

Middle School Initiative within Beacon Community Centers DYCD's Response to PSA's Evaluation Report on Year 2

The Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) is pleased to present the second year evaluation report for the Middle School Initiative of the Beacon Community Centers.

In September 2007, DYCD launched the Middle School Initiative in the 80 Beacon Community Centers located throughout New York City. The Beacon Centers, first established in the early 1990s, provide varied services to youth and families in New York City neighborhoods. Community-based nonprofit organizations operate the Centers in public school buildings during non-school hours. Beacon Centers are typically open during the school year from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays, and from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. during the summer. The Centers have a history of commitment to the safety and healthy social and emotional development of both youth and adults. The Beacon model integrates supports for youth and families through activities and services reflecting local community needs and interests. The Beacon Middle School Initiative is intended to improve the lives of young adolescents in grades 5-8 by providing high-quality, structured out-of-school-time experiences through the Beacon Centers.

In conjunction with the launch of the Middle School Initiative, in 2007 DYCD introduced a management information system, DYCD Online, requiring Beacons to track data on program enrollment, attendance, and activity participation for all middle-school participants.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation of the Beacons Middle School Initiative is being conducted by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) over three years, with generous support from the Wallace Foundation. The first year report focused on Beacons' implementation of the Middle School Initiative and how programs adapted to the new requirements in 2007-8. The second year report continues to look at implementation, but focuses on the experiences of youth in the program during 2008-9. Like the first year report, it includes analyses of program participation, activity approach and content, relationships with partners, staff retention, and professional development. The evaluation used the following data sources:

- online survey of Beacon directors,
- enrollment and participation data from DYCD Online,
- survey of Beacon middle-grades participants,
- site visit interview and observation data in ten Beacon Centers (the "in-depth sample") in the spring of 2009,
- survey of parents of middle-grades participants in the in-depth sample, and
- NYC Department of Education (DOE) data for participants in the 10 in-depth sample.

In the third year, the evaluation will continue to document implementation successes and challenges. Analyses will examine the professional networks of Beacon Center directors and how they support program quality and participant outcomes.

Participant Engagement

Enrollment and Dosage

In the second year of the Middle School Initiative, Beacon Centers were each expected to enroll at least 200 middle-grade youth or 16,000 initiative-wide and provide each youth with 216 hours of structured programming. In 2008-9, the Beacon Centers served a total of 21,000 middle-grade youth with 64 of the 80 Beacon Centers meeting the 200-participant target. The middle-grades Beacon participants averaged 182 hours of structured programming.

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic profile of Beacon Center youth (K-12) were mostly male (56%), Black or Hispanic (78%), and eligible for free or reduced lunch (68%). Compared to NYC public school students (K-12), the Beacon Center youth showed a higher percentage of Hispanics (36% versus 14%) and poor youth (68% versus 63%), but a lower percentage of Whites (8% versus 14%).

Staffing Patterns

On average, Beacon Centers operated with a total staff of 31 individuals and assigned 15 of those to Middle School Initiative activities. A majority of Beacons relied on college students and certified teachers to lead and assist with academic activities. On average, 7 college students (5 paid and 2 volunteer) and 4 certified teachers provided staffing coverage at each Beacon Center. For nonacademic activities, most programs had activity specialists and college students as activity leaders with teens providing assistance.

Program Supports

Beacon Centers operate within a landscape that includes the host school, other schools in the area, businesses and agencies in the surrounding community, and the neighborhood residents. Through DYCD, each Beacon Center receives \$400,000 annually to provide all services. Because no new funds were made available for the Middle School Initiative, Beacon Centers shifted their focus to emphasize programming for middle-grades youth, a shift which was amplified in the second year. DYCD provides supports through individual meetings with Center directors, networking and informational meetings for directors, and opportunities for training and technical assistance. Eighty percent of directors responded that DYCD supported them “to a great extent” in using DYCD Online and 54 percent reported that DYCD helped “to a great extent” to identify opportunities for staff development and technical assistance.

The support of the host school is a critical component of a successful middle-grades program. In surveys, 83 percent of directors reported interacting with their host schools at least monthly while only 5 percent reported that they never interacted with their host schools. Beacon directors reported that school administrators played an important role in allocating space, discussing the needs of participants, and coordinating all the host school’s after-school programs. By the second year of the initiative, 61 percent of directors also reported that the initiative had encouraged them to make connections with other schools in the area.

Youth Experiences at the Beacon

Youth were asked to assess their interactions with their peers and with the program staff, their sense of belonging at the Beacon, and to report on the perceived influence of their participation in the Beacon Center on their connections to their communities and their academic success. The findings are summarized below.

Interactions between Youth and Staff

Youth were asked to respond to questions across nine areas of interaction. Responses were generally favorable with about half of the youth responding that they “agree a lot” with positive statements about their relationships with staff. A high percentage (87 percent) of youth reported that the staff treated them with respect.

Interactions among Youth

Youth most frequently reported that they had a lot of friends (89 percent). About half of youth “agreed a lot” to positive statements about interactions with their peers, indicating that Beacons could increase their focus on intentional development of interpersonal relationships among youth.

Observed Quality of Relationships

The quality of relationships between youth and staff and with one another was also rated through observation of activities in the Beacon Centers. Observed middle-grades activities averaged 4.27 out of 7 on the relationship-focused scale, signifying that activities often had a strong relationship building component.

