COP MEETING
20 AUGUST 2020
ONLINE

LEARNING BRIEF:
FUTURE PROOFING THE AFTER SCHOOL SECTOR

This learning brief was produced by The Learning Trust in partnership with the After School Programme Office which drives After School programming as a priority project of the Western Cape Government. The brief emerged following the third Community of Practice (CoP) meeting held in 2020, which marked the 16th CoP organised by its partners since 2016.

In August, the Community of Practice focused on future proofing the After School sector, particularly the following four pillars:

1.   Organisational flexibility

2.   Programme Adaptation

3.   Connection with learners

4.   Unusual Collaborations

We discussed the rapid shifts brought about by COVID 19 to the education space and ways to remain relevant while ensuring a productive, innovative and educated future for every child. How do we ensure that when the unexpected happens, we have enough resources around us to adapt to change?

EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND PROGRAMME REVISIONS

After School programmes played a huge role in closing the education gap during the lockdown period. As government eases restrictions to level 1, we reflect on how, as the After School sector, we have managed to remain relevant during the Coronavirus pandemic and how we are using these lessons to inform organisational policies and build the sector going forward.

While moving programming online worked swiftly in other parts of the world, in a country such as South Africa, with a wide digital divide, many learners were left to find their way through. After School

Programmes made many efforts to curb these challenges and reinvented programming to meet learners' education needs. Many organisations continue to face the challenge of reaching their learners and as such, emergency funding has been made available by different funders, to ensure that organisations continue running programmes. As schooling slowly returns to normal and with the many changes that have taken place during the pandemic, it remains clear that the After School Sector has to stay ready for times of crisis.

Even though we won't be able to avoid the impact of the Coronavirus on education, it is essential that we remain relevant during a time of crisis. We must find innovative ways to continue programming by implementing systems that will enable children to thrive during adversity. It is important that After School organisations formalise newly drafted response plans as part of organisational policies to ensure readiness for future crisis. What is clear from the Case Studies of some of our partners is that organisations were ready with urgent responses to the pandemic by employing methods that will enable programme continuity. No matter how big or small the efforts or adjustments, organisations went into full mode of trial and error to establish best working practices; yielding impactful results for learners.

SOME OF THE KEY PRACTICES BELOW

Shifting from core programming to food provision for learners and their families.

Building strategic partnerships that enabled organisations to drive the newly found focus and expose them to how to best navigate the future of programming going forward.

By making use of dependable infrastructure, Information Systems and reliable databases, organisations ensured the smooth transition to online learning and the involvement of as many learners as possible.

Programmes moved learning to online platforms almost immediately and continued ordinary programming elements such as winter school.

Organisations conducted surveys to assess learners' educational needs.

Although some organisations started small, data shows how they gained traction by increasing learner participation and improving programme delivery throughout lockdown.

Organisations quickly learned to shift mindset from being reactive to being adaptive – trying different methods with the virtual learner curriculum and finding ways to keep learners engaged for longer periods.

Over and above taking care of their learners, organisations had to make sure that staff's wellbeing was taken care of.

KEY SUCCESSES TO TAKE FORWARD WHEN IT COMES TO CONNECTING WITH LEARNERS

While challenges in reaching all learners persist, the After School sector continues to show great potential in reinventing and innovating their programmes. Without dwelling too much on the challenges posed by the pandemic when it comes to maintaining remote contact with learners; it is clear that keeping registers and important records of learners is key to our work. There is a greater need to track learners and parents, ensuring effective database systems to minimize the continuous hurdle of staying in touch. Moving towards a more futuristic approach to making impact, the After School sector must remain agile and adaptable to new programming methods to keep up with the ever changing times.

It is also apparent that continuously providing numerous avenues for learners who come from different backgrounds and challenges, enabling them to access the same quality programming is important to the future of After School. The reality is that most of the learners we work with come from disadvantaged backgrounds and face unique challenges that hinder their learning progress. These have to be addressed and met by organisations for maximum reach and impact.

Learning around the world is inevitably becoming more digitized and we have to embrace the changes and explore suitable online tools for our programmes. While we look to engage more learners online, physical contact is the only reality for most of our learners. Therefore, providing such tools and resources that will cater for both online and physical learning is how the After School sector moves forward.

PROGRAMME ADAPTATION & FLEXIBILITY

COVID-19 has exposed the need to have a sense of know-how when it comes to delivering programmes that our learners need. Getting to know learners must be intentional for organisations to achieve desired outcomes. Moving programming online poses many challenges for our organisations; engaging parents, tailor making suitable learning content and curbing data costs are only some. The sustainability of ASPs depends on strategic solutions and realistic policies which include long term plans that enable the organisation to move ahead. One of the key components in the functioning of any organisation is around building healthy and valuable relationships to sustain the involvement of learners in the programmes. More people in the sector are realising the importance of cultivating and harnessing these relationships to ensure that programmes are sustainable and withstand times of crisis.

Flexibility is key in the conversation of 'what lessons to take forward'. The pandemic has proven that ASPs must at all times show readiness for change to improve on efficiency and not lose sight of their core programming. The move to online learning has safety implications for learners. How are we making sure that we protect learner information while maintaining online presence? This is something that ASPs must consider when designing future online systems that speak to programme delivery. There is also the question of how organisations maintain the 'human touch' when adapting to changing times. ASPs running online need to be mindful of how programmes can keep the human touch that makes them unique while remaining adaptable and flexible.

UNUSUAL COLLABORATIONS

In the After School space, collaborations form an important part of catapulting organisational thinking and developing ideas that are unique and creative. COVID-19 saw a number of newly formed collaborations that enabled organisations to improve on efficiency and effectiveness, while allowing programme redesign and development. There are some key lessons to take forward in terms of leveraging efforts to reach broader systematic collaborations and partnerships.

CHALLENGES THAT AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMMES FACE DURING LOCKDOWN

■

Remaining accountable to donors is an important aspect in approaching future collaborations. This can be done through employing data collection tools that will enable organisations to collect, manage and analyse data for reporting purposes.

■

Understanding the value that each organisation brings is an important component in achieving successful partnerships. There is a need to find congruence in values which will allow for easier and smoother partnerships. Although it can be challenging to work with a new team, there are ways in which a new culture can be cultivated with more intent and systematic processes in place.

■

Organisations need to 'act' or they become irrelevant. Although it can be frustrating and unclear as to which direction to take from the onset, organisations need to be mindful that if they do not act, especially immediately, they run the risk of becoming irrelevant.

■

There is a much greater need to reinforce **existing partnerships.** There is a lot more that can be done through already existing networks and collaborations. Going into the future, ASPs have to be more deliberate about harnessing external relationships and allowing communities to bring their knowledge to form solid foundations for their work.

CONCLUSION

The future of ASPs lies in work being done more deliberately and intentionally. It is important to be mindful of how programmes and learners have been largely affected by the pandemic. Over and above this, with the many challenges brought by COVID-19, there are many opportunities of growth and programme reinvention as we move forward. Organisations also have to be intentional about putting measures in place that will ensure meaningful policies and guidelines to rise above adversities. It is critical to look at what is working and what isn't for purposes of future proofing After School programmes.

RESOURCES & LINKS

■

Outliers Learning Material:
outliers.org.za

■

The Answer Series:
www.theanswer.co.za

■

Collaborative advocacy efforts:
Join our first #LightsOnAfterSchool digital campaign in SA, 22 October.
The campaign is aimed at increasing awareness of the After School sector and its impact on learner outcomes and broader education as a whole.

Next WC CoP: 18 November 2020