

ROLE OF THE EDUCATION SPECIALIST IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

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Summary

In its 2011 Request for Proposals (RFP) for Out-of-School Time (OST) programs for youth in the elementary and middle grades, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) set out a requirement that each OST program include an education specialist who would identify suitable curricula, help staff create lesson plans, oversee implementation of program activities, foster continuous quality improvement, and build productive relationships with the schools attended by program participants. As part of the evaluation of the OST initiative, Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA) was asked by DYCD to develop and administer a survey designed to explore the qualifications, role, and responsibilities of OST education specialists during the 2012-13 school year, the first year of the OST education specialist requirement.

This report is based on the responses to an online survey administered by PSA in spring 2013, completed by education specialists in 277 out of 437 OST programs (a 63-percent response rate). Seventy-four percent of the survey respondents worked in elementary-grades programs, while 26 percent served as education specialists in middle-grades programs. This report summarizes findings on the qualifications of the OST education specialists, and on their role in supporting curriculum and lesson planning, program relationships with schools, and the implementation of a continuous quality improvement process. Highlights of the survey findings include:

- The vast majority of survey respondents met DYCD's expectations for qualifications of education specialist, with 95 percent holding at least a four-year college degree and 76 percent holding a degree related to education. Education specialists also brought extensive experience to their role, including prior experience working both with OST programs and in schools. Nearly one-third of education specialists (32 percent) reported being currently employed by the school attended by program participants.
- DYCD expected that the role of the education specialist would constitute at least 25 percent of a full-time position for a single OST program, and that an education specialist could work with as many as four OST programs. Sixty-seven percent of education specialists however, worked with only one OST program. Seventy percent reported spending 10 hours per week or more on duties related to the position of education specialist. Thirty-five percent of education specialists who worked with multiple programs worked 35 hours per week or more, compared with 9 percent who worked with a single program.
- Ninety-three percent of education specialists reported that their programs use some type of curricula to guide activities. Most education specialists played significant roles in curriculum selection and planning within their programs. They typically relied on curricula resources available online or through the nonprofit OST provider organization, or on curricula that they developed themselves.

- The majority of education specialists reported that their OST program’s content is aligned with school-day curricula at least to some extent. Nearly all the education specialists (97 percent) worked with program staff to align activities with City and State learning standards. Thirty-four percent used school goals as a criterion for selecting program curricula.
- Education specialists supported continuous quality improvement in their programs by using information from a variety of sources to improve program content, including participant performance data and feedback from school administrators. They also observed program activities and participated in staff evaluations, using those opportunities to coach staff, identify training and professional development needs, and make decisions about program staffing.

Some education specialists also reported challenges in carrying out their roles. Finding time to review staff lesson plans, coordinating with school staff, and identifying approaches to assess youth outcomes were among the most frequent challenges identified.

Study Overview

In its 2011 Request for Proposals (RFP) for Out-of-School Time (OST) programs for youth in the elementary and middle grades, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) laid out a set of strategies for OST programs designed to support and enhance the quality of program implementation. One of these strategies was establishing the position of an education specialist who would work with each OST program and support provider organizations and staff as they implemented DYCD’s new requirements for OST activity design. DYCD identified the following roles for the OST education specialist: identify suitable curricula, help staff create lesson plans, oversee implementation of program activities, foster continuous quality improvement, and build productive relationships with the schools attended by program participants. This was grounded in findings from previous evaluations of DYCD-funded programs, which found that high-quality programs featured staff whose qualifications enabled them to successfully implement sequenced, skill-building activities, often supported by a master teacher or education specialist who helped in aligning program content with learning standards (Russell, Walking Eagle, & Mielke, 2010; Sinclair, Sanzone, Russell & Reisner, 2012). Other research on OST programs has also identified alignment to the school day, continuous program improvement, and experienced, effective staffing as key components to program quality (Huang & Dietel, 2011; Smith, Akiva, Sugar, Lo, Frank, Peck, Cortina & Devaney, 2012).

As part of the evaluation of the OST initiative, Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA) was asked by DYCD to develop and administer a survey designed to explore the qualifications, role, and responsibilities of the OST education specialists. The education specialist role became an expectation for OST program contracts in September 2012, and, in February 2013, PSA e-mailed an invitation to complete an online survey to either the onsite directors overseeing each OST

program, or to the executive directors of the nonprofit provider organization.¹ For 437 OST programs that commenced in 2012, 128 executive directors received the survey invitation for the programs they oversaw, as did 309 on-site program directors. The e-mail invitation included instructions to forward the survey to the program's education specialist or to the staff member responsible for the duties prescribed to the education specialist. A total of 277 individuals completed the survey, for a response rate of 63 percent.

This report summarizes findings on the (1) qualifications of the OST education specialists; (2) their role in curriculum and lesson planning; (3) their role in supporting a productive, aligned relationship with schools attended by OST participants; and (4) their role in implementing a continuous quality improvement process.

Qualifications of OST Education Specialists

DYCD envisioned the education specialist playing a significant role in supporting the quality of OST programs, a vision that was reflected in the expectations for the role. DYCD specified that an education specialist should have at least a four-year college degree, experience in curriculum development, and, if possible, teaching credentials. DYCD also expected that the role of the education specialist would constitute at least 25 percent of a full-time position for a single OST program, and that an education specialist could work with as many as up to four OST programs. Recognizing the staffing constraints of OST programs, the education specialist could also fulfill other roles within the program, and, in those programs serving fewer than 90 participants, the program director could assume the role of education specialist. As described below, the survey revealed that OST programs generally engaged education specialists who were well-qualified for their roles.

Staffing Patterns

As previously mentioned, DYCD estimated that the role of the education specialist was equivalent to at least 25 percent of a full-time position for a single OST program, or about nine hours per week (based on a 35-hour work week). Overall, 17 percent of respondents worked 35 hours or more a week as education specialists, and an additional 12 percent worked between 20 and 24 hours a week. The most common time commitment devoted to serving in that capacity was 10 to 19 hours per week (41 percent). Thirty percent of survey respondents reported spending fewer than 10 hours per week as education specialists.

Sixty-seven percent of education specialists reported that they worked with only one OST program. Twenty-six percent worked with additional programs at multiple locations, and 7 percent worked with other programs at the same location. As expected, education specialists who worked with multiple programs spent more time serving in that capacity than did those who

¹ Direct contact information for education specialists was not available through the DYCD Online data management system.

worked with just one OST program: Thirty-five percent of multi-site education specialists worked 35 hours or more, compared with 9 percent who worked with a single program.

Education specialists may serve other roles in their OST programs, and 26 percent of respondents confirmed that they serve additional functions. Of those who held multiple roles, 26 percent said that they taught activities in the program, either as a group leader or as an activity specialist, and 31 percent were managers for the OST program (either the program director or assistant program director). Two percent were parent liaisons. In addition, 49 percent served in an “other” role, which included respondents who listed leadership positions at the nonprofit provider organizations managing the OST programs (e.g., executive director and deputy director).

Education specialists were asked to identify the three responsibilities on which they spent most of their time. Most commonly identified as one of the top three responsibilities of education specialists were: observing program activities (36 percent), coaching program staff or volunteers (34 percent), working with staff to align activities with learning standards (34 percent), and developing curricula (33 percent). Education specialists were least likely to spend a significant amount of time recruiting and training staff and volunteers (9 percent selected this as a top responsibility), leading program meetings (8 percent), and working with community organizations and external vendors to support programming (5 percent).

