Learning Support That Lasts

How the OSHLSP sector manages program stability and long-term sustainability.

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Acknowledgements

Centre for Multicultural Youth

CMY is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia.

Our purpose is to ensure that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds have every opportunity to succeed in Australia.

CMY was the first organisation in Australia to work exclusively with migrant and refugee young people. We've come a long way since 1988 but there are still significant challenges and much work to be done.

Young people can encounter significant barriers as they try to settle in Australia. Alongside the challenges of growing up, they are figuring out how things are done and adjusting to unfamiliar cultural, academic and social expectations.

Despite these complex issues, we know that young people have the enterprise, resilience and optimism to contribute to the continued prosperity of Australia. By engaging them as experts in their own lives and focusing on their strengths, they can be empowered to adapt and thrive.

Abbreviations

CALD: Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

CMY: Centre for Multicultural Youth

EAL: English as an Additional Language

EAL/D: English as an Additional Language/Dialect

LBB: Learning Beyond the Bell

OSHLSP: Out-of-School-Hours Learning Support Program

Executive Summary

Out-of-School-Hours Learning Support Programs (OSHLSPs) form a coherent and cohesive sector which stands alongside the school system providing invaluable additional learning support to a wide range of students. OSHLSPs have demonstrated the capacity to remain stable, providing much needed support to students and families through difficult circumstances. The strength of the sector is partly formed around its support from local community organisations and existence beyond the immediate school environment. Programs emphasise the importance of cultivating relationships with families and creating a positive climate for students. These are both seen as crucial to program stability and sustainability. The capacity to remain stable also hinges on volunteer recruitment, training, and retention.

Programs often rely on a core group of long-term volunteers who contribute a great deal to program stability and sustainability. However, regular recruitment and training is still required and programs may struggle to keep up with these demands. Short-term funding stretched thin across the sector contributes to feelings of instability and unsustainability amongst programs. Stable and sustainable programs often rely on additional funding from community agencies but remark on the potential for the sector to consolidate and expand its services with access to more consistent long-term sector funding.

Key findings

- A stable and sustainable OSHLSP sector is of immediate benefit to students, families and schools.

- Volunteers are both a source of program sustainability and a challenge to it.

- Stable and sustainable programs often rely on a core group of committed long-term volunteers.

- Stable and sustainable programs draw on the skills and energy of newer volunteers but recruitment, training, and retention of these volunteers remains a challenge.

- A positive climate for students, staff and volunteers is critical to the stability of programs.

- A positive climate can be proactively cultivated and programs can be supported in doing so.

- Short-term and uncertain funding arrangements are a source of unsustainability for programs.

- Better funding arrangements could allow programs more focus on forward planning and consolidating their service delivery over time.

Recommendations

- Develop resources and facilitate learning for program coordinators which focus on how to facilitate a positive climate within programs.

- Facilitate network relationships between coordinators to develop community connection and share resources on topics like relational strategies and volunteer recruitment.

- Provide support to programs to facilitate more efficient volunteer recruitment and retention.

- Provide additional funding to the OSHLSP sector with some exploration of long-term funding arrangements for programs.

Introduction

What is the OSHLSP Sector?

Out-of-School-Hours Learning Support Programs, or OSHLSP, provide high quality learning support to children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. They also assist families to better support their children's learning at home. They provide opportunities for small group or one-to-one support tailored to students' needs. OSHLSP can be managed by schools, community organisations, religious groups, and local governments. They are often, but not exclusively, delivered through a partnership between organisations and schools. They can be located in community centres, schools, or at public libraries. The OSHLSP sector in Victoria is made up of a diverse group of paid and volunteer professionals who work across these different organisations to provide learning support for school students. OSHLSP may target particular students or be open to all who are interested. The majority of those reflected in this report target students considered most vulnerable to disengagement from education. Risk of disengagement can be caused by frustrations over performance, social and emotional issues, or the individual circumstances of the student outside school. Students who are most at risk of these factors are those who are from low socioeconomic areas, Indigenous students and students from migrant and refugee backgrounds. While not all students in these categories will experience disengagement from education, some need additional support to have positive experiences at school. The majority of clubs represented in research for this report include some focus on refugee background and English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. EAL students have the additional challenge of learning English, within an unfamiliar education system.

