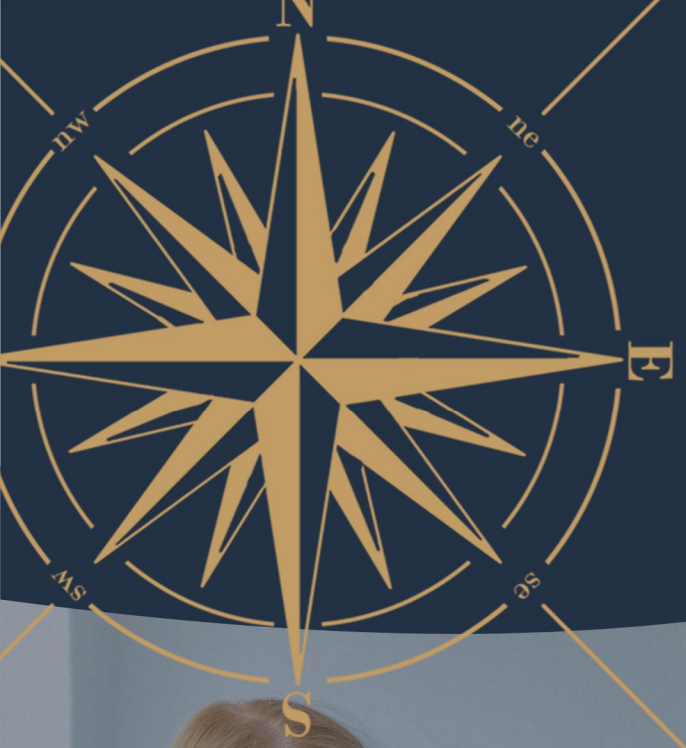




4 tweaks
to make a
bigger impact
in your afterschool program



Thank you!

I'm so glad you're here. I know that you want to make a bigger impact in your students' lives.

But I also know that you need a practical approach. And, you want to do it without adding to your already-full plate.

This guide provides strategies you can use in your afterschool program right now to increase your program's impact. You will begin to take a more deliberate approach to helping more students in bigger ways.

You have the power to change your students' trajectory.

You just need focus, the right approach, and some help.

Let's get to it, shall we?



Leslie McConnell



Tweak #1. Be clear about what you're (supposed to be) doing.

It's really hard to run an afterschool program.

There's a lot of moving parts, a lot of things that have to align every day for the program to even happen. And you're responsible for all of them.

Enough staff coverage. A clean, safe space. Students actually showing up. Healthy snacks. Funding. All before you even start to think about academics and enrichment.

And maybe you also have your own family and your own life. Maybe you wear multiple hats and afterschool is just one of them. With so many obligations and competing needs, it's difficult to focus on any one thing.

You're just trying to get through each day.

You've probably heard the saying, "if you fail to plan, you plan to fail."

Do you have goals and objectives for your program? Perhaps they were set when your agency applied for grant funding. Maybe they are aligned with what you're actually doing, maybe they aren't. Maybe you don't know.

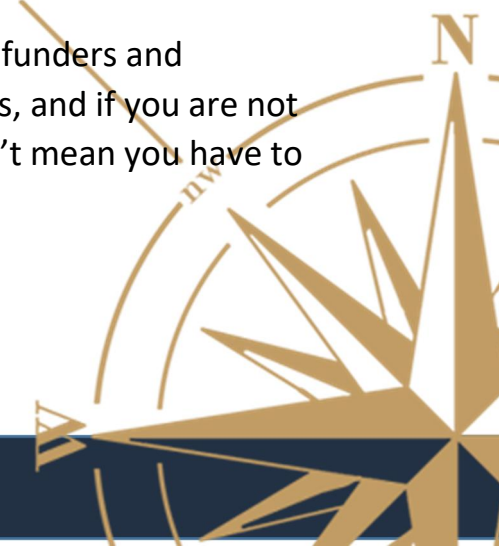
It has not been unusual for me to meet with a program team that has never seen their grant application. I've heard more than once, "There's a grant that outlines what we're supposed to be doing?"

