for the program. All of the coordinators in my study were aware of their principals' vision for their programs and wanted the principals to share this vision with staff and families.

Several coordinators noted that principals' ability to communicate their vision to classroom teachers and parents, as well as to afterschool program staff, is an important component of program success. One envisioned a principal who

could "…lead her staff and have them all understand the importance of a great comprehensive afterschool program…and that would make things a lot easier." Though the role of Visionary may be largely symbolic, it holds significant implications for practice. For example, two coordinators explained that their principals' high standards for performance encouraged them to improve program quality. One remarked, "She tries to give us that extra space [for growth] but she won't be too lenient, and I like that. She'll give me that extra push that I need [and] that helps me a lot."

Principal as Decision Maker

The teachers tell the students, "You don't disrespect [the coordinator] because she's like the principal of afterschool. She's in charge." —*Coordinator*

During the school day, principals are involved in decision making on multiple levels. Though leadership structures vary greatly across school sites and strong emphasis may be placed on collaborative decision making, principals are faced with endless decisions throughout the day (Brown & Anfara, 2002). However, is this level of involvement in daily program management and supervision sustainable after the last bell rings?

While the principals in my study wanted to have input into and approval of program decisions, they said the demands of their jobs did not allow them to make daily decisions for the afterschool program. They wanted to be able to trust their coordinators with day-to-day operations. One principal I interviewed said that she had taken on the daily decisions because she didn't trust her coordinator's leadership—but she also said she could not sustain this level of involvement. Furthermore, coordinators, confident in their leadership abilities, often said that they viewed themselves as "principals of afterschool." They told me that parents shared this vision of their role; principals also agreed with this description. Therefore, as Decision Maker, the principal's role is to support the coordinator's decision-making process. In my study, the form that support took varied in terms of the level of involvement, from principals who wanted to be informed of (but not make) daily decisions to those who wanted input only on "big picture" decisions. Principals in the study who viewed their coordinators as "co-leaders" expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their programs than those who were burdened by daily management decisions.

Maintaining a vision of the "big picture" and leaving the decisions on day-to-day operations to the coordinator is a role transition for the principal. Principals must feel confident in the leadership abilities and expertise of their coordinators. Coordinators must be highly qualified professionals with access to the information they need to make effective decisions. The implications of these roles lead to discussion of the principal's role as Supporter.

Principal as Supporter

So if [the principal] doesn't buy into our program, then we can't go [anywhere]. I mean we can try, but it's not going to be as effective.… If you don't have her support, then basically this program won't be as successful as it is. —*Coordinator*

Perhaps the most powerful theme to emerge from my interviews was that coordinators needed their principals' support in all aspects of programming. In some ways, the role of Supporter encompasses the other five roles in the logic model. Playing the roles of Communicator, Resource Provider, Liaison, Visionary, and Decision Maker—in ways that create an effective relationship with the coordinator and move the program toward its goals—captures what it means to be a Supporter. When explaining how principals can be Supporters, coordinators listed such specific actions as communicating with classroom teachers, facilitating training for afterschool program staff, and providing afterschool staff with access to facilities and materials. One principal, for example, discussed her role in rebuilding parents' faith in the afterschool program following difficult staff transitions.

All coordinators, when describing ideal principal involvement, envisioned principals attending all afterschool program events and meetings, showing support and advocating for the program's value. One coordinator articulated the power of principal support by saying, "She has a certain power where, if she doesn't like it, then it's not going to happen. If she doesn't buy into the goals then we can work as hard as we want to try to reach these goals—but if she doesn't approve of it, then it's just another hurdle." Overall, the interviews illustrate that principal support and advocacy for the afterschool program must be both action-oriented and ideological.

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Implications for Principals

Through an analysis of my investigations into the logic model's six roles, I identified three general themes with important implications for any model of principal involvement in school-based afterschool programs: the necessity of role transitions, the importance of an effective coordinator, and the critical nature of the principal-coordinator relationship. Afterschool sites that want to define their own sets of promising practices should address principal involvement as an independent program component, considering these themes in the process.

The Necessity of Role Transitions

Because afterschool programs are inherently different from school programs, sites must successfully negotiate a role transition when the last bell rings. As discussed under Decision Maker above, all participants in my study agreed that principals cannot devote the time and energy to manage daily operations and decisions in afterschool programs. The coordinator is the appropriate staff member to fulfill such responsibilities; he or she is the "principal of afterschool," with the school principal as his or her key support. This role transition requires deliberate negotiations on the principal's part to delegate responsibility and institutionalize this alternate leadership structure. As Liaison to the school day staff and families and as Supporter of the program in general, principals must consciously initiate and follow through with this role transition. Though coordinators are just as crucial in this transition, principals can empower the coordinators by allowing them space to take on responsibilities and assume leadership.