Stability and Sustainability

This report revolves around the core concepts of stability and sustainability within the OSHLSP sector. These two concepts are used to highlight common challenges faced by OSHLSPs and how programs manage these challenges. Within this report, program stability refers to the ability of OSHLSPs to provide a consistent support to targeted students and families. This means that programs consistently run sessions which are supported by a regular group of staff and volunteers. In addition, programs are able to weather disruptions and adjust services based on need. Within this report, program sustainability refers to the long-term survival of OSHLSPs. Sustainable programs exist over a long period of time and are able to plan for delivery over multiple years. Stability and sustainability are separate concepts but closely linked. Programs which experience instability and are unable to provide a consistent service to a target group of students or families will struggle to be sustainable long-term. Similarly, those programs which are concerned about their long-term sustainability may find it difficult to justify the consistent effort and forward planning required to ensure program stability.

Scope of the report

This report aims to take a broad scope in terms of understanding what contributes to stability and sustainability within the OSHLSP sector. Programs throughout Victoria were approached to participate. CMY's networks are predominantly with programs that target (or at least explicitly include) students from refugee and migrant backgrounds. However, this was not grounds for excluding respondents whose programs may be focused on other student cohorts. The majority of participants were located in Melbourne, with some limited regional representation. Themes emerged naturally during the research process and participants were fundamental to shaping these themes. This report offers a snapshot of the sector at a particular moment. Although respondents were encouraged to think more generally about their program's stability and sustainability, they were no doubt influenced by present circumstances, including the recent Covid-19 pandemic and related lockdowns.

Research methodology

The research presented in this report bases its methodology on the assumption that those involved in the coordination of OSHLSPs are best placed to comment on the immediate challenges to sustainability and stability for their programs. Taken together these individual impressions from coordinators can then be examined for common themes across the sector. Additionally, the current views of those directly involved in the coordination of OSHLSPs reflect an understanding of these challenges which has been shaped by the previous two years of tumultuous change and instability through the Covid-19 pandemic. It would be difficult to capture this understanding through any work published before this year.

The research design for this report draws on CMY's close connections and expertise within the OSHLSP sector. CMY's work supporting the sector provides an ideal position to reflect on relevant research subjects, scope, and research design. The research presented here follows a mixed methods approach combining both quantitative data collected through a standardised survey, and qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with individual coordinators. Quantitative data was gathered to represent a wide geographic area and a range of program forms. Qualitative data was gathered to help interpret and validate survey findings.

Survey sampling was done through CMY's existing connections within the OSHLSP sector. The survey was distributed among CMY's contacts, specifically targeting program coordinators. Survey respondents were self-selecting and completed surveys independently through an online platform. The survey also gave respondents the opportunity to self-nominate to participate in the interview process. This process of self-nomination towards the end of a period of high instability within the sector may have skewed responses towards those programs and coordinators who were most stable and sustainable. This is explored in the results below.

Survey results were analysed, the results then shaping questions in the semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted one-on-one with survey results acting as prompts for discussion. Following the completion of all interviews, interview transcripts were coded for common themes. The number of survey responses and interviews represent a small fraction of the total programs in the OSHLSP sector but do reflect a large geographic spread and a range of program forms.

> CMY's work supporting the sector provides an ideal position to reflect on relevant research subjects, scope, and research design.

Findings

Survey results

More than 91% of survey respondents described their programs as homework clubs or learning support. Programs were split evenly between being community and school based. Half of the programs were community organised and run. The remainder of the programs were a mix of school run, an equal partnership between school and agency, or an alternative arrangement. A majority of programs were run in-person or a mix of in-person and online.

The majority of respondents described their programs as mostly stable, followed by very stable. Similarly, the majority of respondents described their programs as mostly sustainable. This is unsurprising. The majority of survey participants who have run programs through the difficulty of the recent two years, who have built connections within the sector, and who will make time to participate in a voluntary survey, are likely those who feel most stable and part of sustainable programs. The clear trends across the research findings shed light on the challenges that face even stable and sustainable programs, as well as how these programs manage those challenges.

The scope of this report reaches beyond the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic but its impacts are still seen in some of the research findings. 83% of programs noted fewer students attending since the introduction of lockdowns and more than half noted fewer volunteers. There were some exceptions, as 10% of programs reported an increase in volunteers during the same period. The most notable impact related to Covid-19 was its threat to program stability. A quarter of all programs had at some point during their existence stopped running for a prolonged period of time and every one of these stoppages was related to Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns. None of the survey respondents noted any other prolonged stoppage in the history of their programs.

