

A NEWSLETTER OF THE NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR QUALITY AFTERSCHOOL LEARNING



FEATURED *product*

AFTERSCHOOL CURRICULUM CHOICE: LITERACY RESOURCES

www.sedl.org/afterschool/guide/literacy/

This free online resource helps practitioners locate and make informed choices about high-quality literacy resources to enrich their programs.



AFTERSCHOOL *news*

From Compliance to Quality: How to Make Evaluation Work for Your Program

Evaluation. If you work in afterschool, you probably hear the word with great frequency. Many afterschool programs are required to evaluate their program or bring in an external evaluator to review their work and determine if the program is in compliance with the terms of the grant.

Although it's a start, simply completing an evaluation does not ensure a high-quality program. As we at the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning continue our research and training, we urge afterschool professionals to think beyond using an evaluation to show compliance to using it to build high-quality, sustainable afterschool programs. High-quality programs have clear program goals, undergo regular evaluations to determine if they are meeting program goals, and reset their goals based on these evaluations.¹

Program evaluation is too broad of a topic to cover in one newsletter (we'll cover other aspects of this topic in April), but we hope to steer you toward some guidelines, resources, and examples that will change your view of program evaluation from a report completed every year to secure funding to an incredible tool that will set your program in a pattern of continuous improvement. The steps below will help ensure that you get the most out of a program evaluation.

PLAN EARLY.

You probably know what your program goals are, whether they include character development or improved math skills. Decide early what data you will need to determine if you are reaching those goals. "Evaluation planning comes at the beginning, not the end," explains Priscilla Little

¹ Huang, D. (2006, May). Preliminary findings from promising practices site identification for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. *SEDL Letter*, 18(1), 9-14.



"Evaluation planning comes at the beginning, not the end. It's not about sitting down at the end and trying to determine what you've accomplished."

PRISCILLA LITTLE
Harvard Family Research
Project

The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning helps state education agencies and local practitioners develop high-quality programs for academic enrichment as well as youth development activities.

www.sedl.org/afterschool/

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of the Harvard Family Research Project, an organization that promotes educational success and includes evaluation as one of its main areas of research. "It's not about sitting down at the end and trying to determine what you've accomplished."²

DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR PROGRAM.

If you are required to complete an evaluation or report, identify the information that is the most useful for program improvement. This should be the starting point, however. Ask yourself what else you need to evaluate to have a high-quality program. If you are trying to assess and improve relationships with students' families and your evaluation is limited to data like students' standardized test scores and grades, you're not going to get the information you need. Parent surveys and reports on family participation would be better sources of data.

GET ALL OF THE STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED.

It may be tempting to limit involvement of stakeholders to the people with money (i.e., grant administrators or potential funders), but the list of people who should be included in planning an evaluation is much longer. Stakeholders can include parents, youth, afterschool and regular day-school staff, and community members, to name a few.

Little encourages afterschool leaders to allocate time and money for staff input during the evaluation planning process. This includes letting them voice any concerns and also adding questions to the evaluation that reflect staff's interests in the program.

USE WHAT YOU LEARN.

Celebrate and share any positive results in your evaluation, and then roll up your sleeves and decide how you want to use the information. Again, involve stakeholders and decide what changes you want to make as a result of your evaluation. The leaders of one afterschool program noticed that attendance rates at one site were significantly lower in the fall. A few inquiries revealed that the drop occurred because the program's hours conflicted with those of fall sports, and students were opting for the latter. The leaders redressed the situation by adjusting the program's hours and collaborating with some of the athletic programs to include them as afterschool activities. Staff from another afterschool program we talked to determined from the staff surveys in their evaluation that they needed to provide more staff development opportunities. Yet another program realized that they needed to get more input from parents if they were going to increase family involvement in the program.

When we showcase afterschool programs, we like to point out the student learning that occurs. Applying what you learn from a program evaluation is a way to show the learning and improvement that occurs among your program leaders as well.

² Little, P., DuPree, S., & Deich, S. (2002, September). *Documenting progress and demonstrating results: Evaluating local out-of-school time programs. Issues and opportunities in out-of-school time evaluation series*. Cambridge, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College and The Finance Project. For more information about the Harvard Family Research Project, see www.gse.harvard.edu/~hfrp/.

CASE STUDY



"The self-assessment process provides program partners and collaborators with a common structure for comparing their perceptions and identifying concerns as they work together."

JOY FITZGERALD
external evaluator

Colorado 21st Century Community Learning Centers

Even the process of developing evaluation tools can involve monitoring your work and using results for continuous improvement. Just ask the team that developed the evaluation tools for the Colorado 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs). The evaluation includes progress reports to determine continued funding, the 21st CCLC Profile and Performance Information Collection System that all 21st CCLC grantees are required to complete, a quality improvement/monitoring tool, and focus groups.

