

Who's Who in School-Age Care

by Roger Neugebauer

In the 1997 *Child Care Information Exchange* school-age status report, I observed that “school-age care is the fastest growing segment of the early childhood arena . . . and possibly the least visible.” Both these observations are still true. In the past six months, school-age care has been a hot news item with the unveiling of major new school-age funds. Despite all the news, the school-age field is still not well understood even by most early childhood professionals. The problem is that there is a wide range of players shaping the school-age environment and most people only see school-age care through the eyes of one of these players. In this status report I will introduce all the major providers in an attempt to provide a broad perspective on the entire field.

Primary Players

The most important players, of course, are the families who use school-age care and the staff who provide those services.

- **Families.** Recent surveys have confirmed the overwhelming demand for school-age services. Over 80% of parents say they want their children to participate in such services. With the increasing employment levels for both men

and women, more children than ever before face the possibility of being unsupervised in out of school hours. Since this generation of parents are more likely to have placed their preschool children in early childhood programs than any generation in the past, they are attuned to the value of entrusting their children to the care of a dependable school-age program during those hours. Unfortunately, supply is not keeping pace with demand. This is particularly true in low income neighborhoods where school-age services are only one-third as likely to be available as they are in high income neighborhoods (*Child Care Bulletin*, March/April 1995).

Families have a range of goals for school-age programs. Primarily they are concerned with safety — they want to know their children are in a secure and supportive environment. Beyond that, parents have a wide range of expectations — some want their children to be tutored, some want their children to participate in recreation activities, some want their children to take part in various activities such as piano lessons and dance class, and others want this to be a relaxing social experience.

- **Staff.** Undoubtedly, staff are the key to the quality of any school-age program. Unfortunately, the biggest challenge most programs face today is recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Lack of benefits and low wages certainly contribute to the problem — currently group leaders in school-age programs earn only \$5.50 to \$8.00 per hour (*NSACA News*, Summer 1998). Another challenge is that the before and after school hours of school-age programs seldom add up to full time work.

In the past, staff recruitment has also been hampered by the field's lack of identity. Some staff came to the field from a recreation background, some from an early childhood background, and some with a public school background. There was no recognition for school-age staff as a unique, prestigious group.

This is all changing, however, as a set of national standards and a national accreditation system take hold (see **Advocates** below). The growing acceptance of school-age care as a distinct discipline is also attested to by the bachelors and masters level programs in school-age care recently launched by Concordia College in Minneapolis.

Providers

Trendwatchers estimate that there are around 55,000 programs offering school-age services in the U.S. These providers are as diverse as early childhood providers. This diversity makes for an interesting range of choices for parents but often gets in the way of effective advocacy. The various types of providers have goals and philosophies that are as different as their legal auspices.

- **Child care centers.** Child care centers — for profit centers, non profit centers, military centers, church-housed centers . . . centers of all sizes and shapes — are currently the primary providers of school-age services. More than one out of every three school-age programs are operated by child care centers.

- **Public schools.** The fastest growing segment of the school-age market are programs operated by the public schools. Currently, 30% of all local school systems offer before and after school services (*Youth Today*, July/August 1998). This percentage is likely to increase as recent

federal initiatives call for funding local school systems to launch new school-age programs (see **Funders** below). In the new legislation and in much of the state funding of school-age programs, local school systems are authorized to contract with local providers for these services. And, in many communities, such cooperative efforts are taking place. However, in most cases, the local school systems are setting up their own programs. Not surprisingly, this is a major source of tension and competition.

- **Private schools.** Although there are no firm figures on how many school-age programs are offered by private schools, it is widely believed that the majority of them do provide school-age services. Private schools, being totally dependent upon parent satisfaction, are highly motivated to meet families' needs for such programs.

- **Other providers.** Three other types of providers complete the school-age landscape. First, there are growing numbers of independent organizations that are set up solely to provide school-age services. Second, there are a wide range of youth services agencies (YMCA's, boys and girls clubs, teen programs, etc.) that offer school-age programs. Finally, in recent years, new players have made their appearance. These are national for profit organizations, such as Voyager and Explore, which are marketing heavily to school districts for contracts to operate school-age programs.

It has been many years since there has been a thorough census of school-age providers. With all the changes that have occurred in recent years, such research is sorely needed.

Funders

Up until recently, there was scant support for school-age programs. Parents provided the lion's share of funding. In recent years, new funding from a variety of sources has energized the field. However, parents still provide the majority of school-age fees.

- **Employers.** First to come on board were employers. Through the American Business Collaborative, nearly \$50 million has been channeled into local school-age initiatives, with more funding coming every year. In addition, in community after community, individual employers have allocated funds for school-age services for their employees.

- **Foundations.** A number of foundations have stepped forward in recent years to fund projects aimed at increasing both the quality and quantity of school-age services in the nation. The first foundation to step forward in a big way was the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund which has contributed \$6.5 million since 1993 for school-age professional development initiatives. Most recently, the Mott Foundation has pledged \$55 million and the Soros Open Society Institute \$25 million to support the federal government's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

- **Federal government.** The big news this year was the announcement by President Clinton that he was proposing an annual \$200 million a year expansion to the Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLC) program which is designed to provide money to school districts for after school projects. In June, the White House announced \$40 million in grants for CLC projects, but Congress has yet to act on the

President's expansion plans. With the recent defeat of the tobacco tax which was being used to fund many of Clinton's child care initiatives, the prospects for major new funding is looking a bit dimmer.

In addition, other federal initiatives have supported school-age programs. Since 1984, federal funds under the former Dependent Care Block Grant have been set aside for school-age programs. In addition, over the years, the federal government has funded major school-age initiatives through military child care programs, and has funded youth development efforts in every county through the Cooperative Extension Service.

Advocates

The emergence of school-age care as a significant movement can be traced back to the tireless efforts of many individuals and organizations, including the following:

National Institute on Out of School Time. In 1978, responding to a deluge of inquiries from a *Good Housekeeping* article about her Brookline school-age program, Mickey Seligson organized the School-Age Child Care Project. In the intervening two decades, Seligson's organization, now titled the National Institute on Out of School Time, has been on the cutting edge of developments in the field. Its extensive research and technical assistance efforts continually propel the professionalism of the field. [Contact: NIOST, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA 02181, (781) 283-2547.]

School-Age NOTES. Eighteen years ago, Richard Scofield launched *School-Age NOTES*, a newsletter for school-age providers. Not only has

the newsletter become the mainstay of the field with 5,700 subscribers, but Scofield has been an active advocate in nearly every key development in the school-age arena. [Contact: *School-Age NOTES*, PO Box 40205, Nashville, TN 37204, (800) 410-8780.]

National School-Age Care Alliance.

In 1980, Mickey Seligson, Richard Scofield, and other key advocates had a discussion at the NAEYC convention that eventually led to establishing a professional organization for school-age professionals.

Founded in 1987, the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA) now boasts 6,000 members and a host of high-impact projects. NSACA sees itself as a home for all types of school-age providers. Rather than advocating for one form of delivery, it advocates for all school-age care that is accountable to families and provides developmentally appropriate activities for children.

In recent years, NSACA has achieved major milestones: it hired Linda Sisson as its first executive director; in collaboration with the National Institute on Out of School Time, it published standards for school-age programs; it has sponsored increasingly successful national conferences; and it has launched a school-age accreditation project. [Contact: NSACA, 1137 Washington Street, Boston, MA 02142, (617) 298-5012.]