The research in this report highlights some common challenges to the sustainability of programs in the OSHLSP sector, as well as strengths contributing to program sustainability. When asked to select the biggest challenges to their program being sustainable long-term, survey respondents most commonly pointed to issues related to volunteers, student engagement, and funding. As shown in the graph below, the most common responses all related to these three areas. Similarly, when asked about the greatest strengths for program sustainability, respondents again noted factors related to volunteers and student engagement. 86% noted the capacity or skills of staff and volunteers; the highest of any factor. However, funding did not feature amongst common strengths and was replaced by maintaining relationships with families and adapting to different groups.
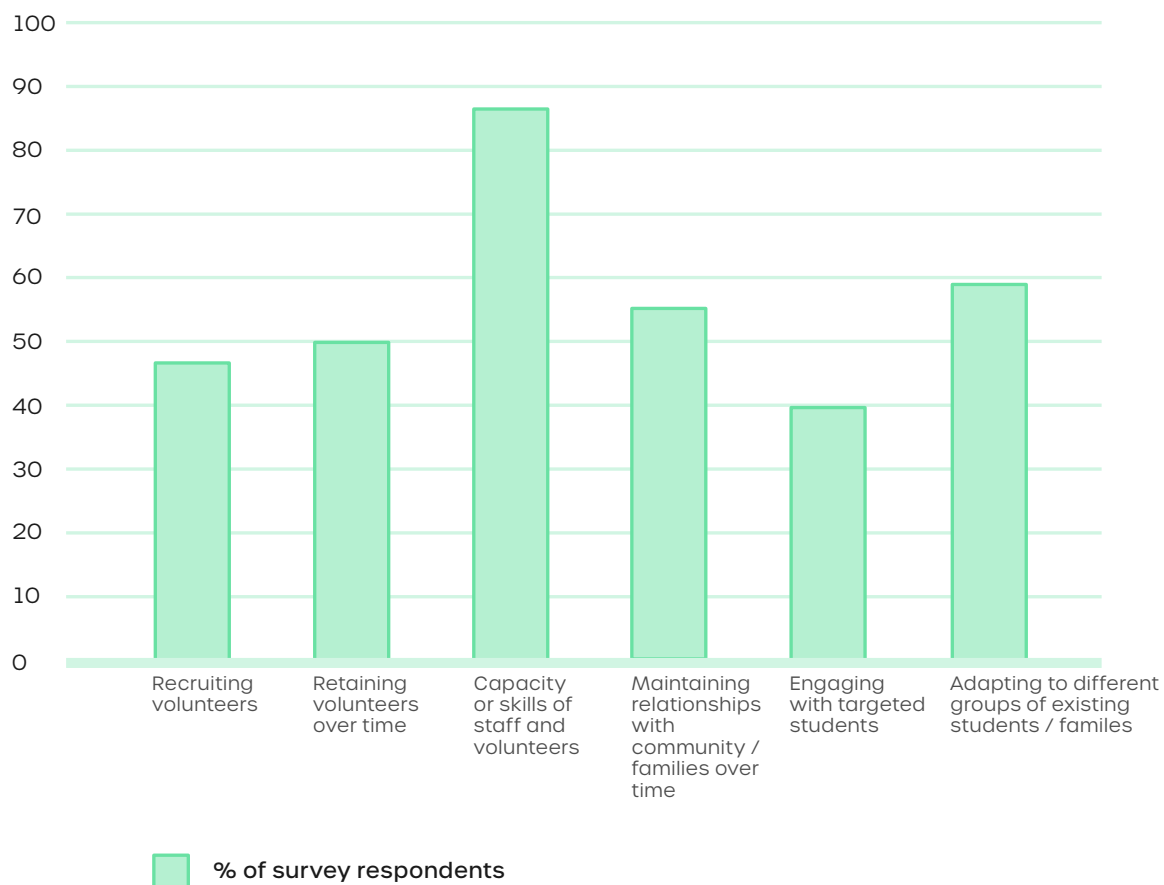
> When asked to select the biggest challenges to their program being sustainable long–term, survey respondents most commonly pointed to issues related to volunteers, student engagement, and funding.

