The Great Resignation or a Referendum on Job Quality?  
Exploring Staffing Shortages in Afterschool  
October 2021

Introduction

The world is experiencing the Great Resignation, the name given to a wave of professionals choosing to quit their jobs in search of increased flexibility, safety, and job quality. In August 2021 (the latest data available at the time of this writing), the U.S. Department of Labor cited unprecedented levels of job openings, with unfilled positions in education and health services near the top of the list. In August 2021, over 150,000 more people resigned jobs in education and health services than in August of the year prior.

In addition to this broad trend, the youth services sector faces additional challenges to hiring and retaining staff. On October 5th, New York City’s vaccination mandate went into effect for teachers and school staff, and many nonprofits working in schools implemented such a mandate along the same timeline. This caused an additional wave of resignations, and remaining staff faced an overnight increase in workload, with additional and unexpected tasks and assignments.

Underpinning these pandemic-related staffing challenges is a range of job quality issues that are not new to our field – minimum wage jobs, limited career pathways, and a prevalence of part-time work with few benefits, to name a few. With the pandemic adding to an already tenuous situation, recruiting employees to work in afterschool and other youth services programs has gone from a challenge to a staffing crisis.

On October 6, 2021, PASE convened a group of stakeholders from youth-serving nonprofits, social services agencies, higher education, and city government to discuss these challenges. This paper offers a summary of the themes of the discussion as well as ideas for change and action steps.

Discussion Themes

Wages and benefits are a barrier to staffing. We know the current infusion of recovery funds as well as existing workforce programs create pathways into entry level jobs for young adults in industries such as retail and hospitality. Youth work jobs pay the same minimum wage, but have limited opportunities for growth, and come with the additional stressors of supporting children grappling with loss, academic catch-up, and social/emotional development disruption due to COVID-19. Moreover, certain agencies
(including NYC Department of Youth and Community Development) do not allow contract funds to be used for bonuses, posing another disadvantage to youth-serving organizations trying to attract talent.

**Workers also want safety, flexibility, and freedom.** In-person youth programs require in-person staff, and cannot accommodate people seeking to work from home. Even administrative positions can be difficult to fill for organizations seeking to maintain equity across roles and asking office staff to work in-person. The allure of the freelance economy, which was already growing pre-pandemic, is now even stronger for some workers who wish to set their own schedules and work from wherever they choose. For many workers who choose to remain unvaccinated, they too have left jobs as a result of vaccine mandates. And, in addition to concerns around social distancing and adequate PPE for COVID-19 safety, some workers’ fears include violence and safety concerns (between 2019 and 2020, hate crimes against people of Asian descent rose by 70%, and against Black and African-American people by 40%).

**Kids’ academic, social/emotional, and physical development are at risk due to staffing issues.** Because of staffing vacancies, a number of programs report slowing the rate of participant enrollment. This means some families are left without child care after school, and kids are missing out on important enrichment that would help them get ahead and accelerate in school. Further compounding the issue, staff who are working in programs have fewer supports and are stretched thin. In some cases, programs are delaying professional development until they are fully staffed, which means staff are not getting training on resources that would fortify their skills and capacity to run high-quality programs.

**Employee retention is precarious as a result of being short-staffed.** Managers are worried about their existing staff and how long they will stay in their roles. Youth work is both rewarding and stressful, with stressors currently magnified due to the pandemic. Turnover costs money, hurts morale, and disrupts young people’s relationships with caring adults. One potential long-term consequence of a retention challenge is a gap in the leadership development pipeline, particularly at a time when more organizations are thinking about how to develop a new generation of leaders of color.

**Systems and bureaucracy are not helping.** While this may be an unsurprising finding, it’s worth noting that system-level delays and added requirements for background checks (clearances and fingerprints) are further slowing the hiring process for many organizations. Contract delays and limitations have also prevented some organizations from deploying innovative hiring practices and/or starting hiring with more advance notice before a program begins.

### Ideas to Recruit and Retain Staff

Solutions generated, listed below, range from short-term fixes to long-term system changes. All are feasible under the right policy and practice conditions.

#### Ideas for Recruitment

- Collaborate across CBOs to compile job postings and send them out to networks of young adults potentially seeking employment.
- Partner with universities to use work study dollars for employment in youth programs.
- Support job candidates to secure child care for their own children so they are available to work.
Ideas to Improve Retention and Job Quality

- Advocate to philanthropy and government funders to include an annual raise/cost of living adjustment in contracts.
- Ensure afterschool and related jobs (e.g., community service corps programs) are part of an explicit career pathway.
- Provide high-quality and flexible professional development opportunities (e.g., credit-bearing courses, mentoring, self-paced learning, industry-aligned certificates) that help staff see themselves as professionals and as part of a bigger sector and cause.

PASE Action Steps

As a result of the strategic discussion and needs identified in the field, PASE commits to the following action steps.

1. Continue to ensure that PASE trainings on core youth development topics are available to support ongoing staff onboarding.
2. Meet with leaders of programs that place young adults in jobs to advocate for a more robust youth services pipeline.
3. Convene thought leaders to continue building our collective knowledge and generating solutions.
4. Connect with university partners to explore potential hiring and internship pipelines and channels for communicating opportunities in the youth services field.
5. Work to advance public and private funding changes that will support stronger staffing practices.

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About PASE

PASE exists to improve the quality of afterschool programs for children and teens living in poverty. PASE recognizes the crucial role afterschool programs play in fostering young people's intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual growth. PASE believes that all kids deserve a safe, nurturing space during out-of-school time where they have opportunities to explore their passions while connecting with and learning from caring adults.

All young people deserve the right to succeed. PASE is determined to ensure we do everything possible to make a bright future possible for New York City's kids.

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