



The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the final issue brief in our latest series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. This series explores afterschool and: the Common Core State Standards, students with disabilities and other special needs, data utilization to improve programming, and keeping children safe and supported. The briefs examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

“In my years researching the effects of afterschool programs on children’s social and academic outcomes, I have observed the power that high quality programs can have on the learning and development of young people.”¹ In this statement, Dr. Deborah Lowe Vandell highlights two important and related points about afterschool. The first is the positive impact afterschool programs can have on the students they serve—impact on a student’s academic performance, as well as socio-emotional development. The second is that the quality of an afterschool program is key to student outcomes, which is corroborated by findings from other studies of the afterschool field.

For instance, a meta-analysis by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) reviewed 68 afterschool program studies and compared afterschool programs that had an intentional program design grounded in evidence-based practices to those that did not.² The review found that students in the programs that employed the evidence-based practices saw significant gains in academic performance, school day attendance and positive behaviors. The same improvements were not seen among students in the other set of programs. A separate meta-analysis looking only at quality afterschool programs found that students regularly participating in the programs scored higher on

standardized math tests, were less likely to demonstrate aggressive behavior, and used drugs and alcohol less compared to their non-participating peers.³

A program’s structure, design and implementation all factor into its impact on the students it serves—an afterschool program that evaluates its programming and services is able to gain valuable information and learn how successfully it has implemented its activities and achieved the outcomes it set out to accomplish.⁴ A clear vision and mission, collecting data on outcomes aligned with goals, assessing impact, and making adjustments and adding supports as necessary to start the cycle over again are all components of a continuous improvement loop that can help an afterschool program identify how to better meet the needs of their students, families and staff.

What Can Afterschool Programs Gain Through Data Collection and Evaluation?

Data—which include everything from survey feedback to attendance records to scores on tests of skills and knowledge gained—can serve as a valuable resource for afterschool programs, as well as their students and families. It is an indicator, or indicators, that programs can use to improve their understanding of how well their offerings are being implemented and what their

impact is. It allows programs to identify what their strengths are and where changes need to be made.

Afterschool programs that collect data then have the opportunity to review and analyze their data, which in turn can help a program determine if it is carrying out activities and services in the way that was intended. If the data do not meet the program's expectations, the information gathered can be used to determine necessary steps to address the issue. Alternatively, if it does correspond with what the program envisioned, the data can help programs see if those activities and services are helping them to accomplish their overarching goals, and if other adjustments can be made to better meet the needs of their staff, students and families.⁵ For instance, a three-year study that looked at the impact of a continuous quality improvement system* found that afterschool programs implementing the system saw program instruction by staff improve, focus on the quality of instruction improve and a small positive effect on retaining short-term staff.⁶

Data collection also presents the opportunity for afterschool programs to develop and strengthen relationships with schools and school districts. **For Kids Only Afterschool**, an afterschool program in Massachusetts, worked closely to build and maintain a partnership with Everett Public Schools—communicating regularly with school day staff and sharing attendance and academic performance results.⁷

Additionally, data collection and analysis can help afterschool programs demonstrate to their community, potential funders and policy makers that they are making a difference in their students' lives—whether it is helping them aspire to attend college, building their self-confidence and leadership skills, or improving health and

wellness. **Spark Chicago**, which is a part of the Spark Program with branches in six cities across the U.S., was launched in 2011 and served 63 students. In the course of two years, Spark Chicago more than doubled their enrollment numbers, serving more than 200 7th and 8th graders during the 2013-2014 school year. The program serves a high need group, more than 9 in 10 students in the program qualify for the Federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program and more than 80 percent of students are African American. Spark Chicago employs a variety of evaluative methods to ascertain program data and qualitative feedback to improve its model. These methods include pre- and post-program surveys on a variety of aspects, like self-confidence, curiosity, and the ability to communicate effectively and ask for help; a data-sharing partnership with Chicago Public Schools; and

“This recent knowledge that high-quality afterschool programs work and make a positive difference is indeed a ‘game changer.’ This means that we should spend much less time arguing about whether quality afterschool programs work and much more time on working to ensure that all programs are effective and to make high-quality programs more accessible and scalable.”