Training and Experience

Ninety-five percent of education specialists who responded to the survey indicated that they held at least a four-year college degree, consistent with DYCD requirements, and two-thirds (66 percent) had a master’s degree or higher. In addition, the majority had degrees and certifications directly aligned with their role as an education specialist: 76 percent of respondents stated that they held a degree in education, curriculum development, or a related field, and 57 percent reported that they had teaching certifications.

Education specialists also had extensive prior experience working in school settings. Fifty-three percent had worked as classroom teachers, 10 percent as school administrators, and 48 percent in other school roles (respondents could identify more than one prior role). Thirty-two percent were currently staff members in the school attended by program participants. More than half of education specialists who reported having experience as a classroom teacher had at least six years of experience (62 percent). Thirty-four percent of education specialists reported that they had previously been a staff member at an OST program.

In addition, 50 percent of education specialists reported that they had received training that supported them in their role as education specialist. Of these, 63 percent received training from their provider organization, 34 percent from DYCD, and 24 percent from the school affiliated with the program (including on such topics as aligning program activities with state learning standards and selecting curricula). Forty-one percent reported that they received training that was relevant to their role as education specialist from another source, including the New York City Department of Education, technical assistance providers retained by DYCD, and

continuing education courses at local universities. Survey respondents could select more than one source of training.

As displayed in Exhibit 1, education specialists most frequently reported receiving training that would help them support program staff in integrating literacy- and STEM-focused activities into programming (72 percent), aligning program activities with state learning standards (69 percent), and coaching/training staff on developing activities (62 percent).

Exhibit 1
Training received for role as education specialist (n=137)

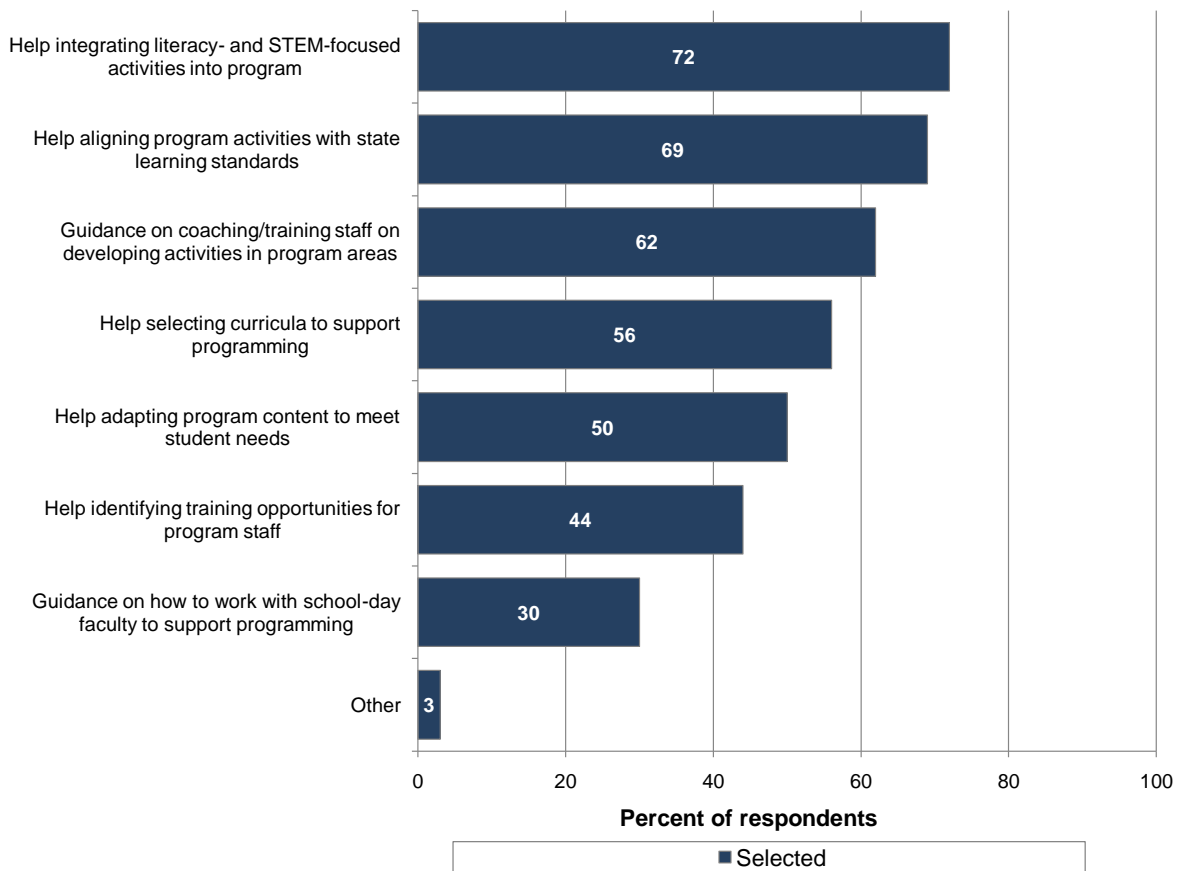


Exhibit reads: Seventy-two percent of education specialists reported that they received training on integrating literacy- and STEM-focused activities into program.

Curriculum and Lesson Planning

Previous research on DYCD-funded OST programs examined several program features that could promote high levels of youth engagement and found that OST programs needed significant assistance on lesson planning and identifying curricular resources (Sanzone, Vaden, Russell, & Sinclair, 2011). Education specialists may fill this need in supporting program quality by developing curricula, identifying resources for programs, and offering guidance to staff as they develop lesson and activity plans.

Education specialists were asked to identify responsibilities in the OST program that were exclusively theirs, along with the responsibilities that they share with colleagues. Education specialists played an important role in curriculum and activity planning, as showed in Exhibit 2. For example, more than half of education specialists reported that they were solely responsible for tracking the implementation of curricula (55 percent), identifying curricula for program use (53 percent), leading meetings with staff about program content or curricula (53 percent), and developing curricula for the OST program (51 percent). Others typically collaborated with colleagues in these responsibilities.