Yes, really.

So if you've seen your grant, you are one of the lucky ones.

It is important to understand and manage expectations. Your funders and administrators are looking for the program to do certain things, and if you are not doing those things, there could be a problem. But, that doesn't mean you have to blindly follow them either.

Here are some things to consider doing.



- Know the expectations. You need to see whatever paperwork, rules, guidance, grants, regulations, and contracts govern your program. Compile these and read them. Cross-walk them to ensure that there are not conflicts.
- Compile all the “rules” you are expected to follow. These might come from funder program guidance, contract items, compliance indicators, agency policy. Make sure you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. If something doesn’t make sense for your program (this is where you might not blindly follow the “rules”), talk to someone on your leadership team or your funding agent to clarify expectations or address why something doesn’t make sense for your program. In other words, you have to know and understand the rules before you decide which ones are worth breaking. Be an open book. Don’t wait to be monitored for them to find you not doing something. Find out if you can get a waiver or formal exemption from things that don’t make sense for your program.
- Make sure all staff and stakeholders know the expectations too. They are a resource to you and you want to make sure that all your resources are supporting you consistently. One of the biggest challenges that program leaders face is staff who ‘do their own thing’ because they don’t realize, or don’t understand, why they are being asked to do something in a particular way. Understanding the ‘why’ behind a process or task makes it more likely that staff will follow it.
- Do students know what you’re trying to accomplish? Make them part of the solution. Make sure they know why they are there. If they think they’re in afterschool just to have fun and hang out with their friends, their mindset about their afterschool time will not be focused on what you want and you will struggle to reach your goals. Share what you want to accomplish with students in a kid-friendly way. Explain why it’s important. Consider adding incentives or rewards for groups that meet the expectations. Or ask students to be part of the goal setting.



- Don't forget parents. You need parents to reinforce your message with the students. Make sure they are in on the expectations too.



Tweak #2: Increase student attendance.

There are people out there that argue that afterschool programs – their very existence – have value in terms of community benefit because they ‘keep kids off the streets.’ And they would be right...to an extent.

In order for an afterschool program to fulfill that value proposition, **kids need to actually be going to the afterschool program regularly.**¹ If they aren't, then the program is not achieving its community benefit, regardless of the academic benefits.

¹ McCombs, J., Whitaker, A., and Yoo, P. *The Value of Out-of-School Time Programs*. Rand Corporation for the Wallace Foundation. 2017.



A drop-in program – one that students can attend when they feel like it and not when they don't – is unlikely to garner consistent and repeated attendance, which is needed for an afterschool program to effectively and positively influence outcomes.

Think about it...if a student attends one day a week for a month, do you think that will make any difference in their achievement? What if they came every school day afternoon for a month? *This* student probably has a better chance of experiencing a positive change.

This sounds like a simple enough solution, but getting repeated, consistent student attendance can be challenging.

- ☐ Determine how much is enough. Does the program have a target attendance threshold? If not, consider how much of the program would reasonably be needed to start having an impact. Consult relevant research or other similar programs to determine if there is a prescribed minimum attendance. This is a program's "dosage." Think of it like medicine, you need a certain amount over so much time to have the desired effect. Identify an attendance threshold that is likely to be effective and encourage all students to attend at least at that level.



- ☐ Establish an attendance policy and reinforce it with students and parents. Incorporate that attendance policy into your handbook and enrollment protocols.
- ☐ Consider incentives or rewards for attendance at certain levels. This doesn't need to be a prize or gift, it might be the opportunity to participate in a special (educational) experience, celebration, or field trip.