*- Carol McElvain, director,
Afterschool and Expanded
Learning, American Institutes
for Research*

* The Youth Program Quality Intervention is a continuous improvement model that includes “quality assessment, improvement planning, coaching by site managers during staff instruction, and staff attendance at targeted trainings for instructional skill building.”

tracking student attendance and mentor retention. Spark Chicago's most recent data show that 72 percent of their students reported learning how to communicate with adults and 81 percent stated that participating in the program made them more interested in learning new things. This sentiment was echoed in parent surveys, in which 77 percent of parents noted that Spark Chicago made their child more excited about learning. Spark Chicago also collects longitudinal data. It found that 92 percent of apprenticeship program alumni through the class of 2012 have completed high school.

“Current, reliable information is the engine of afterschool systems. With reliable data, afterschool organizers can chart the progress of their efforts, recognize problems and possible remedies, handle matters ranging from program location to program improvements and arm themselves with the facts to build a compelling case about afterschool for funders and the public. In other words, good data power good decision making.”

- Better Together: Building Local Systems to Improve Afterschool, The Wallace Foundation

What Are the Steps Necessary to Evaluate a Program?

However, before afterschool programs dive into the evaluation process, it is important to start first with a clear understanding of what they want to accomplish, why they want to accomplish it, and how they will accomplish it. In her article “Using Research to Continuously Improve Afterschool Programs: Helping Student to Become 21st Century Lifelong Learners,” Denise Huang, project director and senior researcher at the National

Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at the University of California, Los Angeles, outlined the quality indicators of afterschool programs under three categories: program structure, program content and program implementation.⁸

An afterschool program's structure includes a mission and vision statement that clearly outlines the program's goals, as well as a “theory of change” that helps drive the program toward the desired long-term goals.⁹ Programs that have a strong understanding of their mission and vision for the future are able to develop the activities and services that align with their objectives and make progress toward achieving their goals. Just as important as program content is program implementation, which includes employing strong staff who have the ability to lead and run program activities, as well as develop positive relationships with students and families in the program. Also integral is having solid leadership in place that can provide direction, motivate staff and make sure staff are equipped with the tools and resources needed to carry out their duties; and forging sound relationships with students, families, schools and the community.

Once a program's quality indicators are defined, organized and executed, afterschool programs can take the next steps and determine what data should be collected in order to review how their program is running, observe interactions and relationships between staff and students, evaluate if their program is having the impact they envisioned, and determine if the program is moving toward the goals of the organization. Common elements of assessment tools measuring youth development program quality include examining the program's organization and curriculum structure; accessibility of activities; the program environment; and the relationship between program participants and program staff, including levels of engagement in activities,

What To Measure?

A unique quality and strength of afterschool programs is that they can be flexible. This means that they have the ability to tailor their services to the needs of their students and their community. Whether that means creating a community garden and teaching kids about healthy eating habits, providing opportunities to learn computer programming skills and work with professionals from the community, or helping kids learn to communicate effectively and feel more confident in expressing their thoughts and ideas.

The variety of supports and activities afterschool programs provide and the range of purposes afterschool programs fulfill also leads to various outcomes they can be interested in documenting. Afterschool programs can partner with schools to track outcomes such as school day attendance, classroom behavior, or performance in subjects such as reading and math. But, afterschool programs can also focus on other performance indicators, such as responsible decision making, effective communication skills, or ability to work in a team. The second set of skills is what the Forum for Youth Investment refers to as a “comparative advantage” for afterschool programs, that “represent a strategic niche,” where afterschool programs can help students develop the 21st century skills that will prepare them for college and work. Wilson-Ahlstrom, A., et. al. (2014). From Soft Skills to Hard Data: Measuring Youth Program Outcomes. The Forum for Youth Investment. Retrieved from http://forumfyi.org/files/soft_skills_hard_data_0.pdf.

understanding and acceptance of expectations, and responses to students’ behaviors.¹⁰

To help determine what to evaluate, the Harvard Family Research Project’s afterschool program evaluation toolkit recommends that afterschool programs consider:¹¹

- If the information collected aligns with the program’s goals and content
- If the measures make sense in the context of the program’s lifespan
- If the data are easily available and accessible
- If the data collected will be of use to the program or its stakeholders