Exhibit 2
Curriculum planning roles performed by education specialists (n=277)

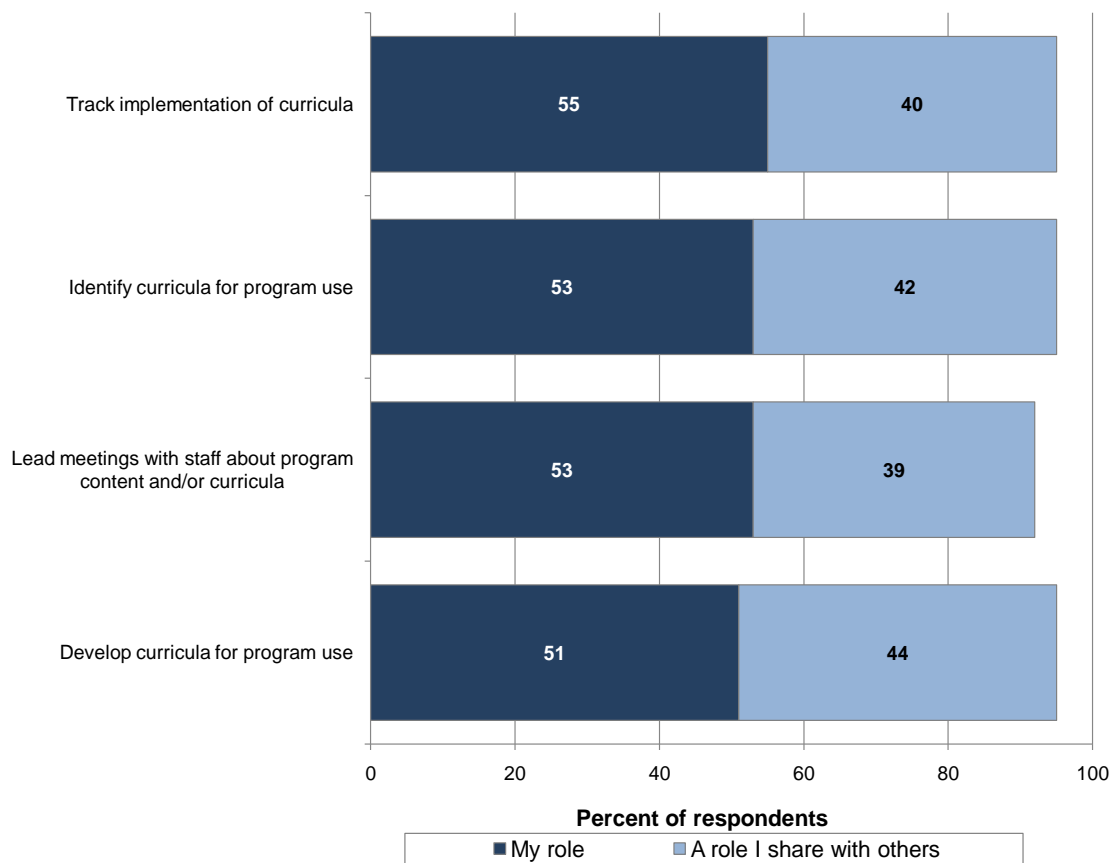


Exhibit reads: Fifty-five percent of education specialists reported that tracking the implementation of curricula was a role that they performed exclusively. Forty percent said that this was a role that they shared with others.

Identifying Curricula

Ninety-three percent of education specialists reported that their OST programs use some type of curricula to guide activities. As shown in Exhibit 3, when asked about the source of these curricula, education specialists most frequently cited using online resources (59 percent),

curricula obtained from the OST provider organization (49 percent), and developing curricula for the program themselves (46 percent). Survey respondents could select more than one source.

Exhibit 3
Sources of curricula (n=254)

Source of curricula	Percent of respondents
Online resources	59
Provider organization	49
I developed curricula for program use	46
DYCD	37
The After-School Corporation (TASC)	37
Program's host school	30
Partnership for After School Education (PASE)	29
Partner organizations not affiliated with DYCD	21
Other	20
Development Without Limits	9
Unsure	2

Exhibit reads: Fifty-nine percent of education specialists reported that they obtain curricula from online resources.

Education specialists who selected “other” in the survey listed several sources of curricula including organizations such as the Alliance for Climate Education, NASA and 4-H. They also specified published curricula, including KidzMath and Science Explorers.

The survey also asked education specialists about the criteria they use when selecting curricula for the OST program. As shown in Exhibit 4, more than three-quarters of education specialists said that they look for curricula that are aligned with program goals for youth (82 percent) and that include project-based activities (78 percent). Seventy percent of respondents reported that they use staff input to choose curricula. About one-third (34 percent) identify curricula that are aligned with the host school’s goal for youth.

Exhibit 4
Strategies used to select curricula (n=250)

Source of curricula	Percent of respondents
I look for curricula that are aligned with my program's goals for youth	82
I look for curricula that include project-based activities	78
I use input from staff to choose curricula	70
I look for curricula that are easy to adapt	54
I look for curricula that are low cost	34
I look for curricula that are aligned with my host school's goals for youth	34
I look for curricula that do not require the purchase of any new supplies or tools	22
None of the above	3

Exhibit reads: Eighty-two percent of education specialists said that they look for curricula that are aligned with their program's goals for youth.

Supporting Staff in Implementing Curricula

The 2011 DYCD RFP introduced a new emphasis on incorporating literacy and STEM content in OST activities. Given their school-day experience and training, education specialists may be uniquely suited to support OST program staff as they implement these and other activities. The survey asked education specialists to report the percentage of time spent supporting staff in various areas. As shown in Exhibit 5, education specialists reported spending an average of 24 percent of their time helping staff implement literacy content. They spent an average of 19 percent of their time on strategies for providing academic support, and an average of 18 percent of their time on STEM-focused content.

Exhibit 5
Percent of time spent supporting staff in various program areas (n=277)

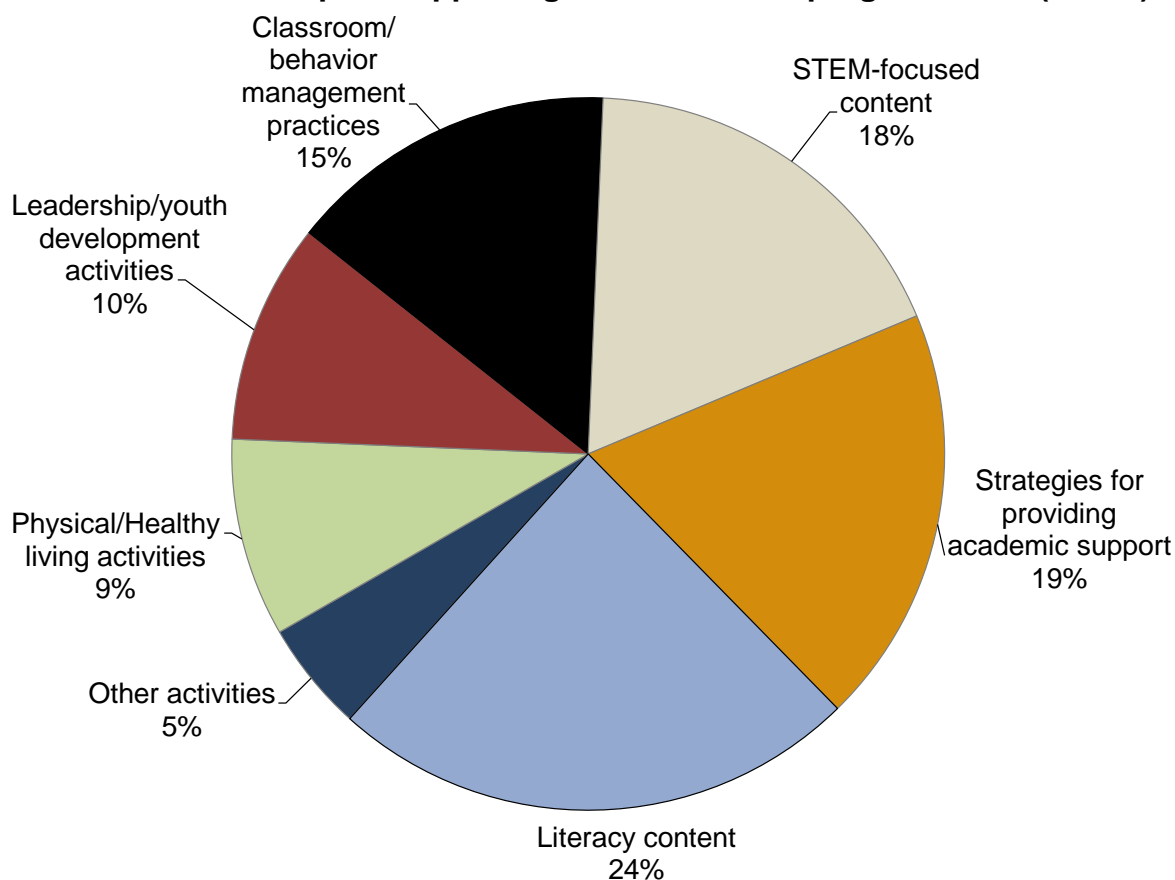


Exhibit reads: Education specialists reported spending an average of 15 percent of their time supporting staff on classroom/behavior management practices.