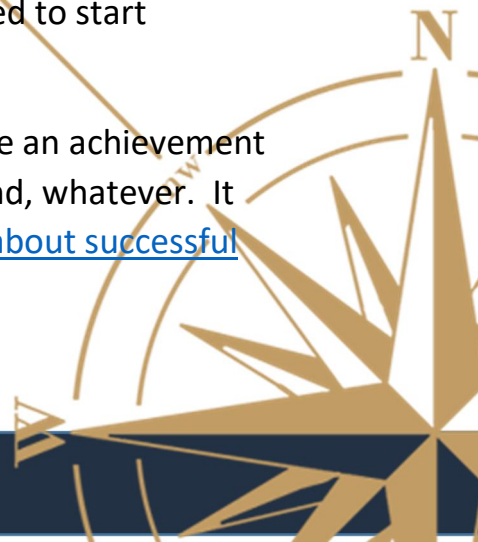




Tweak #3: Establish a vision and take intentional action - in baby steps, if needed.

It's time to map out a plan and then take action.

- ☐ Establish a vision for your ideal program and the results it produces. What does your most successful program look like? If everything was happening exactly as it should, what would be happening? What would you see? What would you be doing? Your team? Your students? Brainstorm and write it down.
- ☐ Define what success means to you right now. This might be informed by your performance objectives, or it might not. But it's important to consider what success means to you at this point and then work to align everything with that. It might even change as you grow, but you need to start somewhere.
- ☐ Define what you want in measurable terms. This could be an achievement goal, an attendance goal, an accomplishment of some kind, whatever. It just needs to be measurable. [Here's a blog post I wrote about successful goal setting.](#)

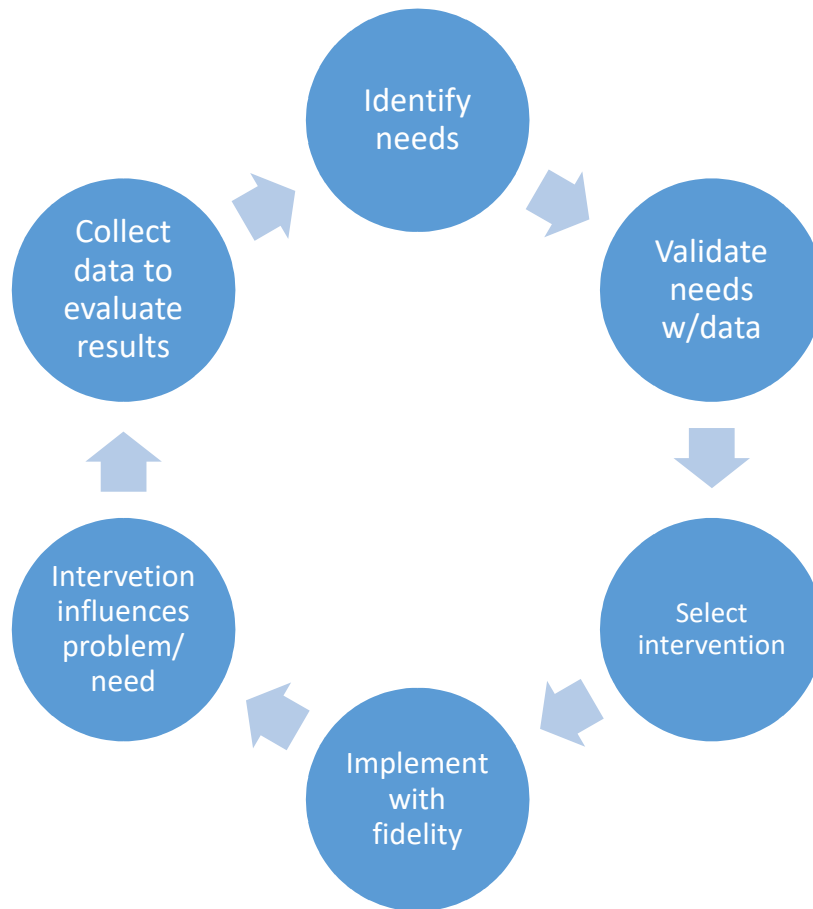


- ☐ Decide what you want to accomplish in the next 3 months. If you, your team, and your students really hustled, really pulled out all the stops, where could you be 3 months from now? Write it down. Focus on just one or two things.
- ☐ In order to get to your 3 month goal...
 - What do you need to do today?
 - What do you need to do this week?
 - What do you need to do by the end of the first month?
 - And so on...
- ☐ Take action. Don't try to do everything at once. Take one task at a time or you will get overwhelmed. Do smaller tasks first to get some early momentum...some small wins. Then, tackle the more complex challenges.