Top Responses:
Challenges to Sustainability

| | % of survey respondents |
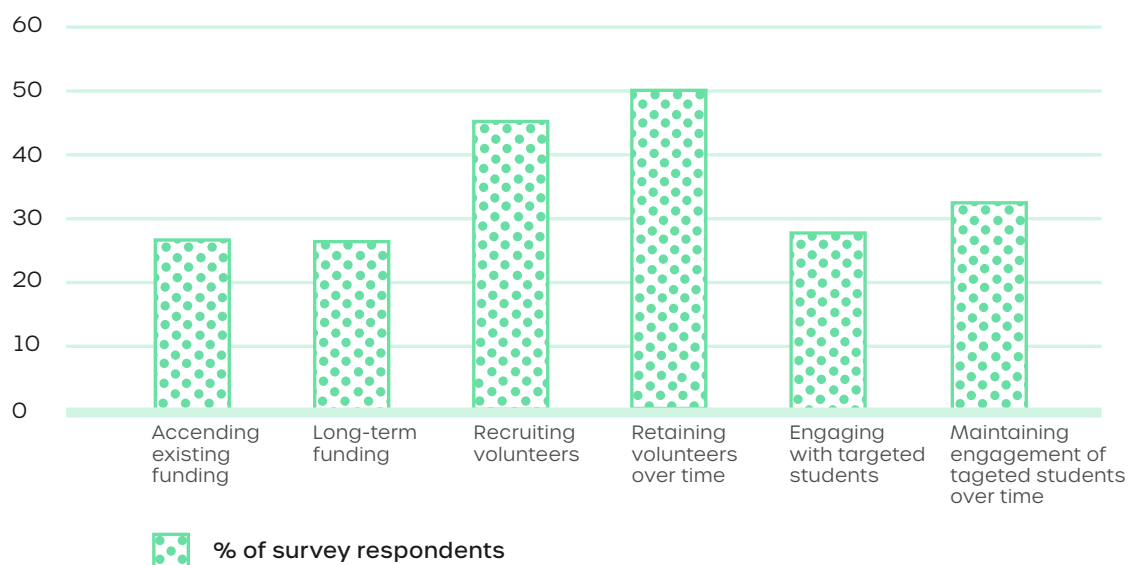
Top Responses:
Strengths for Sustainability

| | % of survey respondents |

Positive climate

A key finding was the importance of a positive climate to the stability and sustainability of OSHLSPs. A positive climate is generally characterised by a feeling of ease and familiarity amongst volunteers, staff and participants in the program. It helps to generate a feeling of safety for students and families. The motivation to participate in activities and work hard towards one's own goals is also seen as working hand in hand with a positive climate. The related concept of growth mindset was raised by multiple participants.

Almost unanimously, interview respondents referred to positive climate as fundamental to program stability and sustainability. Half of all survey responses noted that engaging students and maintaining relationships with families is fundamentally important to program sustainability. Coordinators regularly referenced the importance of a positive climate to maintaining student engagement. Survey responses also indicated that many programs have shifted their focus to include some deliberate effort to cultivate social and emotional skills as well as student wellbeing. These activities were seen to be part of maintaining a positive climate.
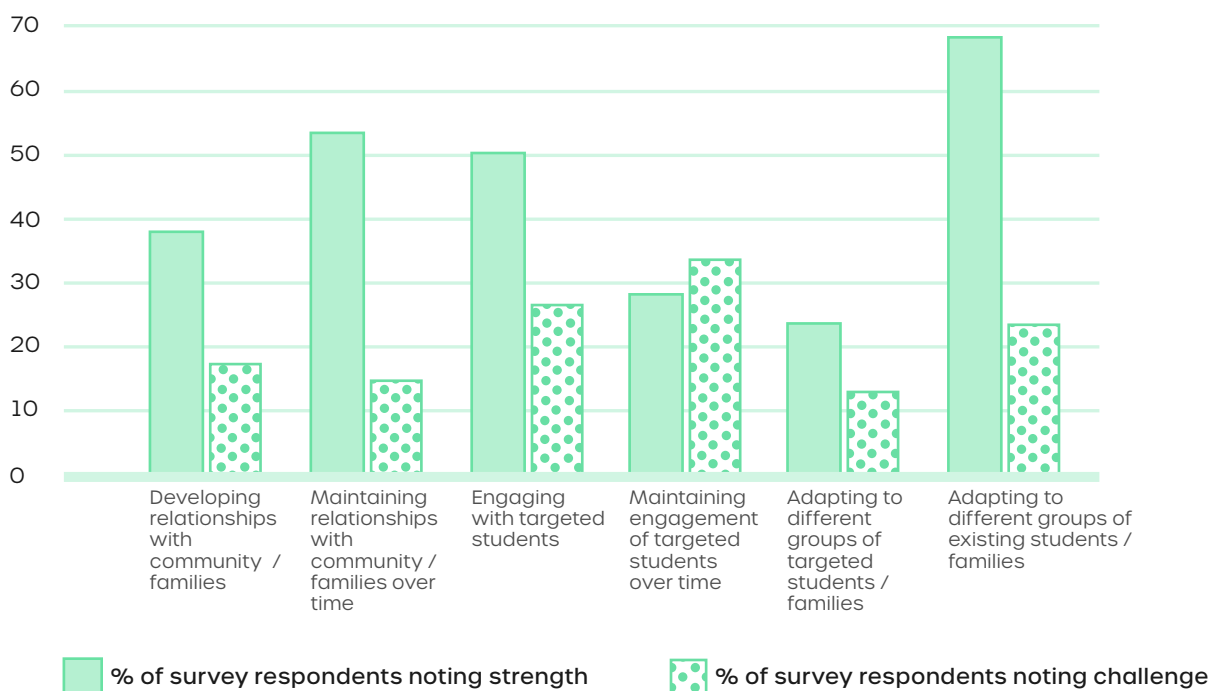
More than study support