Education specialists were asked to report how often they provided training or coaching to staff on the curricula used by their programs. Thirty-nine percent of education specialists said that they provided curriculum training to staff at least once a month, and 47 percent provided training a few times per semester. Eleven percent said that they have not provided training on curricula used by the program, and 3 percent did so only once during the school year.

Education specialists can also support staff through regular feedback and interactions with OST staff members. Education specialists who responded to the survey took advantage of the opportunity to communicate with staff during program staff meetings: the majority reported attending all (45 percent) or some (42 percent) of the staff meetings held by the OST program.

Alignment with School

Previous research has shown that OST programs aligned with school-day curriculum and instruction can support student learning and offer supports that complement and reinforce learning that takes place during the school day (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). Education specialists can play an integral role in supporting the alignment between OST programs and the schools attended by their participants by serving as liaisons between OST program staff and school-day faculty, and by facilitating conversations about curricula, priorities for student learning, and student progress.

Ensuring content alignment with the host school was a significant part of the responsibilities of education specialists, as illustrated in Exhibit 6. For example, 97 percent worked with staff to align activities with city and state learning standards; 60 percent of education specialists were exclusively responsible for that role. Serving as a liaison with the school was a responsibility of the education specialists to a somewhat lesser degree—44 percent said that they served as the liaison between OST program staff and school faculty, and 40 percent were responsible for integrating school-day norms into the OST program.

Exhibit 6
School alignment roles performed by education specialists (n=277)

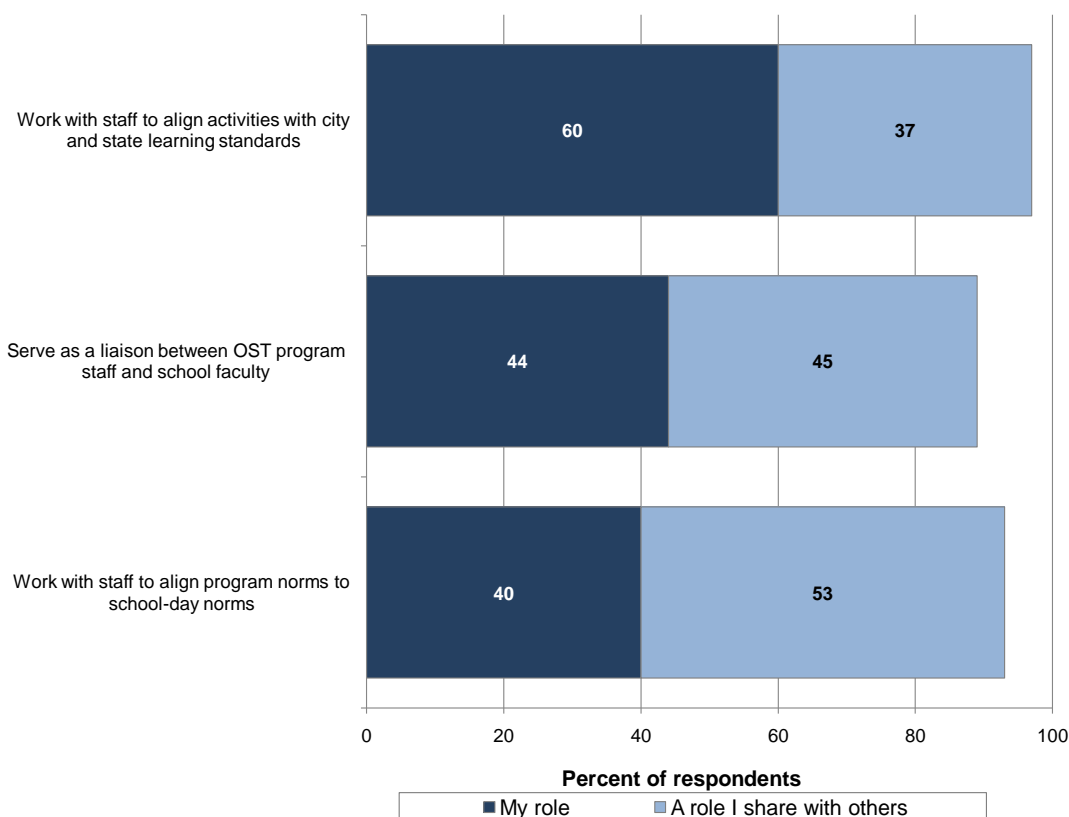


Exhibit reads: Sixty percent of education specialists reported working with staff to align activities with city and state learning standards was a role that they performed exclusively. Thirty-seven percent said that this was a role that they shared with others.

Communication with School Day Staff

Discussing school curricula, learning goals, and the needs of students with school day staff can help ensure that the OST program enhances learning opportunities for program participants and meets their needs. For some education specialists, serving as a liaison between the school and the program was a natural fit, as they were also employed by the school. Nearly one-third of education specialists (32 percent) reported being currently employed by the school attended by program participants. Of those respondents, 71 percent were current teachers, 7 percent were school administrators, 4 percent were curriculum specialists, and 2 percent were school support staff members. Sixteen percent held other positions in their school, including serving as math and literacy coaches.

Education specialists reported varying frequency of communication with school-day staff. When asked how often they speak with school faculty, including teachers, administrators, and curriculum specialists, about one-third reported contact with school-day staff on a weekly basis, and another third reported communication only once or twice a semester, as shown in Exhibit 7.

Exhibit 7 Communication with school day staff (n=270)

How often do you speak with the following school day staff members?