The Importance of an Effective Coordinator

The role of coordinator must be central to any discussion concerning afterschool programming or leadership. While one coordinator told me, "I'm here just to make sure everything goes the right way," another described himself as "the glue" that holds the program together. Coordinators are responsible for everything from managing daily program operations to evaluating student progress, training staff, and fundraising. Given the wide range of requirements of the position, coordinators must be highly qualified individuals with the capacity to take on multiple roles.

How does this connect to principal involvement?

Principals and coordinators who shared common visions and expectations, who communicated regularly within a structure that worked for both of them, and who collaborated to link the afterschool program with the classroom expressed satisfaction with their working relationships.

First, principals must be aware of the extensive demands on coordinators and the diverse skill set required to do the job effectively. This awareness should directly guide the process of hiring and selecting a coordinator. Even when the coordinator is hired by an outside lead agency, the principal should—and usually does, at least in the programs in my study—have input on the selection. Second, as Liaison and Supporter of the afterschool program, principals must convey the complexity of the coordinator position to their regular day staff so that the staff values the coordinator as a professional. Finally, as Resource Providers, principals must do everything in their power to secure salaries for coordinators that reflect their qualifications. If the lead agency rather than the principal determines the coordinator's compensation, the principal can advocate on the coordinator's behalf. The more principals believe in the value of the position, the more likely they will be to allocate or advocate for sufficient funding.

The Critical Nature of the Principal-Coordinator Relationship

The youth development literature tells us that relationship building is an essential component of successful afterschool programs (CNYD, 2001). My study demonstrates that this is especially true in regard to the principal-coordinator relationship. Any discussion of principal involvement in afterschool programs must adequately reflect the critical nature of this relationship. The information shared by study participants highlights the value of integrating the afterschool program with the school day and of aligning principals' and coordinators' visions and expectations of the program. Principals and coordinators who shared common visions and expectations, who communicated regularly within a structure that worked for both of them, and who collaborated to link the afterschool program with the classroom expressed satisfaction with their working relationships. These principal-coordinator teams viewed their programs positively, despite any challenges they reported.

Building a positive and effective principal-coordinator relationship requires input and effort from both individuals. Program design and staffing decisions must take this relationship, and its implications, into serious consideration. In matching coordinators with principals, it is important to

look at both individuals' expectations, goals, communication practices, and leadership styles. Aligning these components from the start increases the likelihood of successful programming. Principals must be aware of the expectations they have for their coordinators and of the extent to which they want to maintain or let go of program leadership. Principals should understand the collaborative nature of afterschool programming and expect to work closely and consistently with their coordinators. Outside agencies responsible for placing coordinators at school sites must dedicate adequate time to getting to know individual principals and coordinators so they can pair teams accordingly.

Implications for Coordinators

Coordinators need to understand potential principal roles as much as principals do. Coordinators stand to benefit from taking part in creating a model of effective principal involvement. In applying my logic model to their specific sites, coordinators can explore the following questions: What roles is my principal currently playing? What roles do I need my principal to play? What roles do *I* want to play? Coordinators can use the logic model to identify specific aspects of principal involvement that have the potential to increase the effectiveness of their programs. In doing so, they can improve their own professional practice as well.

Because an effective program depends on an effective coordinator, coordinators must take initiative in ensuring that they have the resources, access, and information necessary to do their job. Taking active part in determining the model of principal involvement at their site is one way to do so. Coordinators can help their principals to be effective Communicators by requesting regular meetings and institutionalizing a structure to ensure such meetings take place. They can increase the likelihood of their principals' being effective Resource Providers by keeping principals abreast of program needs and of the potential consequences for students if these needs are not met. They can help their principals to be effective Visionaries by discussing their own visions for the program with their principals and finding common ground. They can encourage their principals to be effective Supporters and Liaisons by seeing that principals get copies of program memos, inviting them to all program events, and inviting *themselves* to regular day staff meetings and professional development opportunities. In sum, coordinators must devote time and energy to developing effective working relationships with their principals and do everything in their power to ensure that their principals have confidence in the coordinators' abilities and qualifications.

Though programs are diverse in their designs, leadership structures, and school cultures, principal involvement is essential in any school-based afterschool program. Programs must assess their unique strengths and challenges to determine a model of principal involvement that works for them. Effective principal involvement that supports program goals requires consistent input and buy-in from coordinators, agency partners, grant administrators, program managers, and principals themselves.

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