Prioritizing staff development and training

Ensuring all children and youth thrive as they move through school and into their adult lives requires that they have the opportunity to develop the skills and competencies that will help them land their first job, navigate and overcome the challenges they will face, keep positive relationships, and make good decisions. While families are central to this effort, others who interact with students can and should play a supporting role. Afterschool and summer learning programs, which have long been a place for positive youth development, are helping students develop these skills and competencies. Programs are providing caring and supportive mentors, creating safe spaces where students can explore new interest areas and develop confidence in their abilities, showing students how to reach consensus and work collaboratively, and providing meaningful ways for students to engage in the program.

Overview

Girls on the Run (GOTR) provides 3rd-8th graders with a supportive environment in which girls run with their friends and coaches while learning, practicing, and applying foundational skills, such as setting goals and managing emotions. The program applies an individualized approach, meeting girls where they are and working with them to inspire them to be joyful, healthy, and confident. GOTR understands that the coaches who work directly with the girls are key to the program’s success and trains coaches to implement the curriculum; build relationships with the girls; foster relationships between girls; create a positive, inclusive environment; and create a mastery climate.

A typical day for students

Each GOTR lesson is structured in the same manner to ensure that girls in the program know what they can expect when they arrive. The first activity of the day is “getting on board,” which introduces a topic, such as standing up for yourself, through an experiential activity or game. Next, time is set aside to debrief and girls discuss what they noticed and share what they learned from the activity. Then the coaches introduce a skill or strategy for the day tied to the topic. Warm up games and a workout follows. Embedded within each subsequent activity is practicing/applying the skills that the girls learned during the lesson. For instance, girls will pick up situation cards at the beginning of each lap they complete that reads, “Your best friend borrowed your _______ and broke it. How do you respond?” Girls complete a lap with the card and think about how to use the strategy they learned earlier in the lesson to respond.
Challenges

Academics alone are not enough for students’ future success. Employers are looking for employees who possess applied academic skills, as well as employees who are able to communicate effectively, work well in teams, and apply other social and emotional skills and competencies. According to a Business Roundtable survey, companies reported that an applicant’s basic reading, writing, and math skills were just as relevant to their company as an applicant’s communication and teamwork skills.

Schools recognize the importance of social and emotional learning, but barriers to implementation exist. Although teachers and principals are strong proponents of social and emotional learning for their students, schools struggle with the implementation of social and emotional learning practices during the school day, which include lack of sufficient time focused on building social and emotional skills, training for teachers and administrators, and integration of social and emotional learning into educational practices.

Too many children and youth today have faced a traumatic experience, placing them at higher risk for negative outcomes. Protective factors, such as social and emotional skills and competencies, help children and youth manage stressful and traumatic experiences in their life. However, close to half of children in the U.S. have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience that could have negative and lasting effects on their health and wellbeing, including depression, drug use, and poor physical health.

Read An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning to learn more.

Outcomes

A 2016 external evaluation of GOTR conducted by the University of Minnesota found that the program was effective in promoting season-long and lasting improvement in competence, confidence, caring, character, and contribution—which GOTR refers to as the “5 Cs.” Survey results showed that 85 percent of girls in the program improved in at least one of the 5 Cs. Almost all girls surveyed reported that they learned critical life skills through the program (97 percent), which included the ability to manage emotions, resolve conflict, help others, and make intentional decisions. Girls who were least active increased their physical activity by 40 percent and maintained this after the season’s end.

Coaches eventually catch up with them and girls practice the phrase, “I feel _____ when you _______ because _______.” At the end of the practice, girls reflect on what they learned, celebrate one another with an “energy award”—a homemade cheer that recognizes one girl for her contributions that day, and are challenged by their coach to take what they learned and use it outside of the program.