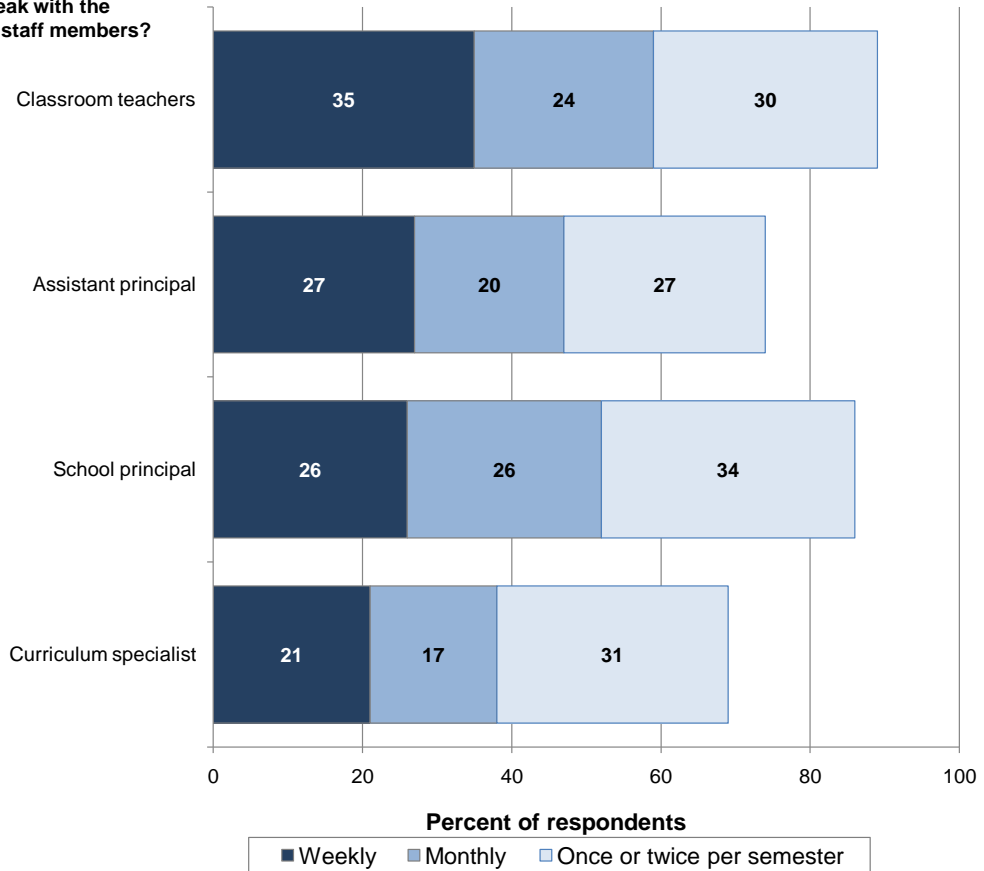


Exhibit reads: Thirty-five percent of education specialists said that they speak with classroom teachers weekly, 24 percent said that they did so monthly, and 30 percent said they did so once or twice a semester.

Alignment with School-Day Expectations

Education specialists were asked about the extent to which the OST program activities and behavior norms aligned with the school’s curricula and expectations for students. Eighty-seven percent of education specialists reported that they aligned the OST program’s content with the curriculum used by the school at least to some extent. Seventy-six percent of survey respondents reported that the program’s approach to behavior management strategies was aligned with the norms used by the school.

Continuous Quality Improvement

DYCD expects all OST programs to adopt a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process to monitor and enhance the quality of program activities. Education specialists can support this process by (1) coaching and supervising staff, (2) identifying and implementing

professional development and technical assistance opportunities, and (3) using data to inform decisions about programming and program staff. The following section summarizes how education specialists reported supporting the CQI process in OST programs.

Education specialists were involved in several activities to support program improvement, particularly as it related to staff capacity (Exhibit 8). Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents, for example, said that they observed program activities, and 92 percent coached program staff and volunteers and identified appropriate training for staff.

Exhibit 8
CQI roles performed by education specialists (n=277)

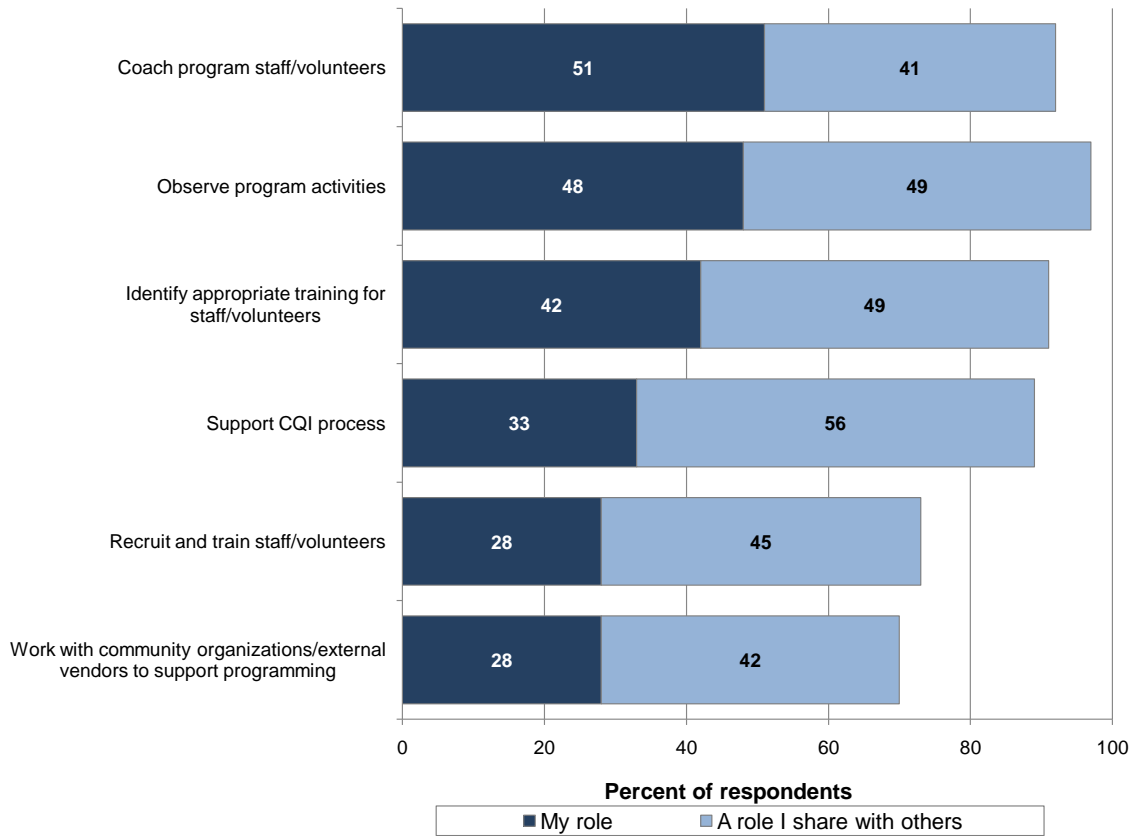


Exhibit reads: Fifty-one percent of education specialists reported that coaching program staff and volunteers was a role that they performed exclusively. Forty-one percent said that this was a role that they shared with others.

Using Data to Inform Program Decisions

Education specialists were asked about the extent to which they used select sources of information to determine and improve program content. As displayed in Exhibit 9, the majority reported using, to at least some extent, data on participant outcomes and achievement (87 percent), assessments of specific participant outcomes or skills (80 percent), and youth grades and school (75 percent).