Similarly, the document “From Good to Great: Using Data to Assess and Improve Quality” outlines nine tips for afterschool programs to follow to help progress from determining what high-quality program attributes they would like to focus on to the ability to evaluate the system overall.¹²

The **Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL) Initiative** in California is an example of an afterschool program that used ongoing evaluation and improvement efforts to hone their goals and revise their curriculum, linking it to the new program focus, in order to better serve their students.¹³ Staff training and professional development; program monitoring, including data collection and staff coaching; and data analysis made up CORAL’s continuous improvement cycle. Once changes were implemented, the CORAL Initiative saw program quality improve, as well as gains in students’ reading comprehension.

Using Data to Improve Programming

Data collection and use and improving program quality are so inextricably linked that funders, like The Wallace Foundation, see them as key to the future of afterschool providers and citywide systems.¹⁴

There are numerous examples of afterschool programs across the country that are using data to evaluate their programming, determining if they are successfully implementing their activities and if they have achieved the outcomes they hoped to accomplish. By collecting data and analyzing the results, programs are using their findings to fine-tune their offerings, provide staff with the support they need, and ensuring that the needs of their students are being met.

Collecting student information at multiple points and in various forms, as well as inputting the information regularly into an easily accessible platform, helps programs be more responsive to the needs of their students.

Developed by researchers at Northwestern University, **FUSE** provides an interest-driven learning experience to engage students across Chicago, Illinois, in science, engineering, arts and design, and mathematics. FUSE uses a leveling up model based on game design to create challenge sequences for their students in areas including robotics, electronics, graphic design, app development and fashion design. FUSE students' interests drive the development of challenge sequences. For example, a challenge sequence designing jewelry using a 3-D computer design tool and then constructing a prototype using a 3-D printer was created when the program discovered students were very interested in 3-D design and printing. Students can complete challenge sequences individually or in groups and have access to FUSE facilitators; scientists, engineers and university student mentors; peer mentors; and video tutorials to provide guidance and support. After finishing a level within the challenge sequence, students upload digital media artifacts to the FUSE website, where others in the program provide feedback. Student data—collected through FUSE's Web platform, in-person observations, video observations and surveys—is gathered on participation rates at

Data-Sharing Between Schools and Afterschool Programs: Rules of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

Schools have rich sources of student data, such as attendance and academic performance records, that afterschool programs can use to better meet the needs of their students and align programming to build off of students' school day lessons. However, an obstacle to data-sharing between the two groups has been the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the federal law that protects a student's personally identifiable information, such as grades, behavior referrals, social security number, and any other information unique to the student that could lead to the student's identification.

In January 2012, FERPA regulations were amended, and among the amendments were two clarifications that are relevant to the afterschool field:

1. The definition of an "authorized representative" and an "education program" were broadened to include programs "principally engaged in the provision of education" and "any program that is administered by an educational agency or institution" and
2. The amendment stated that an educational authority can "enter into agreement for the purposes of research studies."

The Partnership for Children and Youth's issue brief on the changes to FERPA and data-sharing practices between schools and afterschool programs found that afterschool programs are able to partner with schools and access student data by "qualifying as an authorized representative of a contracted education program" and "conducting studies in partnership with schools." The issue brief also outlines various ways afterschool programs are able to work with schools within FERPA's requirements and successfully create data-sharing systems that allow programs to tailor their curriculum to the needs of their students, supporting students in the areas where they need it most.

Partnership for Children and Youth. (2012). "Data-Sharing: Federal Rules and Best Practices to Improve Out-of-School-Time Programs and Student Outcomes." Retrieved from http://www.partnerforchildren.org/storage/documents/downloads/after_school_downloads/ost_data-

each site, what challenges students participate in and how long each student spends on challenges. Data collected help FUSE recognize what challenge sequences are most appealing to students, what activities sustain student engagement and why, new challenge sequences that can be created, and how to better support the development and continuation of learning pathways.

Partnering with other institutions can help on various fronts regarding evaluation. Examples include partnering with a school district, which can give a program access to student data, and partnering with a university, which can help a program implement an evaluation.