Bonus! This approach is also great for productivity. Have a long to-do list? Have many long-term tasks that need completed but they make you feel overwhelmed? Use the above steps to back-map your long-term tasks and feel more in control.

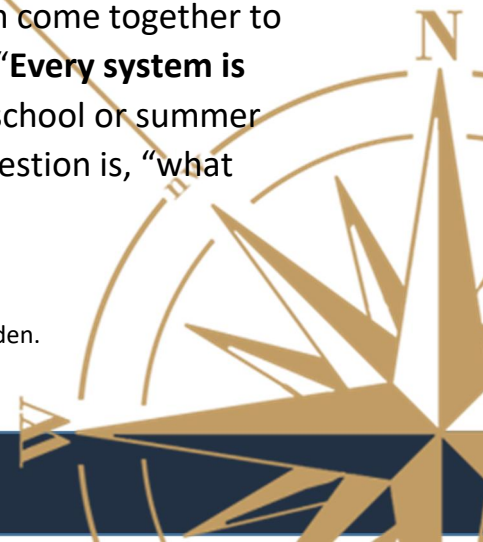


Tweak #4. Follow a cycle of continuous program improvement.



In my nearly 20 years of working with supplemental, out-of-school, and afterschool programs, one of the biggest challenges I have seen is a lack of understanding about how all the parts and phases of a program come together to produce a result in the future. Maybe you've heard the quote "**Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.**"² Well, your afterschool or summer program is a system. And it's going to produce a result. The question is, "what result is it designed to produce?"

² Attribution disputed. May be from W. Edwards Deming, Don Berwick, or Dr. Paul Batalden.



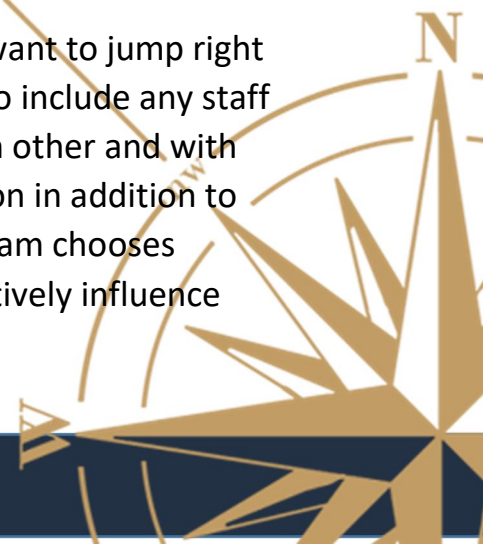
The biggest question you need to decide here is **where do you want to be at the end?** Hopefully, you identified this in Tweak #3, but if you need more help, think about this as your **vision of change**. If your world was perfect, what would things look like for your students, community, staff, or agency?

The end might be a year from now, 5 years, 10 years, or some other point in the future. The reason that this is the most critical part of the process, is that you need to know where you're headed before you can map out your plan to get there. And then, you can use the continuous improvement cycle to propel you toward that end result.

Keep in mind that your program does not happen in a vacuum. Other programs, the regular school day, students' home dynamics also play a role in the results your program might achieve. You have to be working in harmony with these elements or take steps to mitigate them, if you're going to be successful.

Here's how to get started:

1. Determine your end result and how far in the future it is.
2. Identify all your needs – student, staff, program, agency – that might need to be addressed or that might be indicators of change along the way.
3. Collect and review data elements to examine these needs indicators and validate that they are needs. This becomes your baseline data.
4. Choose or design an appropriate intervention or set of approaches that are appropriate and likely to influence change related to your identified needs. Ideally, programs and interventions should be evidence-based, research-based, grounded in established best practice, or something you have experienced success with before. In other words, you should be able to identify why you think an approach is likely to be successful.
5. Then, you get to implement. Many afterschool leaders want to jump right to this step. *Resist the urge!* Implementation should also include any staff training to ensure everyone is being consistent with each other and with the program design, infrastructure adjustments, and so on in addition to student programs. Another problem I see is that a program chooses appropriate activities and interventions that should positively influence