Exhibit 9
Feedback used to determine and improve program content (n=268)

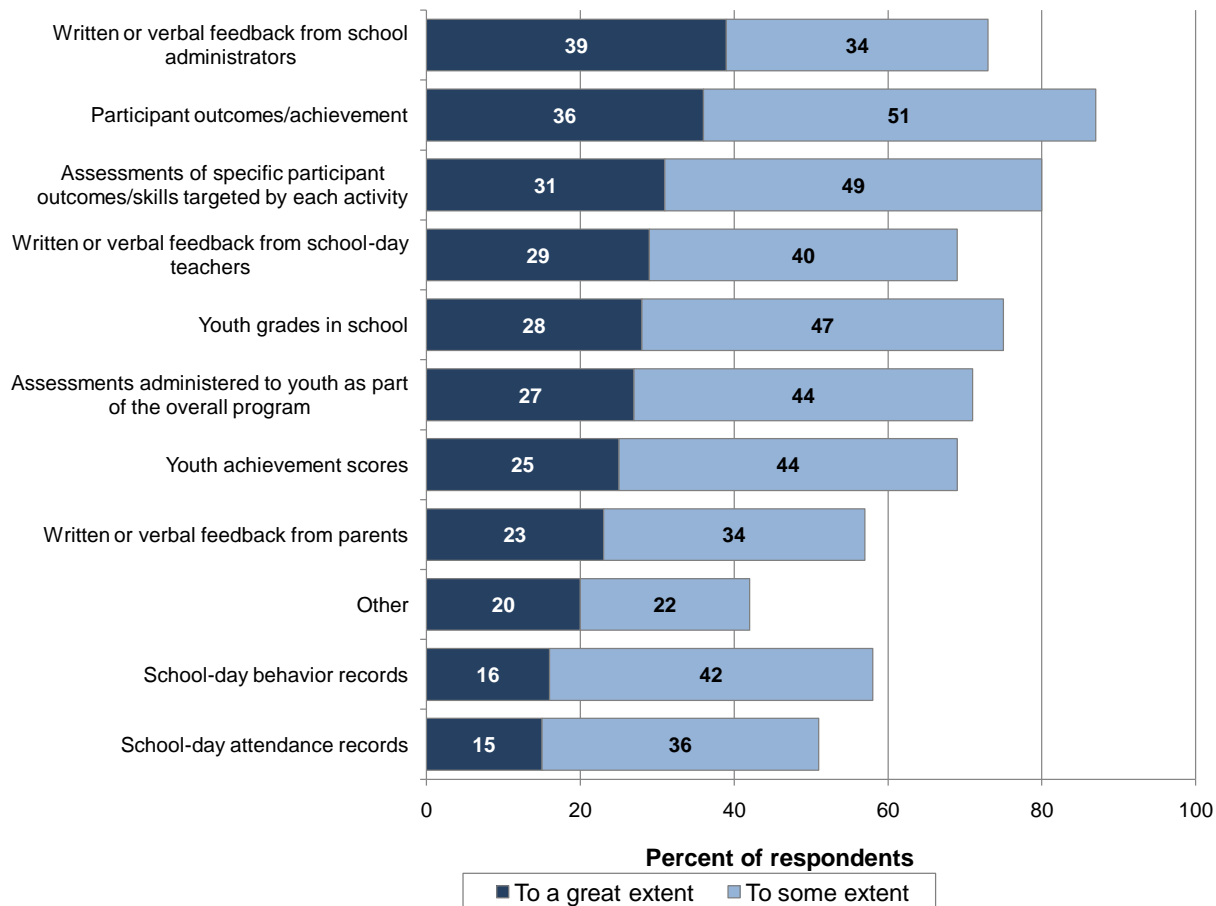


Exhibit reads: Thirty-nine percent of education specialists reported that they used written or verbal feedback from school administrators to determine and improve program content to a great extent. Thirty-four percent did so to some extent.

Coaching and Supervising Program Staff

Strategies used to support staff. More than half of education specialists reported that they used the following strategies to a great extent to support staff: reviewing lesson plans written by staff (64 percent), observing activities and providing written or verbal feedback about instructional strategies (61 percent), and providing written or verbal feedback on lesson plans (59 percent), as shown in Exhibit 10.

Exhibit 10
Strategies to advise program staff (n=270)

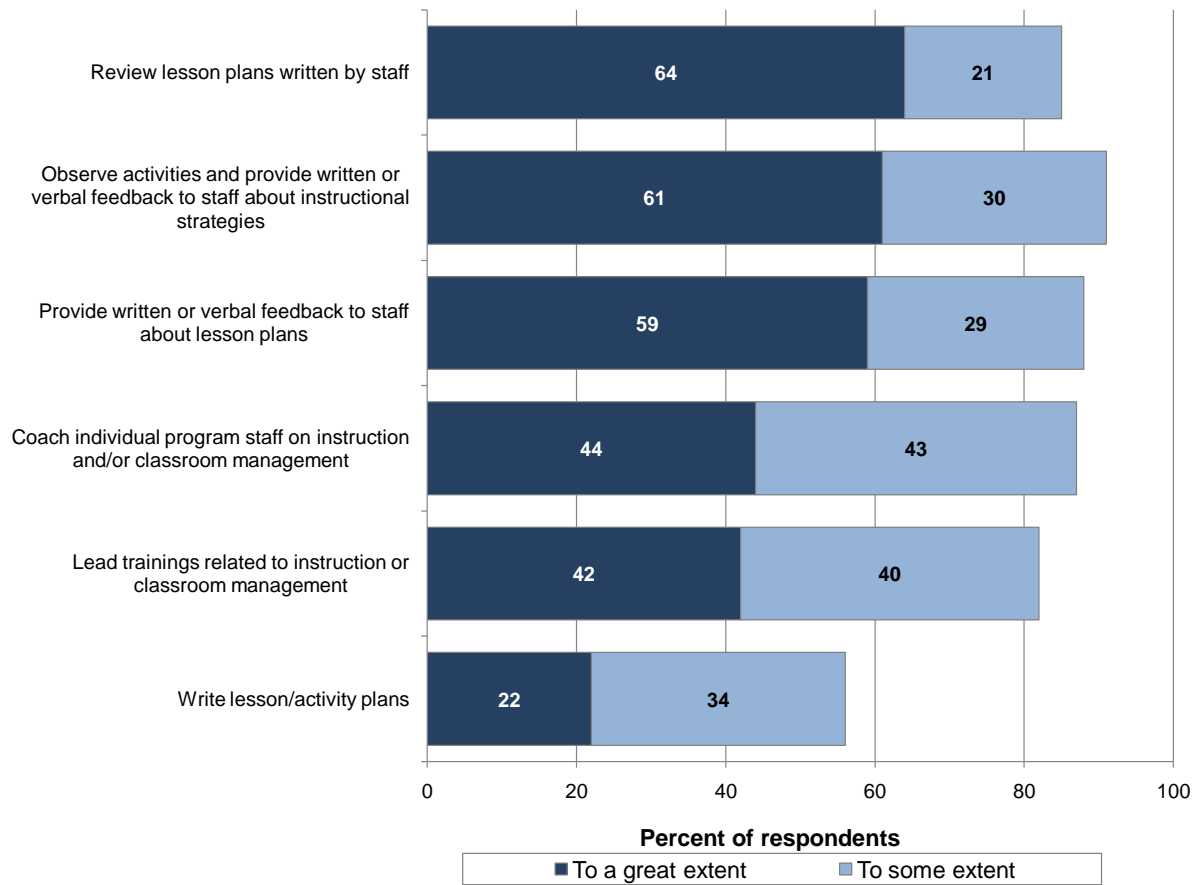


Exhibit reads: Sixty-four percent of education specialists reported that they review lesson plans written by staff to a great extent. Twenty-one percent did so to some extent.

