From Good to Great: USING DATA TO ASSESS AND IMPROVE QUALITY

The issue of program quality – how to define it, evaluate it and, ultimately, improve it – has taken center stage even as many communities face cuts to out-of-school time (OST) funding.

As resources become scarce, public and private funders alike want to make sure that the programs they support are engaging and beneficial to young people. Increasingly, OST system organizers are collecting and analyzing data to identify areas for improvement and raise OST program quality throughout cities.

The Wallace Foundation

This is one of **six tip sheets** on using data to improve access to high-quality after-school and summer programs. The tip sheets are meant for staff members of city agencies, mayors' offices, "intermediary" groups, program providers and youth advocates.

Tip #1: Decide what quality looks like.

The first step is defining the attributes of a high-quality after-school program. Don't reinvent the wheel: State after-school networks, national organizations and cities have already invested a lot of money and sweat equity into establishing quality standards that can be customized for your community. The Providence After School Alliance (PASA), in Providence, R.I., assembled a group of 25 providers to review standards of other cities and adapt them to meet their local needs. The process resulted in buy-in from providers, and today the standards[1] are used across the state. Once you've identified standards, you can decide which indicators you'll use to gauge a program's progress.

Tip #2: Pick a quality assessment tool.

There are several options, so you'll need to decide which one best suits your community. The second edition of "Measuring Youth Program Quality"[2] from The Forum of Youth Investment (FYI) distills 10 assessment tools that are among the most popular in the field today. All of them rely on observation: One or more people see a program in action and then fill out forms rating it according to various measures. The best tools, according to FYI researchers, share three characteristics. First, they collect data on the staff behaviors and program attributes that can have the most beneficial effect on young people. They also use measures that are clear and unambiguous. And they teach staff members how to improve.

Tip #3: Weigh the merits of self-assessment and external evaluation.

Self-assessment or external evaluation? Ideally both, suggests Nicole Yohalem, FYI's special projects director. You'll likely get similar results, which reinforces the story behind the numbers. "When the focus is on improvement, even staff who may feel uneasy about being observed tend to find the fresh perspective extremely useful," she says. Some system coordinators hire external evaluators or train staff members, such as those who work directly with program providers, to conduct the assessments. Three of the four major public-funding streams in New York State require that their programs use a self-assessment tool[3] developed by the New York State Afterschool Network.

Tip #4: Provide constructive feedback to site managers.

Observational data can be powerful information that programs can use to strengthen their practices. Once program managers understand the assessment process, teach them how to interpret the findings with their staff, so they can create a data-driven plan for improvement. Keep in mind the manager's level of experience. He may be a former front-line worker who's more comfortable supervising a third grader than mentoring a 25-year-old employee. Help him be an effective coach by getting him the management training he needs to foster a culture of continuous improvement. New York City's Department of Youth and Community Development contracts with organizations, such as the Community Resource Exchange and the Partnership for After School Education, to teach managers new skills, like using quality assessments to shape the agenda for a staff meeting.

Tip #5: Pinpoint Common Problems – and Respond.

By aggregating data from quality assessments systemwide, you can start to identify trends across your network of providers and develop training to address weaknesses. When quality assessments revealed that providers of sports programs in Providence didn't offer kids many opportunities to make choices or plan activities – program traits important to middle-school students – PASA designed two workshops on how to integrate youth development principles into sports programs.

Tip #6: Check in with your customers regularly.

Honest feedback from youth and parents can help identify a program's strengths and weaknesses. It can also validate findings from quality assessments. In surveys, students who participated in PASA's programs reported relatively high levels of support from adults, but less from their peers. That led PASA to put more emphasis on peer interactions and creating a respectful environment. Through focus groups or surveys, parents can also evaluate systemwide quality by weighing in on issues such as fees, transportation and program availability. (See the tip sheet on mapping need and supply.[4])

Tip #7: Supplement assessments with participation data.

There's not always a direct correlation between the popularity of a program and its quality, but it can be useful to examine participation data in tandem with observational evaluations. PASA, for instance, uses average daily attendance, assessment scores and youth surveys to get a 360-degree view of program quality.

Tip #8: Recognize outstanding performance.