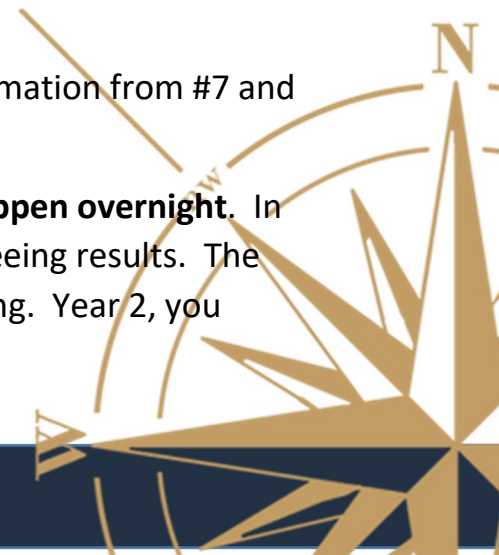
change but implementation consistency and alignment breaks down over time. Staff start tweaking the approach on their own, new staff come in and get trained in-house on a modified approach or without all the parts, new leadership wants to add elements, and so on. It is so easy to get off track. But that's the beauty of the cycle approach! You can catch this happening and correct course.

6. This is the part that everyone forgets. This is the step where the program actually starts to influence outcomes. It's usually forgotten because you're not actually consciously doing it. It should be happening on its own if all the parts that came before are working correctly. But if you don't have this part of the cycle, you'll never see the results you want. This is the culmination of:
 - a. Good planning,
 - b. An appropriate and well-implemented model,
 - c. Highly qualified and effective staff, and
 - d. Repeated and consistent student attendance.
7. You should be collecting information as needed along the way and at the conclusion of each year. Compare these data to your baseline (from Step 2) to determine if any growth is seen yet. Then, use these data as the springboard and needs assessment result for the next year. Each year you build off the gains of the year before.

And don't forget to tweak the program or approach along the way. I don't mean completely change it. I mean that you should refine implementation, course correct, rein in off-plan implementation, identify particularly successful elements and expand them, etc.

8. Then, start the cycle over again using the updated information from #7 and what you've learned throughout the previous cycle.

It is important to remember that dramatic **changes do not happen overnight**. In my experience, it takes at least three years before you start seeing results. The first year, you're trying to figure out what the heck you're doing. Year 2, you



know what you're doing but still getting comfortable. Year 3? You're ready to rock n' roll.

And it's OK if you don't see dramatic results, either, as long as you're building on them each year. I am a believer in the **accumulation of marginal gains**,³ which is a theory that small changes implemented consistently over time lead to big results in the end. Sort of like compounding interest.

BONUS! Tweak #5. Take better care of you. And encourage your staff to do the same.

We've talked about focusing on program improvement and all the reasons you haven't been able to do that. Work expectations, your family, the daily fires you have to put out, other commitments.

It is **really** hard to take good care of yourself. ("I'd like to reschedule my haircut appointment, please.")



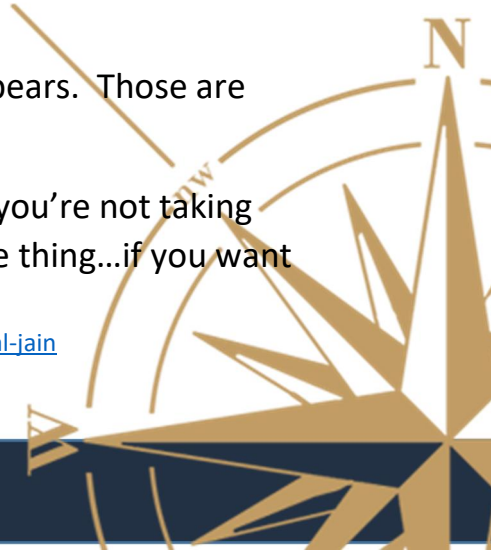
Take it from someone who has struggled with this for years.