Many participants shared the view that programs are not simply about study support but also help to build a positive association with education and healthy working relationships with adults. The holistic support of so many programs in the sector was emphasised during the past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. One participant remarked on the past two years stating, "providing homework assistance was not enough, we became counsellors, supports and [student's] connection". The need to provide this additional support was echoed by many participants. Here, the importance of program stability is emphasised. It is not simply that the programs aim to consistently offer some learning support but they also become sources of stability for students and families during difficult periods.

The positive climate for learning was explicitly described by participants as distinct from the school environment and this is a fundamental strength of the OSHLSP sector as a whole. One participant described the ideal homework club as being "somewhere between home and school". Approximately half the survey respondents were part of programs that are community based and run. In addition, a majority of all respondents had some connection with a community agency. The majority of interviewees remarked on the strength of connection that community agencies have with families. This was especially true for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Coordinators stressed the importance of partnerships with schools and noted that they often felt their greatest success was with those students and families who struggled to connect with schools.

Close community connections

The ability to maintain a positive climate, and related stability, hinges partly on being able to maintain close community connections and adapt readily to the needs of both students and families. It is seen as crucial to maintaining both volunteer and student engagement. Families are also seen to value the efforts made to maintain connection and promote a positive climate. Families need to constantly see the value in keeping students academically engaged and many programs in the OSHLSP sector are able to promote this value. One coordinator said, "You have to earn a reputation. Families won't just send kids to any club". Another coordinator observed, "The school approaches families through their students. Community agencies approach students through their families". A third put it simply, "the quality of the service will impact who wants to stay on board". The program coordinators interviewed were all able to point to adaptations they had made to reach out to families and maintain student engagement. These included delivering earphones to students to cope with background noise in busy homes during online sessions, providing additional homework style tasks for students who were not receiving homework from school, and constantly checking in with students and families about what they needed. This effort from programs builds trust with families and promotes close connections between families, students and program coordinators. These closer relationships in turn keep program coordinators attuned to the needs of students and families. A program coordinator described it clearly, "our program is strong because we listen to students and families". The willingness to adapt to changing needs is again seen as reinforcing feelings of ease, familiarity, and safety among participants within programs. The reinforcing of these positive elements contributes to the overall stability and sustainability of programs.

Engagement Strength vs. Challenge

Chart categories (left to right):
- Developing relationships with community / families
- Maintaining relationships with community / families over time
- Engaging with targeted students
- Maintaining engagement of targeted students over time
- Adapting to different groups of targeted students / families
- Adapting to different groups of existing students / families

Legend:
- % of survey respondents noting strength
- % of survey respondents noting challenge

Supporting positive climate

Positive climate can be actively developed and OSHLSPs can be supported in doing so. Participants regularly detailed the practical measures required and tangible benefits of a positive climate within their programs. Some coordinators set aside time to debrief with volunteers and check in on student wellbeing. One program coordinator highlighted, "I always brief with the team [before the session], it creates a family environment". Many program coordinators stressed the importance of making proactive efforts to check in on the wellbeing of both students and families. This included ensuring that tutors made the effort to have a positive conversation with students, often about something as simple as how their day had been. Some programs deliberately structured time for these conversations. One coordinator remarked, "The first 15 minutes is always a wellbeing check. It's a whole team thing". It was a common theme that maintaining a positive climate for learning required proactive steps and benefited from collaboration. Some programs did this internally, setting aside time for volunteers and staff to participate in a community of practice or reflective session. Others were able to benefit from links with other program coordinators. Here, CMY's own efforts to host coordinator catch ups, circulate newsletters and resources, and host practical training sessions for coordinators were considered of immediate benefit.