Staff evaluations. Sixty-eight percent of education specialists reported that they participate in staff evaluations or performance reviews. The most frequently identified strategies for evaluating staff were observations of staff as they lead activities (50 percent), formal one-on-one performance reviews (24 percent), and informal check-ins and meetings (20 percent).

Education specialists reported using information from staff evaluations in several ways to guide decisions about the program. As shown in Exhibit 11, more than half used staff evaluation results to make improvements in practices used by staff (63 percent) and to identify training and professional development needs (52 percent), to a great extent.

Exhibit 11
Use of staff evaluation results (n=182)

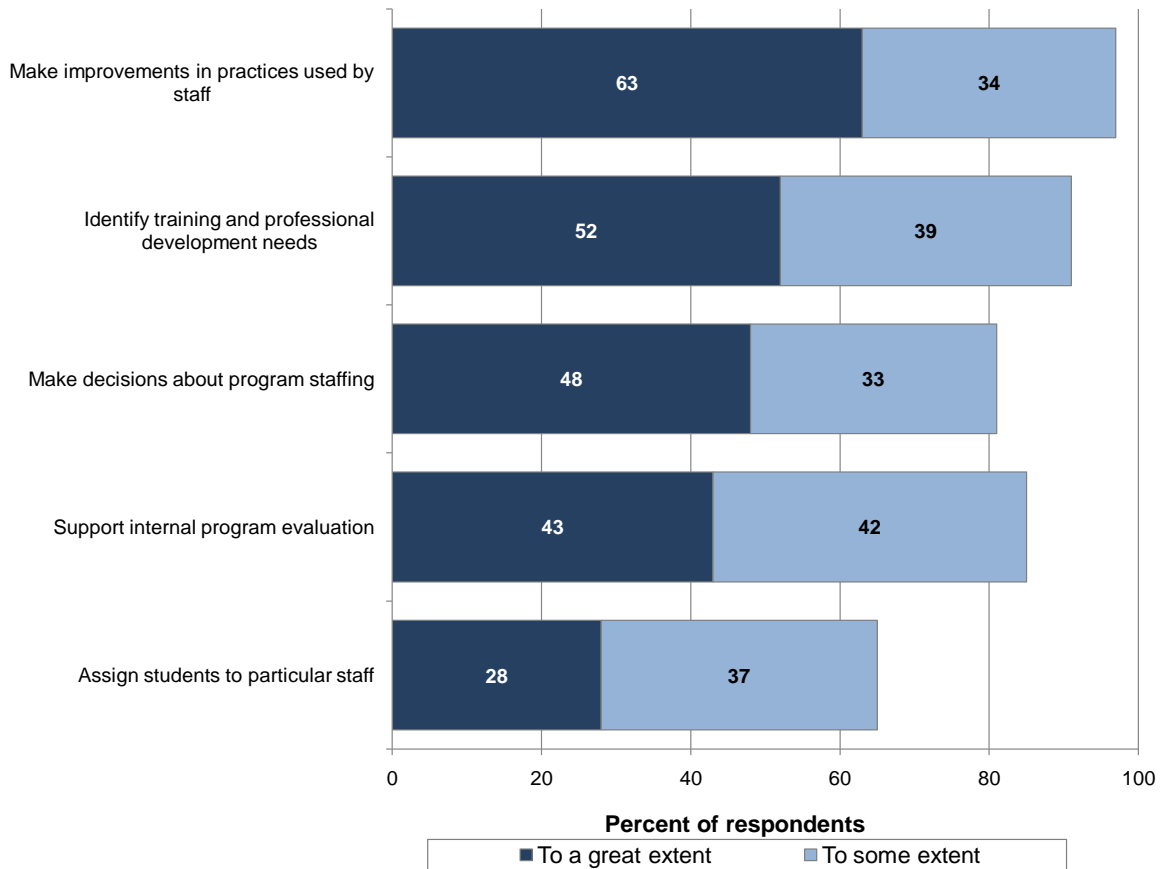


Exhibit reads: Sixty-three percent of education specialists said that they use staff evaluation results to make improvements in practices used by staff, to a great extent. Thirty-four percent did so to some extent.

Professional Development and Technical Assistance

Technical assistance providers, including The After-School Corporation (TASC) and Development Without Limits, are retained by DYCD to support OST programs through direct assistance and professional development workshops. OST programs can receive technical assistance in several ways—by sending staff to advertised professional development workshops, by requesting on-site technical assistance through DYCD, or by recommendation of the DYCD program manager monitoring the program.

Education specialists were asked to report how much they expected to work with DYCD’s technical assistance providers during the 2012-13 school year as part of their efforts to enhance the quality of programs and build the capacity of staff. Thirty-nine percent said that they did not expect their program to receive technical assistance from the DYCD-retained providers by the end of 2012-13. In contrast, 14 percent expected to work with technical assistance providers at least monthly by the end of 2012-13. Twenty-six percent of respondents expected to work with technical assistance providers only once or twice each semester.

For those education specialists who worked with technical assistance providers during the 2012-13 school year, the services most frequently requested included help integrating literacy- and STEM-focused activities into programming (72 percent), identifying training opportunities for program staff (68 percent), and guidance on coaching and training staff to develop activities (54 percent). These topics reflect the training that education specialists reported receiving for their own role (as reported earlier). This suggests both that training opportunities offered reflected the needs of programs, as well as alignment in coaching offered to program staff internally by education specialists and externally by technical assistance providers.

Challenges Facing Education Specialists

Education specialists reported several challenges related to fulfilling their responsibilities. Sixty-four percent of respondents, for example, reported that finding time to review staff lessons or activity plans was a minor or major challenge. Fifty-nine percent reported that coordinating with school day faculty, identifying appropriate approaches for assessing youth outcomes, and identifying appropriate approaches for assessing program quality were challenges (Exhibit 12). Having a pre-existing relationship with the school does not appear to be sufficient to protect against some of these challenges: for example, both education specialists employed by the host school and those who were not reported that coordinating with the school was a challenge (36 percent and 68 percent, respectively).

Exhibit 12
Challenges to fulfilling responsibilities (n=267)