Data can help you sniff out best practices in your midst. Have a program that scores off the charts in creating meaningful relationships with kids? Tell its story on your Web site or in your monthly newsletter. Ask the program's staff members to share their strategies with a gathering of providers. Showcase systemwide achievements, too, by comparing the performance of your city against a national sample. PASA benchmarks[5] the average quality scores of its programs against national averages to publicize its work to the community. (See the tip sheets on using data in advocacy efforts.[6])

Tip #9: Evaluate the system overall.

For several years, New York City's Department of Youth and Community Development has contracted with an external evaluator to assess its OST initiative and has actively used the results. When evaluators found that parents particularly needed summer programs, for instance, DYCD made summer programming a requirement in its next round of applications. "It's not a luxury," says DYCD Commissioner Jeanne Mullgrav of the external evaluations. "It's how we ensure quality and assure taxpayers that their money is being spent well." While New York City allocates resources to its evaluation efforts, there are cost-effective options as well. Local universities or research firms might be willing to donate their expertise for such a project, or at least for smaller-scale projects that study aspects of the system. The University of Minnesota, for instance, helped the city of St. Paul analyze the costs and benefits of a bus transportation system that links youth with after-school programs in targeted neighborhoods.

Further Reading

AfterZones: Creating a Citywide System to Support and Sustain High-Quality After-School Programs, Public/Private Ventures, 2010.
http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/coordinating-after-school-resources/Documents/Afterzones-Creating-Citywide-System-to-Support-and-Sustain-High-Quality-After-School-Programs.pdf

Hours of Opportunity: Lessons from Five Cities on Building Systems to Improve After-School, Summer, and Other Out-of-School-Time Programs (Volumes I, II and III), RAND Corporation, 2010
http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/key-research/Pages/Hours-of-Opportunity-Volumes-I-II-III.aspx

Measurement Tools for Evaluating Out-of-School Time Programs: An Evaluation Resource, Harvard Family Research Project, 2011
http://www.hfrp.org/out-of-school-time/publications-resources/measurement-tools-for-evaluating-out-of-school-time-programs-an-evaluation-resource2

Municipal Leadership for Afterschool: Citywide Approaches Spreading Across the Country, National League of Cities, 2011
http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/coordinating-after-school-resources/Documents/Municipal-Leadership-for-Afterschool.pdf

Palm Beach County's Prime Time Initiative: Improving the Quality of Afterschool Programs, Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2010
http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/palm-beach-countys-prime-time-initiative

Promoting Quality Through Professional Development: A Framework for Evaluation, Harvard Family Research Project, 2004
http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/promoting-quality-through-professional-development-a-framework-for-evaluation

Raising the Bar: Quality Improvement Systems for Youth Programs, The Forum for Youth Investment, 2009
http://www.forumfyi.org/files/OSTPC15.pdf

Speaking in One Voice: Toward Common Measures for OST Programs & Systems, The Forum for Youth Investment, 2008
http://forumfyi.org/files/OSTPC13.pdf

Supporting Success: Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs, Public/Private Ventures, 2008
http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/227_publication.pdf