"The first 15 minutes is always a wellbeing check. It's a whole team thing".
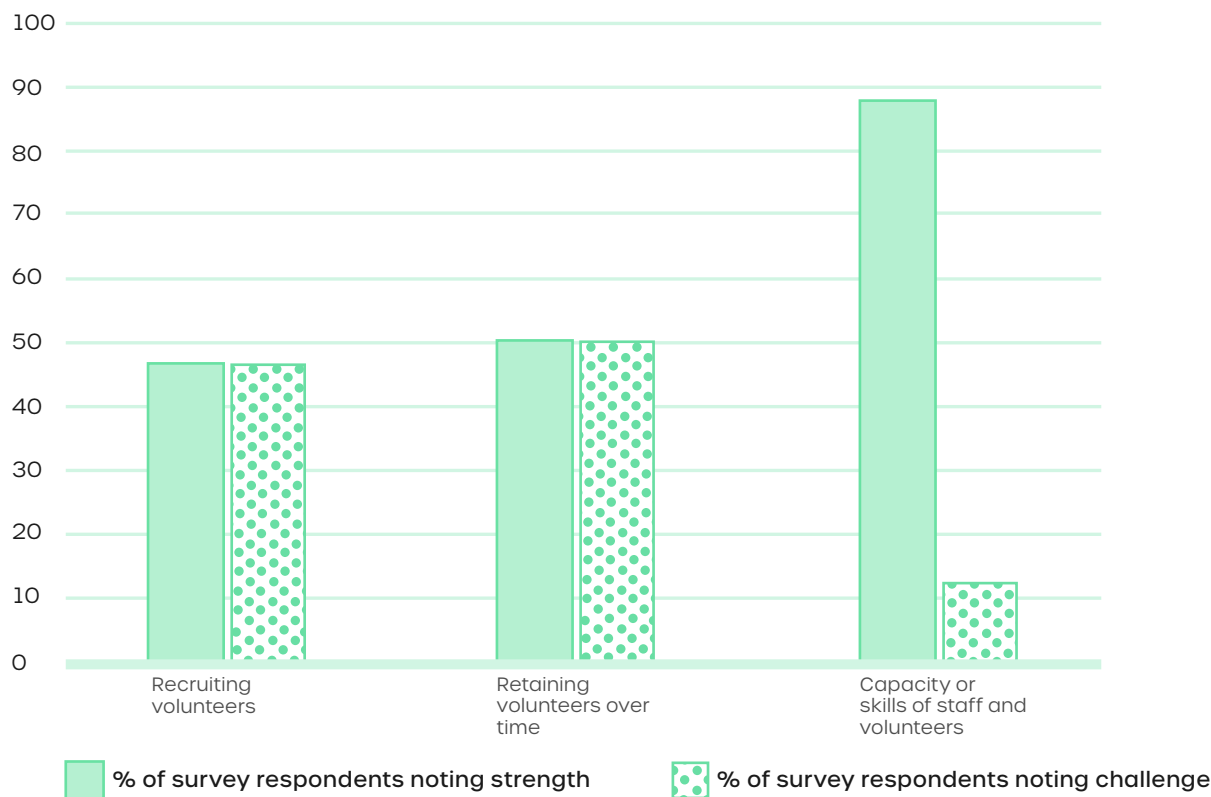
Volunteers

A clear theme from this research is that within the OSHLSP sector, volunteers are both a powerful source of sustainability and a key challenge to it. The capacity or skills of staff and volunteers was the most common factor contributing to program sustainability. 86% of survey respondents pointed to this capacity as a key strength. Recruiting volunteers and retaining volunteers also featured prominently among the top strengths noted by program coordinators Survey responses also indicated that a range of volunteer related issues were among the biggest challenges programs faced to being sustainable long term.

45% of responses noted recruiting volunteers as a challenge and 50% noted retaining volunteers. During interviews coordinators confirmed that volunteers were simultaneously the greatest contributor to program sustainability and posed some of the greatest challenges.

Volunteers Strength vs. Challenge

□ % of survey respondents noting strength   ⬡ % of survey respondents noting challenge

Long–term and transitory volunteers

Program coordinators repeatedly described how they often thought of volunteers as forming two common groups; a core group of long-term volunteers and a group of more transitory volunteers. Those interviewed were confident in this distinction. One coordinator captured the common sentiment when they said simply, "You know who your core volunteers are". The core group is made up of those who had been volunteering with the program for a number of years. This core group is often comprised of older volunteers, including former teachers and principals. Whereas the transitory group was commonly described as featuring younger volunteers, many of whom are university students. This group may be volunteering for the first time and may be fulfilling a volunteering requirement within a university degree or building experience for future employment.

