

attracting and retaining middle school students in out-of-school time programs



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YOUTH ENROLL in Citizens Schools for myriad reasons. Their parents don’t want them home alone after school. They need help with their homework. They’re looking for a place to have fun or trying to stay out of trouble. Maybe they just like doing things that are different from what they usually do. But few students begin attending Citizen Schools on their own initiative. Most are recruited by proactive and persistent staff who know that getting students to sign up is only half the job. To have any effect, they also must keep them coming back.

Recruiting Students

Handing out flyers in school lunchrooms, organizing mass mailings, telephoning parents, visiting classrooms, and enlisting the aid of school administrators and teachers are all common recruitment strategies. None, however, is ideal, said Citizen Schools staff who have been involved in recruitment. Flyers get lost or lay crumpled up at the bottom of backpacks. Faulty or outdated addresses on mass mailings produce as much as 40 percent return rates. Parents may be unable to speak or read English. Cold telephone calls by staff are labor intensive and depend on who answers the phone and who’s at home. What to do then?

Recruit Early

Recruiting students for Citizen Schools begins early. “Last year was the first time we focused our efforts in the summer,” explained Stephanie Ybarra, deputy director of program operations. “We were relentless at communicating with families to get their buy-in so they would push

their students to come. Before that we waited until school started, which was too late.”

Many Citizen Schools campuses prepare for the new school year by holding open houses. Open houses are held for parents and students at centrally located libraries or neighborhood community centers. For between 90 minutes and two hours, staff describe the Citizen Schools program, use PowerPoint presentations that show photographs of students going on field trips and engaged in other activities, and distribute flyers and other written materials. Refreshments are served at open houses, with one campus actually serving a full meal, no matter what time of day it holds open house. The final step is for staff to help students fill out applications and to conduct short interviews with students and parents.

Enlist Student Recruiters

A promising practice that helped boost attendance at the 8th Grade Academy’s open house was to enlist enthusiastic high school students who were themselves Citizen Schools alumni to extend the invitations. These students knew the program and could talk about how it had personally benefited them. As a result, parents responded positively, observed Leah Tuckman, a second-year teaching fellow who coordinated recruitment and admission into the 8th Grade Academy. Before saying goodbye and hanging up, interns made sure that parents had a phone number to call if they had additional questions or wanted to speak with a staff member.

Hold Orientations

Three-to-five day orientations, which used to be trial runs for students to see if they liked the program, start the actual program. Emphasis is on getting acquainted and building solidarity. “This has more payoff [than other strategies]. Anecdotally, those who participate in orientation are more likely to stay than those who don’t,” said Ybarra.

Orientations at the 8th Grade Academy also attend to logistics, such as transportation. “We ask everyone from this neighborhood to huddle in this corner, everyone from that neighborhood to huddle in another, and they figure out how students will get to the program, be it by bus, subway, or parents carpooling,” Tuckman said.

The highlight of orientation week for eighth-graders, however, is visiting local colleges. While not as extensive as later college trips, special tours and talking with college students give young visitors both a taste of what college is like and of the field trips that lie ahead. ■

Students Attend Regularly

Among students in PSA’s evaluation sample:

- 66% attended 60% or more program days
- 48% attended 80% or more program days
- 85% of 8th graders attended 80% or more program days

Students Comment on Citizen Schools

When students enrolled in Citizen Schools were asked what the program had done for them, their responses ranged from having fun to getting their homework done and getting ready for high school. Several said their grades had improved. One student, obviously looking forward to being accepted by a top-flight public high school, said, "Before, you would need to make connections and pull strings. When you come here, they tell you how to fill out your applications, so you have a choice of where to go." The most frequent response, however, was, "In Citizen Schools, they made us talk in front of people and now I don't get as scared." Another nodded and said, "I speak better now. I'm not as shy."

Retaining Students

KEEPING THESE STUDENTS

coming back is a challenging goal, and Citizens Schools staff have developed numerous strategies for accomplishing it.

Maintain Continuity

Semester break can tempt students to drop out of formal out-of-school activities. One strategy that coaxes them back is to sign them up for the full year instead of for each semester. By not needing to sign up again in the spring, fewer students feel they have the option to drop out.

A second strategy takes an even longer view of student retention. In this approach, staff concentrate on recruiting sixth-graders. "We know that rising sixth-graders are easier to get in the door than seventh- or eighth-graders, so we narrowed our recruitment strategy to focus on sixth-graders, and then to retain them," said Ybarra.

Still a third strategy is to excite students about what's in store for them later in the year. Foreshadowing spring activities during the last weeks of the fall semester stokes anticipation and spurs students to return.

Set Attendance Rules

Citizen Schools is an enrollment-based program. Consistent yet reasonable rules discourage students from treating it as a drop-in center and set clear expectations for student attendance. Nonetheless, while staff try to impress on students

that attendance is mandatory, it doesn't always work out that way. Students visit family out of town, state, or even the country; some must care for siblings; others have transportation problems or conflicts with other personal interests, such as sports.