It's easier to push off your own needs because you have work, personal, and family obligations. You think your needs can wait longer. Raise your hand if this sounds like you. *Yeah, me too.*

I am a giver. Often to my own detriment. (Except my gummi bears. Those are mine. Sorry, kids.) And to prioritize yourself feels selfish.

I'm sure you've heard that you can't be your best for others if you're not taking care of your own needs, so I won't belabor that. But here's the thing...if you want

³ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/aggregation-marginal-gains-theory-key-lessons-vishal-jain>



your afterschool program to be your students' ticket to a better life, you need a better life. You need to spend some time on *you*.

Change is not magically going to come. You're not going to wake up one morning to find students excelling or your program running like clockwork. *Unless you're doing your part and taking action.*

That means you need to be fully present and feeling good. And so do your staff. Happy, healthy, positive, fully present staff are critical.

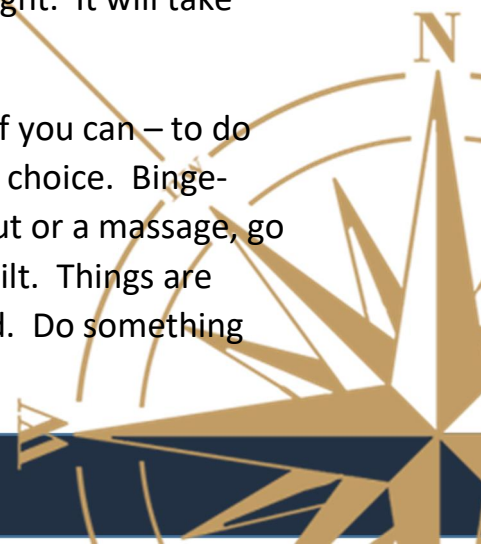
You don't get out of burnout by wishing. (*I've tried.*) [Here's a blog post about mindset that you might relate to.](#)

Happy, healthy, positive staff (and you) are critical to your students' success.



You have the power to change this. But it won't happen overnight. It will take some time. Here are some ideas:

- ☐ Designate some time – an hour, an afternoon, a full day if you can – to do something you enjoy. Do it alone or with someone, your choice. Binge-watch your favorite show, stop for ice cream, get a haircut or a massage, go to a movie, work out. Whatever you do, do it without guilt. Things are hard, particularly now in this not-quite-post-COVID world. Do something



that makes you feel human. And then do it again. Regularly. Taking care of yourself is not a one-and-done thing.

- ☐ Take advantage of resources or options that are available. Don't feel guilty asking for help. We *all* deserve more help. You aren't alone.
- ☐ If you can, organize staff wellness resources. Staff yoga class? Discounted massages for buying in bulk? Partnership with a local fitness center? Your agency health plan may offer some of these benefits, so ask your HR representative what wellness options staff have available, make sure everyone knows about them, and then encourage them to take advantage (and you should too). Often, I find that resources are available to staff, but the staff don't know about them.
- ☐ Prioritize and plan. Identify what needs to happen. Consider the importance of each task and prioritize your list. Considering getting a planner or other tool that allows you to plan out your schedule and your to-dos. Then, deliberately and consistently attack that list. Focus on one thing at a time. Personally, I like writing my lists on paper so I can scratch each item off as I do them. I find that more satisfying than a digital checklist.
- ☐ Make a list of tasks and estimate how long each should take. Then, when you have just a short window to work, you have ideas for things you can accomplish in that amount of time.
- ☐ Reinforce your team's value. Make sure they know you appreciate what they do each day and how much they contribute. Gratitude attracts positivity. Positivity makes for a more effective and conducive work dynamic. A more effective and conducive environment supports growth.



Don't panic!

There is a lot here. I get it. You won't be able to do all the things right away. It will take some time.

But you do need to ***do something***. Take action. Start slow. Even if you do just a few of the things I've suggested, you'll be on your way to a more impactful program. But you won't get what you want waiting for it to happen. Make it happen. I know you can do it.