Both groups of volunteers are seen as important to the stability and sustainability of OSHLSPs for distinct reasons. Interviewees described younger more transitory volunteers as bringing a youthful energy and acting as role models for students. Both the energy and behavior modeling were seen as important to the positive climate highlighted above. In addition, several program coordinators specifically noted that this group was highly adaptable and good with changing circumstances. Simultaneously, coordinators spoke passionately about the strengths their core group of volunteers contributed to programs. As one coordinator emphasised, "Consistent presence of the same faces makes the difference". Others remarked that the support of a core group of volunteers is what enabled the program to run and having a solid team was the most important thing to adapting the program to meet the needs of students and families.

Challenges for volunteers and coordinators

The past two years have revealed key challenges to stability and sustainability, particular to each of the groups of volunteers described by coordinators. The high rate of turnover among new volunteers was described as quite demanding. Coordinators described difficulty with time consuming training and recruitment of new volunteers. This reflected survey results which flagged recruiting and retaining volunteers as key challenges to program sustainability. Half of all survey respondents highlighted retaining volunteers over time as a key challenge, the highest proportion of any factor, followed immediately by recruiting volunteers (see graph above). Furthermore, surveys and interviews pointed to the fact that Covid has had a negative impact on both recruitment and retaining volunteers.

The stability provided by the core group of volunteers has also been challenged by the past two years in the Covid-19 pandemic and its regularly changing circumstances. Coordinators described a difficulty with a lack of adaptability among older volunteers. In particular, training older volunteers with online tools was seen to take a long time. Some coordinators described a hesitancy coming from core volunteers, including doubts over whether online learning would work. In some cases, programs looked to manage these difficulties by having younger volunteers who were new to the program, help older volunteers from the core group to use online tools.

Although coordinators described measures they took to successfully manage volunteers, they continue to present a challenge for program stability and sustainability. Coordinators feel confident in identifying volunteers who will contribute to program stability over a long period of time. However, constantly recruiting volunteers remains a challenge. Communicating an overarching purpose for the program and celebrating volunteer achievement were both key strategies for retaining volunteers over time. Coordinators pointed to the annual MY Education awards run by CMY as a great support in celebrating the achievements of volunteers.

Sustainable funding

Throughout the research process funding regularly featured as a concern for the sustainability of programs. Accessing existing funding, inadequate funding length, and inadequate funding amount all featured among common responses to challenges to program sustainability. Whereas, less than 5% of responses noted high levels of funding as a strength. Accessing existing funding and long-term funding did feature in survey responses about the greatest strengths of programs in relation to sustainability; 36% and 23% respectively. However, subsequent interviews suggest this may be related to the additional funding support provided by community agencies to their own programs, rather than funding to the sector.

Funding Strength vs. Challenge

Legend:
- % of survey respondents noting strength
- % of survey respondents noting challenge
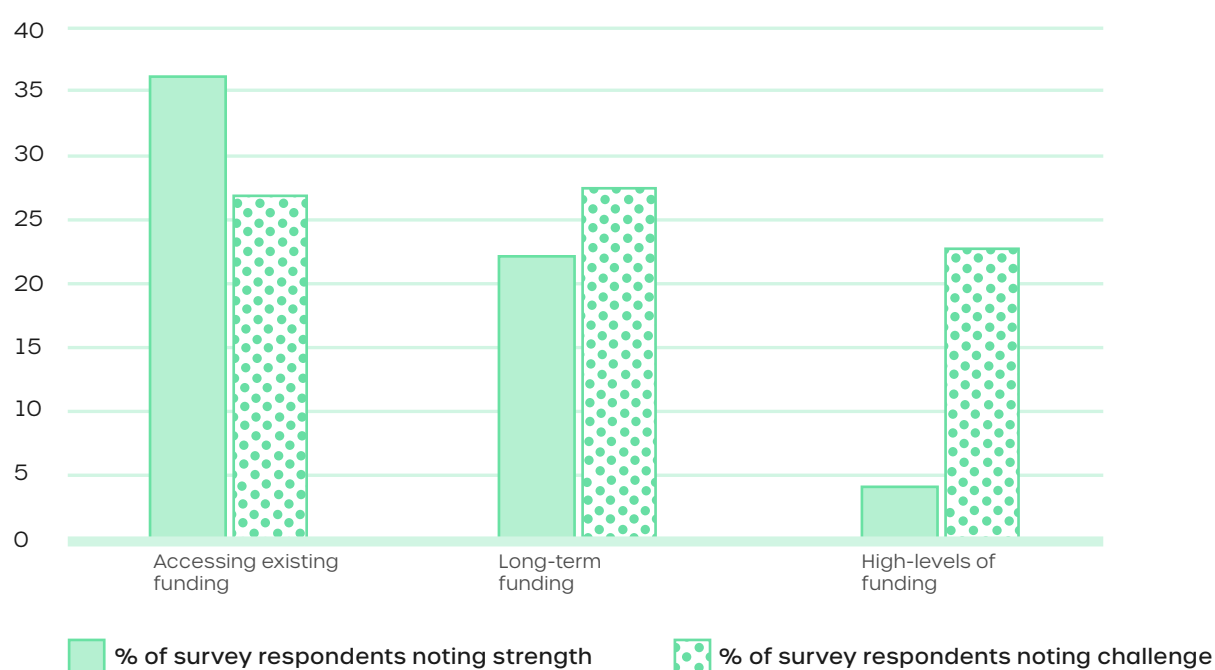
Short–term grants and agency support