Still, students find little tolerance among Citizen Schools staff for unexcused absences. Students who miss school can't attend Citizen Schools either on that day. Parents must phone before or within the first hour of a session to report their child's absence or students are marked unexcused. In Boston, three unexcused absences result in a day's suspension. Students are allowed back only after they and their parents meet with staff.

Offer Incentives

Citizen Schools has offered a variety of incentives to keep students coming back. The most common inducement is a point or reward system in which perfect attendance gets students free movie passes, for example, or a raffle ticket for a CD player. Prizes are often donated. The program also holds out a \$50 cash or tuition incentive for parents whose children stay in the program all year and maintain at least an 85 percent attendance record.

Mix Activities

Citizens Schools staff are always on the lookout for activities that keep burnout at bay. "Last year our academics really overpowered things," said Tuckman. "Kids didn't want to go to school after school. [This year] we've done a better job of doing something purely fun just

for an hour. Last year we never did that. They burned out.”

Open New Vistas

Apprenticeships that place students with professionals in their communities for experiences that otherwise wouldn't be open to them are one of Citizen Schools' allures. In focus groups, students talked excitedly about preparing cases and participating in mock trials during their apprenticeship in law. Others relished their apprenticeships in archaeology, music, and web design.

Explorations, too, take students places they normally wouldn't go, such as museums, the IMAX theater, neighborhoods in other parts of the city, an ice rink, and even rope climbing in New Hampshire. College trips that take many eighth-graders on their first solo overnight trip away from home add to the adventure.

Grow with Students

Out-of-school activities should evolve as students mature. “Certain things we did with sixth- and seventh-graders we can't do with eighth-graders,” said Tuckman. Take rewarding students by handing out cut-out stars, “That's not something we can do with eighth-graders,” she illustrated. Instead, eighth-graders serve on campus councils, where they have input into program planning, mentor younger students, or help orient sixth-graders.

But varying the program from year to year takes work, and the older the students are, the more choices they want. Staff invest considerable energy

in expanding the menu of explorations and apprenticeships each year so that students can pursue new interests.

Instill Belonging

Being with friends, meeting new students who accept and like them, and feeling they belong are important motivators in attending Citizen Schools, say students and staff. Particularly at the 8th-Grade Academy, students enjoy meeting youth they would otherwise not meet. “You see different faces instead of just the kids you see in class and you hear about what they do at other schools,” said a student.

A sense of belonging also develops when students know that adults care. Students in focus groups also made it clear that “cool team leaders” matter. These team leaders have rapport with youth. The departure of a favorite team leader can taint a student's entire Citizen Schools' experience, unless that team leader is replaced by another who is just as cool.

Ybarra noted staff's pivotal role in attendance: “If students want to see their favorite staff, they will come.”

Communicate with Families

Citizen Schools requires staff to phone parents at least every other week. They alert parents to open houses, orientations, and other parent events by mail, and then follow up with as many phone calls as necessary to get them there. Other phone calls invite parents to drop by to see what their child is doing, or give them good news about their child's progress. Passing on good news, not just that their child has misbehaved, piques

Staff Involve Parents

According to parent responses to the PSA-administered survey, program staff requested their attendance or assistance at events, such as parent meetings or potluck dinners at least once over the course of the semester. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of parents reported that staff contacted them at least twice a month to discuss their child's progress in the program, and more than half (62 percent) indicated that Citizen Schools staff contacted them at least twice a month about their child's homework and school performance.

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parents’ interest.

At the same time that staff spoke enthusiastically about communicating with some parents, they voiced concerns about communicating with others, especially non-English speakers. Having staff who can speak the language of students’ families is an essential part of student recruitment and retention.

Program administrators are hopeful that increased translation will ease this problem. Materials have already been translated into Spanish and plans are underway to translate them into Haitian-Creole. Citizen Schools has also hired part-time staff who speak Haitian-Creole.



Advice for others with similar programs? Said Ybarra, “Take it day-by-day. Each team leader needs to get his or her students to show up today, and then tomorrow worry about the same thing.” ■

For Additional Information

Afterschool Alliance
www.afterschoolalliance.org

Citizen Schools
www.citizenschools.org

National Institute of Out-of-School Time
www.niost.org

Partnership for After-School Education
www.pasesetter.com

Fiester, L. (n.d.) Afterschool Counts: A Guide to Issues and Strategies for Monitoring Attendance in Afterschool and Other Youth Programs. New York: The After School Project.

Espino, J., Fabiano, L., and Pearson, L.M. (2004). Citizen Schools: Evidence from Two Student Cohorts on the Use of Community Resources to Promote Youth Development: Phase II Report of the Citizen Schools Evaluation. Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates. www.policystudies.com/studies/youth/CS9.20Report_pdf.

Harvard Family Research Project. (July 2004). Moving Beyond the Barriers: Attracting and Sustaining Youth Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs. Cambridge, MA: author.

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