Citizen Schools North Carolina serves students throughout Charlotte and Durham and is a part of Citizen Schools, a national nonprofit organization that partners with schools serving predominantly low-income students and students that are struggling academically. Developed to directly align with their program model, the Program Scorecard tracks both student and staff performance. Regarding student performance, the Program Scorecard includes metrics for student attendance, English language arts and math test scores and grades, 21st century skills, beliefs related to college and career preparation, and perceptions on self-efficacy. For staff, the Program Scorecard tracks staff instructional proficiency and apprenticeship quality. Both national and regional site staff have access to real-time dashboards for student data and Program Scorecard reports are available at the end of each semester. Each year, Program Scorecard targets are set; progress is measured; and annual results are compared to determine areas of improvement, areas in need of work and effectiveness of interventions. Through a partnership with North Carolina State University, researchers from the university conducted a quasi-experimental, matched comparison design study

that tracked students participating in Citizen Schools from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District during the 2007-2008, 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years. Evaluations found that Citizen School students were absent from school less than students not in the program and 8th grade students in the program were more proficient in math and reading than their non-participating peers.

“FERPA doesn’t forbid the exchange of student information where it is in the best interest of kids. As long as afterschool providers are sensitive to the assurances schools require, in terms of how data is shared and used, they have every reason to expect they’ll be granted the access they need.”

- Christopher Kingsley, principal associate, data initiatives, National League of Cities

Employing evaluation tools that observe and measure various outcomes can lead a program to uncover a need they did not know existed.

BUILD—an in-school and afterschool program that provides mentorship, academic enrichment, and social and emotional support to at-risk and underserved youth in Chicago, Illinois, collects a variety of data to ensure that the program is meeting the needs of their students and staff. BUILD’s tools and surveys include:

- Mutual Accountability Plan (MAP)—helps students develop short- and long-term goals, identify the steps necessary to reach each goal, and monitor and assess each benchmark that is reached.

- Group Activity Report—measures quantitative and qualitative data, recording the activities and progress toward achieving the program’s outcomes.
- Youth Profile—tracks both students’ positive and negative behaviors, such as improved grades, making progress on goals, substance use and behavioral problems.
- Youth Life Plan Self-Assessment and Reflection—asks students to evaluate their progress in the program.
- Health Assessment—collects students’ height and weight, diet, and exercise habits.
- Youth Surveys—student surveys are given at the end of each program session, providing students the opportunity to share their opinions on activities, changes they would like to see and additional features they would like the program to incorporate.

“We have just started [FUSE] but what I will say is that I’ve never seen a teacher and group of students so engaged in instruction in a therapeutic school setting...The biggest changes that I have seen so far are: (1) Teachers and students interact as partners in problem solving, (2) Students interact with other students as partners in problem solving, and (3) Students are engaged and excited about the class. [It] gets no better from my perspective.”

- Administrator, Special Needs School

The program implements strategic improvements based on the data collected and analyzed through their various tools and surveys. For example, when BUILD found that 10 percent of their

students identified as LGBTQ and that 40 percent of students did not know if they had health insurance, they reallocated resources to develop and implement a new program aimed at addressing students’ mental health, physical health and overall wellness. Program evaluations found that 93 percent of BUILD students were promoted to the next grade and 93 percent of BUILD seniors graduated from high school.

Conclusion

The afterschool field has made great gains in providing supports and an environment that helps their students succeed in school and beyond. Students are discovering an interest in science, gaining confidence in their speaking abilities, missing school less, connecting with caring adults and more when participating in quality afterschool programs. A distinctive benefit of afterschool programs is that their focus and scope of activities is wide-ranging—they are able to meet the unique needs of their community, which could be to offer a dance program in an area where arts have been scaled back during the regular school day or aligning programming with the Common Core State Standards to serve as an additional source of support for students, teachers and schools. The variety of focus areas also means that there are a number of measures—both inputs and outputs—that can be relevant to their programming. Therefore, it is critical that programs have a clear and focused set of goals, gather and synthesize data that are connected to those goals, and implement a continuous improvement cycle that uses the data in order to build on lessons learned and ensure that they are providing their students with the supports they need. Fortunately, more and more programs are recognizing the critical role of data and more resources and tools are becoming available to help programs put the data to use in order to best meet the needs of their students.

Endnotes

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