Research data clearly described how short-term funding spread thinly across the sector is a cause for instability and unsustainability. Universally, program coordinators described the grant application process as demanding large investments of time and effort. More recently established programs also noted high levels of uncertainty around funding. Ultimately, accessing sector funding required large time commitments yet still left coordinators unsure how much funding they might secure or whether they will secure funding at all. Coordinators remarked, "how can we plan ahead?", "it ends up feeling more like a temporary project than a long-term program", and "even without Covid, the way that it is funded is not sustainable".

Multiple program coordinators described how the community agencies which hosted their programs supported them beyond the sector-based funding. Multiple agency-based program coordinators reported that the agency would make a concerted effort to find additional funds internally to support the program. Coordinators remarked on how grateful they were for this sort of funding support. Survey responses supported the fact that accessing existing funding and long-term funding are key strengths for program sustainability. However, even these coordinators voiced common frustrations at funding for the sector.

Secure funding and consolidating success

Throughout the interview process, participants expressed faith in the sector and its services, noting that more secure funding would help to consolidate successes. Speaking about the time-consuming grants process, one coordinator highlighted, "The amount of work that has to go into grants is substantial. Consistent funding is important. We could spend more time making programs run like clockwork; consolidating and improving what we have". Securing greater stability, sustainability and efficiency in funding could free time to be used to consolidate the existing service. Furthermore, adequate funding was also seen as crucial for keeping existing services stable. One interviewee explained that there needs to be a nucleus of staff who can provide skilled support to a program and that adequate funding is critical for this. One respondent wrote, "The focus on helping parents to assist their children with school work at home no longer exists. We were keen to continue providing this, but we do not have the number of staff needed to do so while running the homework club". Across the board, respondents emphasised that the capacity exists within the sector but that it needs support.

Accessing existing funding, inadequate funding length, and inadequate funding amount all featured among common responses to challenges to program sustainability.

Conclusion

Throughout the research process, the themes of volunteer management, student/family engagement, and funding featured heavily. This report details some nuanced insight to these themes shared across a number of programs in the OSHLSP sector.

A positive climate is fundamental to program stability and sustainability. This positive climate can be actively fostered amongst staff, volunteers, students and families. It requires some investment of time but there are simple effective strategies like wellbeing checks, developing relationships with families, and dedicated time for volunteers to discuss and debrief. It may be helpful to develop resources and facilitate learning for program coordinators which focus on how to facilitate a positive climate within a program and the importance of doing so.

Volunteers are both a source of and challenge to program sustainability. Programs rely on the capacity of volunteers and point to a core group of long-term volunteers as the key to program stability. In addition, coordinators need to recruit new volunteers who can offer adaptable skills and a youthful presence. However, recruiting and retaining volunteers remains a challenge for programs. Some thought should be given to how programs and volunteers can be supported to manage this challenge.

Finally, funding remains an ever-present issue for program sustainability. The most stable and sustainable programs may rely on community agency support in addition to sector funding and still consider funding an ongoing challenge. For all programs, the short-term grants-based funding to the sector limits sustainability and the potential for programs to build on their capacity to provide much needed support to communities, families, and students. Additional funding, particularly long-term funding for programs, could give programs the opportunity to plan further ahead and consolidate the support they provide.

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