Endnotes

1 http://mypasa.org/sites/default/files/u3/44970%20Booklet%20PDF.pdf

2 http://www.forumfyi.org/files/MeasuringYouthProgramQuality_2ndEd_ExecSum_0.pdf

3 www.nysan.org/usersguide

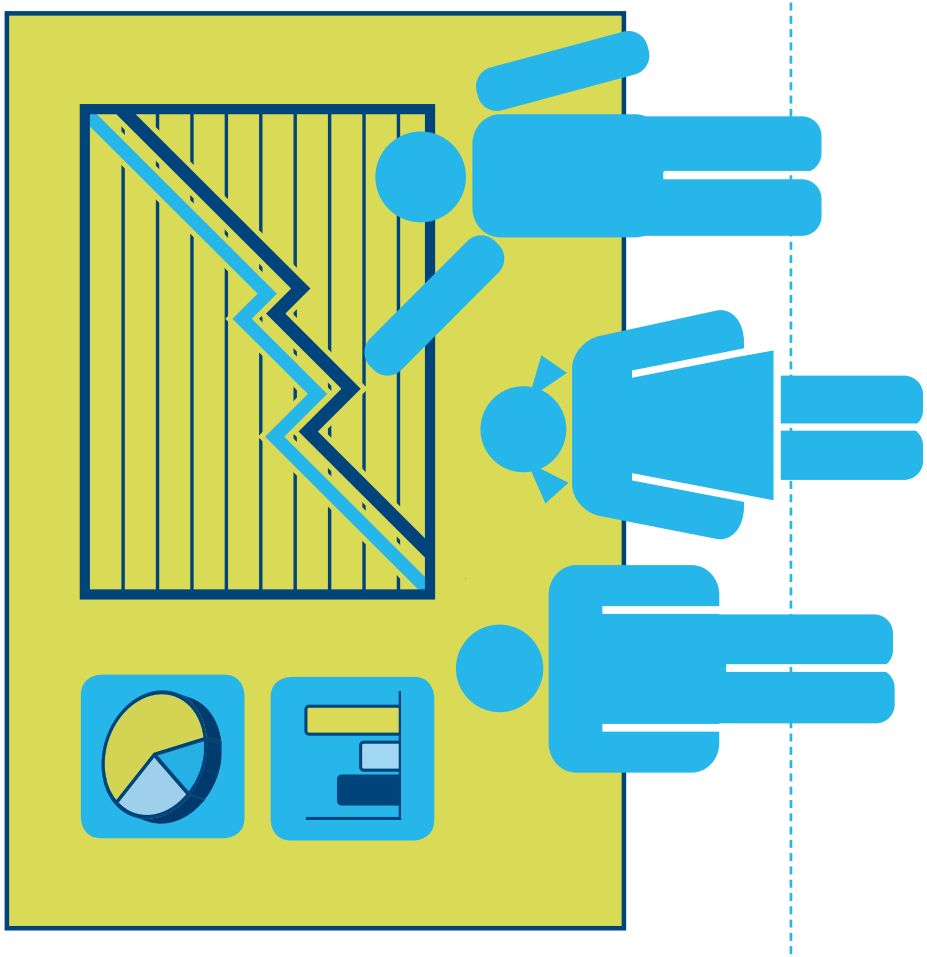
4 http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/collecting-and-using-data/Documents/X-Marks-the-Spot-Using-Data-to-Map-Needs-and-Supply.pdf

5 http://mypasa.org/node/202

6 http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/collecting-and-using-data/Documents/All-in-Favor-Using-Data-in-Advocacy-Work.pdf

Other Tip Sheets in the Series:

Introduction • All in Favor: Using Data in Advocacy Work • Made to Measure: Using Data to Improve Accountability • 'X' Marks the Spot: Using Data to Map Needs and Supply Fair Share: Data-Sharing Strategies That Work



For further reading, please visit: www.wallacefoundation.org

The Wallace Foundation is a national philanthropy that seeks to improve education and enrichment for disadvantaged children. The foundation has an unusual approach: funding projects to test innovative ideas for solving important social problems, conducting research to find out what works and what doesn't and to fill key knowledge gaps – and then communicating the results to help others.

Wallace has five major initiatives under way:

- School leadership: Strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement.
- After-school: Helping selected cities make good out-of-school time programs available to many more children.
- Audience development for the arts: Making the arts a part of many more people's lives by working with arts organizations to broaden, deepen and diversify audiences.
- Arts education: Expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens.
- Summer and expanded learning time: Giving children more hours to devote to learning.

Wallace's work in after-school programming

Typically in the world of after-school programming, the many varied programs for youngsters and the government agencies and private organizations that fund them operate in isolation from one another. In 2003, Wallace began working in five cities to help coordinate the after-school workings of these institutions, in the hope this would lead to systems supporting better programs and increased access to them citywide. A 2010 RAND Corporation report that studied the initiative found the cities' efforts had provided "a proof of principle" that after-school systems hold promise. Wallace today is funding after-school system efforts in nine additional cities, and in a separate Chicago initiative, Wallace is trying to help after-school providers and funders overcome a little-recognized barrier to offering more and better services – weak financial management.

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