Launched this year, the quality improvement/monitoring section is the newest component of the evaluation structure. In developing the tool, the team sought input from afterschool staff, program evaluators, afterschool advisors, and outside experts. While they were working on the various drafts of the tool, evaluation leaders also presented it to grantees, giving them the opportunity to provide feedback and express any concerns they had. Finally, they pilot-tested the tool at three sites. According to Joy Fitzgerald, an external

LA's BEST

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA



When the word *best* is part of your name, people expect great things from your afterschool programs. To ensure that they are living up to their name, the staff at LA's BEST (Better Educated Students for Tomorrow), an afterschool enrichment program that offers out-of-school activities for elementary students

at 180 sites across Los Angeles, California, have included evaluation in their program administration since the organization was created in 1988.

LA's BEST has relied on external evaluations, such as a recently completed 4-year study, which found that students who participated in the program for 3 or more years were 20% less likely to drop out of school than their peers.¹ Senior educational research analyst Jim Sass notes that the organization's ability to provide evidence of effectiveness has helped it "grow, maintain funding and positive governmental relationships, and have constructive influence on afterschool policy and practice."

While long-term external evaluations have helped the organization observe more general results and trends, ongoing internal evaluations are key to helping programs meet their goals. Internal evaluations monitor four general areas: 1) academics, 2) social development, 3) parent involvement and satisfaction, and 4) delinquency prevention and safety. Sass says that staff in the evaluation department try to make the data they collect directly useful to both the staff

evaluator who helped develop the tool, "The feedback of those who participated in the pilot monitoring visits was invaluable in helping us fine-tune both the format of the . . . tool and the processes for its use by programs and monitoring teams."

Although sites use this tool to prepare for external evaluations, it also helps them create high-quality programs. Leaders and key staff can use it to assess, plan, design, and implement strategies for ongoing program improvement. The tool includes a worksheet on which afterschool leaders can note strengths and priorities for improvement. "This plan provides a structure to help grantees consider how improvement priorities will be enacted—through what activities, by whom, using what resources, and on what timeline.

conducting observations and collecting data as well as the site staff who work at the programs being evaluated.

Successful evaluations depend on strong relationships between the evaluation department and the field staff who conduct site visits and collect data. They also require an effort to help all staff understand the reasons for collecting data. "This helps in managing the burdens of data collections and seeing opportunities to use the data," Sass says.

For programs that are just beginning the processes of developing and using evaluations, Sass urges them to be both proactive and realistic—proactive in seeing evaluation as a foundational component of a successful program but realistic in that measurable outcomes in children often require regular attendance over many months.



"The organization's ability to provide evidence of effectiveness has helped it grow, maintain funding and positive governmental relationships, and have constructive influence on afterschool policy and practice."

JIM SASS
senior research analyst

¹ The study was completed by the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). Although this was an independent project, CRESST is also a member of the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning.

In addition to promoting quality improvement, the self-assessment process provides program partners and collaborators with a common structure for comparing their perceptions and identifying concerns as they work together," says Fitzgerald.

As they introduce their new evaluation tool and begin site visits in April, the evaluation leaders will also model evaluation and continuous improvement for the sites they visit. They intend to collect feedback from users, make notes of their own experiences, and study emerging research on evaluation and then use this information to improve the quality improvement/monitoring tool they have developed.

www.cde.state.co.us/cdecomp/21stCentury.htm

What fun literacy activities have you done in your afterschool program that you might not be able to do during the regular school day?

"Our afterschool program at Avondale Middle School is composed entirely of students who are refugees. We use a digital storytelling activity called 'All About Me.' It is a PowerPoint lesson where students write about themselves and include pictures to improve their reading and writing skills and familiarize them with technology. The results of this program have been amazing."

MINDY DISALVO
Assistant Director
Decatur, GA

"My staff and I take our students to the neighborhood park and read books to them there. Afterward we discuss the stories like in a book club. While there, we also encourage the students to pick something interesting from the environment (trees, clouds, etc.) for inspiration. They are then encouraged to write their thoughts or draw them out in their journals."

ANILA AHMED
Afterschool Site Coordinator
Austin, TX

Next Month's Question

How have you used program evaluation to improve your afterschool program?

Send your answers to afterwords@sedl.org with "March survey" in the subject line.

Presenting Evaluation Results

If you are eager to show off results of an evaluation, remember not to limit your report to data. Include some narrative description of the program and its best practices, as well as quotes from students and photographs of some of your afterschool activities. Including this qualitative information will help you reach a broader audience.

Do you have a training tip you would like to share? E-mail us at afterwords@sedl.org with "Training tip" in the subject line.

EVENTS *calendar*

- April 16-17 SERVE Center 2007 Linkages to Learning Afterschool Institute
MYRTLE BEACH, SC
- May 2-3 Success in Afterschool: Increase Your Odds
LAS VEGAS, NV
- May 8-9 The After-School Institute's Eastern Regional Conference on After-School 2007
BALTIMORE, MD

For more events, visit our calendar at www.sedl.org/afterschool/training/calendar.html.

ANNOUNCEMENT

There are only a few days left to register for the Southwest Regional Afterschool Conference, **Success in Afterschool: Increase Your Odds**. Registration ends on April 5. Enter today at www.regonline.com/Checkin.asp?EventId=125652.

NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR QUALITY AFTERSCHOOL LEARNING

at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory



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