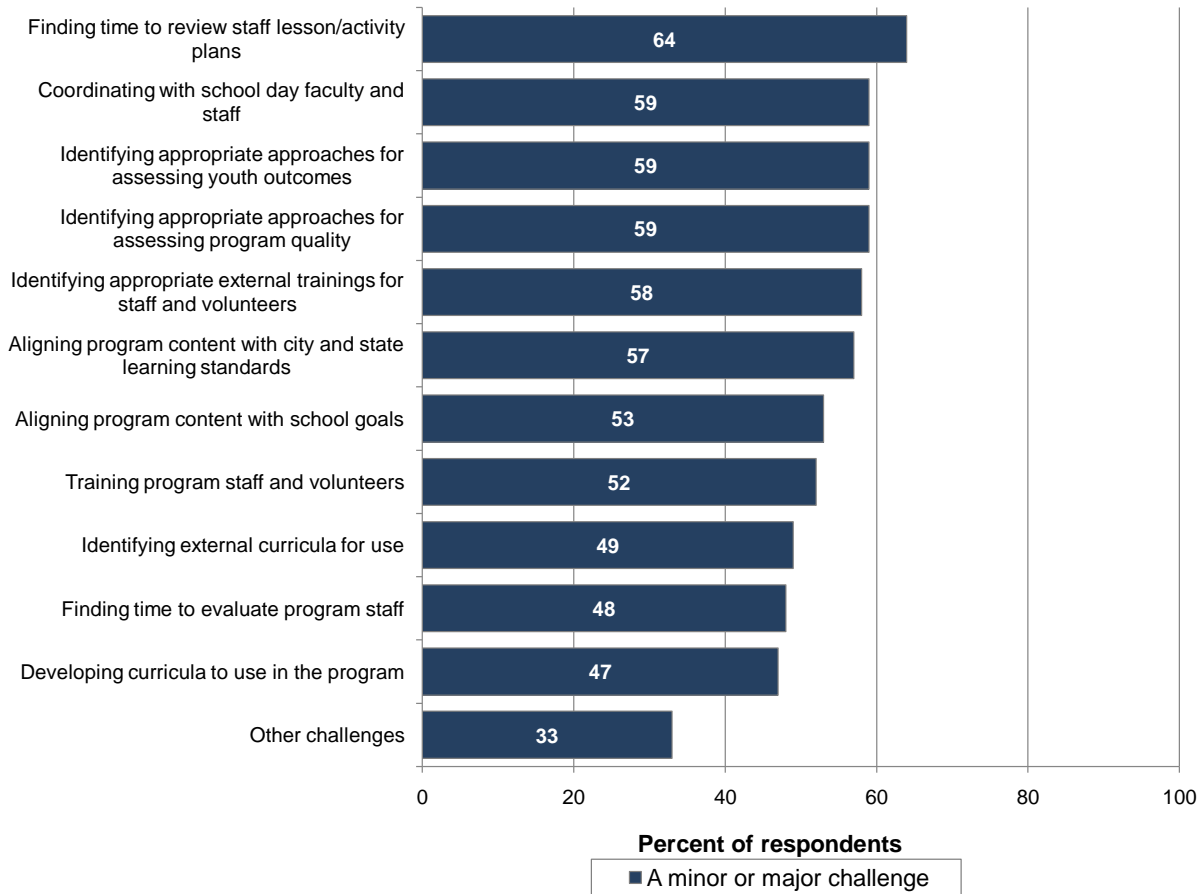


Exhibit reads: Sixty-four percent of education specialists reported that finding time to review staff lesson or activity plans was a major or minor challenge.

To gain insight into what supports would help education specialists address these challenges, survey respondents were asked to identify areas in which they would like to receive additional assistance. Slightly more than half of educational specialists (53 percent) reported that they needed assistance in better integrating literacy- and STEM-focused activities into the program. Help in identifying training opportunities for program staff was the second most frequently selected need; help in aligning program activities with state learning standards, and help in selecting curricula to support programming were the third most frequently selected needs (Exhibit 13). It is clear from responses to survey questions about training needs that these areas are ongoing concerns for the education specialists; the survey, however, did not ask education specialists to reflect on the quality or effectiveness of the assistance currently being offered in these areas.

Exhibit 13
Technical assistance needs (n=263)

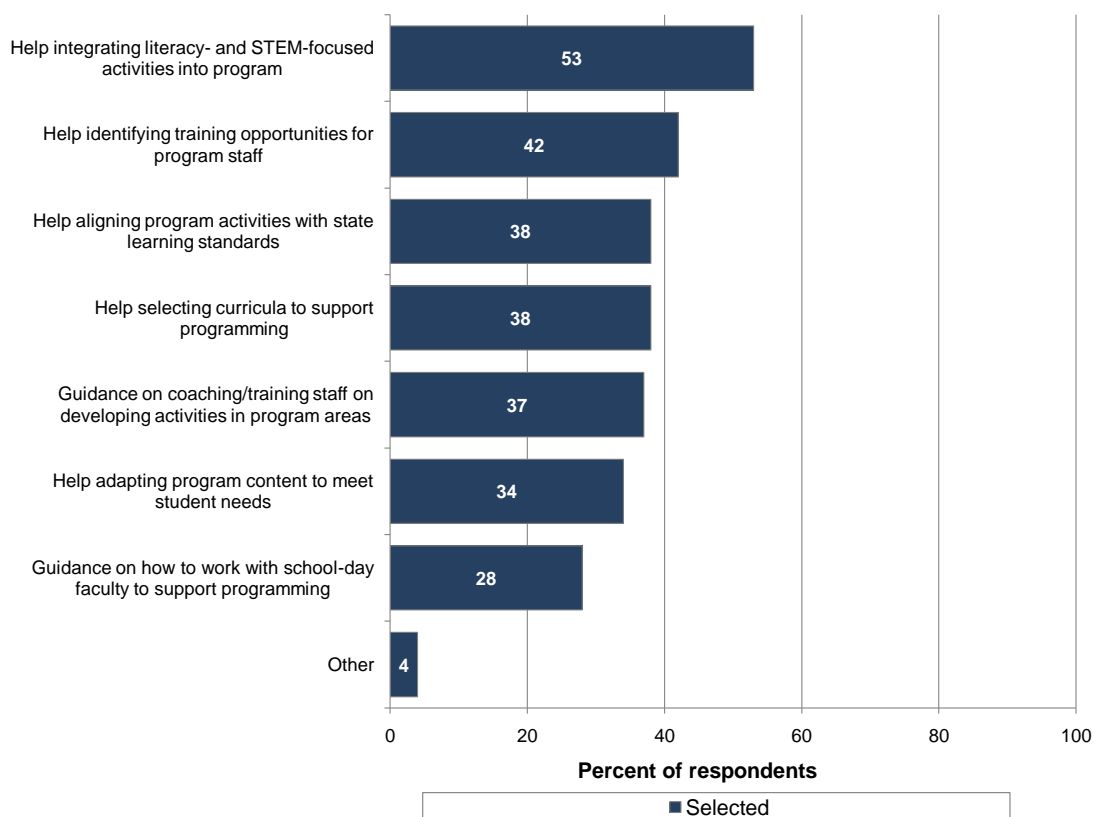


Exhibit reads: Fifty-three percent of education specialists said that they would like to receive technical assistance to help integrating literacy- and STEM-focused activities into their program.

Among survey respondents who selected “other,” technical assistance needs included advocacy and program funding.

Conclusions

OST programs succeeded in identifying well-qualified, experienced educators to serve as education specialists during the 2012-13 school year, the first year in which this position was required by DYCD. They played significant roles in continuous quality improvement by identifying or developing curriculum, participating in staff supervision, and identifying technical assistance opportunities. Education specialists also played important roles in aligning OST programming with school-day norms and content, despite somewhat irregular communication and coordination with school-day staff. As the role of education specialist becomes institutionalized within OST programs, devoting additional time and resources to the role, in particular to coordination with the school, may enhance the effectiveness of education specialists in promoting the quality of OST programs in ways aligned with DYCD priorities, and in enhancing the impact of these programs on youth participants. In particular, education specialists recognize that they need additional guidance in better integrating literacy- and STEM-

focused activities into the program, more help identifying training opportunities for program staff, and help aligning OST program activities with state learning standards.

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