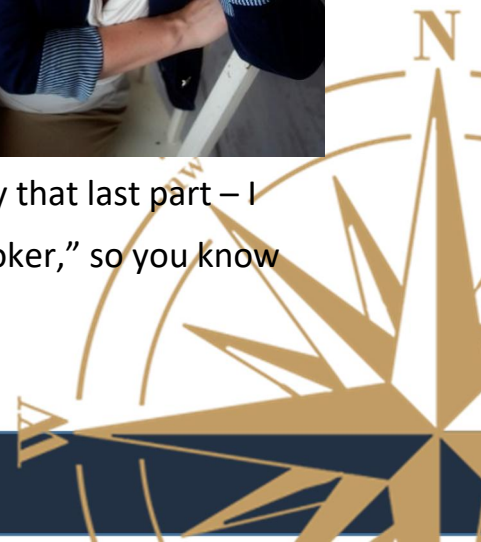
Need help? Want more? I'd love to connect with you. Reach out to me any time: Leslie@NorthofthePresent.com.

www.NorthofthePresent.com

About Leslie

Most organizations start an afterschool program and think that they are going to do better than those that came before them. *Their* program is going to be the one that turns their school or community around...until it doesn't. And then program leaders wonder why.

I'm Leslie McConnell. Officially my profession is program evaluator specializing in education. But really, I like to think of myself as a data storyteller, results improvement harbor pilot, and problem-solver – and also a get-it-done writer, coach, planner, analyst, mom, wife, chief cook and bottle washer...you get the idea. Especially that last part – I ❤️ to cook. My five-year-old nephew told me I was “a good cooker,” so you know it's true. 😊



I wear a lot of hats. Probably many of the same hats you wear.

I help afterschool educators change more lives for the better.

I believe that needs-informed program design, aligned action, the right staff mindset, adequate support, and a continuous cycle of improvement has the potential to transform.

Want to know more about my philosophy? Check out [My 5 Guiding Principles](#).

I didn't start out as a data person. But I realized the power that data had to transform our stories and make them more real. So I fell in love with the data part because I knew what it could do for my clients and me. It was going to take a 'non-data person' approach to help my clients and their stakeholders – who were not data people. I think that's what gives me an edge. It takes a non-data person who loves data to make evaluation effective for most programs. Data can lead to knowledge and knowledge is power.

My work is designed to guide you from where you are to where you want to be and to tell your story of the journey. For the past 19+ years I have helped schools, government agencies, and nonprofits improve their supplemental and out-of-school education programs for children and youth facing some of the most profound challenges: poverty, failing academics, homelessness, displacement from persecution in foreign countries, trying to adapt to and succeed in American school but speaking not a word of English. I've worked with small, community-based organizations, to school districts, to statewide agencies, and multi-million dollar programs. I've supported programs that involved six classroom teachers to programs that serve 40,000+ students. All of them had the same purpose: improved outcomes for children.

I founded North of the Present with a mission to **empower afterschool educators tell their program's story and change their students' lives**. Learn more about my background [here](#).



Your program can be and do all those things that you dreamed about, AND it can be a source of satisfaction and success, not stress.

That's part of what makes me different. I want to do more than evaluate programs and analyze data. I want you to have the most effective and successful

afterschool program. But...I want it to also **work for you**. If your program burns you and your staff out...if your pace is unsustainable...it won't be effective in the long term for anyone. In addition to improving outcomes for students, **I want it to help you too**. I want to help you work smarter, not harder.



I've focused on out-of-school time and afterschool program evaluation and improvement for more than 15 years and the most common challenge I encounter is that program directors and education leaders are overwhelmed, tired, and being pulled in too many directions. They are too busy working IN their program that they don't have the time and energy to step back and work ON their program. And working ON their programs is **the key to improving student outcomes** and program results.

Now is the best time to make your program better for children. And for you.





You can choose to do nothing and stay where you are.

You can get some momentum on your own by following some of the strategies I've shared in this guide.

Or, you can get help and start building a new future for you and your students.

I'd love to hear from you. Please [reach out now for your free consultation](#).

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