Sense of Belonging

Eighty-seven percent of youth believed they were safe at the Beacon; 86 percent felt that they belonged and that they were successful; 84 percent thought the Beacon was a good place to hang out; 82 percent felt like they mattered; and 77 percent believed that their ideas counted at the Center.

Community Awareness

Seventy-seven percent of participants reported that their actions help others; 76 percent agreed that they have learned to help others at the Beacon; and 75 percent reported that they learned that it is important to be involved in their community.

Educational Development

Results indicated that 80 percent of youth finished their homework more often because of the Beacon; 75 percent believed the Beacon helped them get better grades in school.

Implementation

The second year evaluation analyzed factors associated with high enrollment, participation, and positive youth experiences. Larger middle-grades enrollments at the Beacon Centers correlated with three factors: Beacons located in schools with large middle-grade enrollments, support from the host school administration, and Beacon directors with more program experience. Those Beacon Centers that had the most success in meeting the 216 hour attendance objective reported frequent communications with their host school(s) and having a master teacher or education specialist on staff. The Beacon Centers which received the most positive responses from participants in their programs tended to offer youth more leadership opportunities.

Challenges and Recommendations

The second year evaluation offered three recommendations in response to challenges identified through the evaluation.

1. **Provide technical support to improve program content.** While Beacon Centers continue to have a generous offering of education support and recreation programming, they offer relatively few activities in the other four content areas identified for the initiative: life skills, career awareness, civic engagement, and culture. In addition, site visit observations suggested that professional development targeting methods for promoting active learning techniques could improve the quality of activities in the Beacon Centers.
2. **Continue to facilitate strong partnerships with the host schools.** Beacon Centers that had good relationships and communication with their host schools achieved higher levels of enrollment and participation among Middle School Initiative participants. Conversely, those with weak partnerships with the host schools showed weak enrollment and participation numbers.
3. **Develop additional opportunities for youth leadership.** Increasing opportunities for youth leadership is an ongoing challenge for many programs. Only 54% of Beacon directors reported that youth had opportunities to lead activities. PSA's analysis revealed that youth leadership opportunities were positively associated with youth reports of their exposure to new experiences through Beacon activities, their sense of belonging at the Beacon Center, and their reports of their relationships with peers and with program staff.

Related to these challenges are the findings on enrollment and dosage that suggest Beacons can do a better job of engaging and retaining the youth they enroll, the findings on youth experiences that suggest Beacons can do a better job building trust toward staff and among participants, and the findings on staffing patterns, which suggest that professional development opportunities are important to sustain program quality as Beacons continue to rely on a large number of college students and volunteers to deliver programming.

DYCD is taking the following actions in response to these challenges and recommendations:

Support Professional Development of Beacon Staff

- As part of its support to the Beacons, DYCD along with its technical assistance consultants is developing Project Team. The goal of Project Team is to deepen the capacity of Beacon providers to implement active learning activities through project based learning. The training explores the conceptual aspects of project-based learning and works with staff to facilitate activities with participants at each site.
- In an effort to increase capacity across Beacon programs, DYCD will institute quarterly sessions for Beacon directors as an add-on to the regularly scheduled monthly meetings held at DYCD. These sessions will address topics such as youth development, project based learning, and establishing environments that promote positive youth and adult relationships.
- An important aspect of strengthening a Beacon Center's capacity to deliver high quality programming is the degree of support it receives from senior staff of the non-profit contractor. DYCD will continue to provide opportunities for senior staff to participate in organizational leadership trainings such as those offered by the High Performance Management Institute, where executive staff participates in a 9-month program involving coaching, simulation exercises, and workshops on how to better support programs.

Provide technical support to improve program content: variety of activities.

- DYCD will continue to partner with other organizations to help Beacons expand the types of programming they offer as well as strengthen youth leadership. For example, DYCD in partnership with Nike, Inc. will sponsor a dance competition among the Beacons. Each Beacon team will select a social issue, then create a dance performance that promotes awareness of that issue. In this way, the dance competition will expose participants to arts and culture as well as civic engagement.
- DYCD will expand the work of Beacon Youth Advisory Councils to create more meaningful service learning projects in areas such as culture and the arts, career exploration, and life skills that are identified, planned, and carried out throughout the year by participating Beacon youth. DYCD will assess existing Youth Advisory Councils to determine best practices of youth leadership within these groups. Findings will be used as a resource for implementation across all Beacon programs.

Provide technical support to improve program content: active learning techniques

- DYCD has developed a relationship with the New York Academy of Sciences that will bring graduate and Ph.D. candidate volunteers to implement high quality Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) activities, including hydroponics and robotics, both of which use an active learning curriculum.

Continue to facilitate strong partnerships with the host schools.

- DYCD will continue to work with school principals to improve existing and cultivate new school-CBO partnerships. DYCD will also continue to work with the DOE to identify strategies that enhance school-CBO relationships.

Develop additional opportunities for youth leadership.

- DYCD will work with Beacon Directors and their staff to set up a structured sequence of graduated involvement and youth leadership opportunities for participants and youth staff members, modeled on the Counselors in Training/Leaders in Training program. This sequence would allow youth to move from participant status, to part time staff member, to full time staff member.
- DYCD will work with contracted TA vendors to train Beacon directors and senior level staff on strategies for strengthening leadership skills and civic engagement through youth-led activities. This training will follow the “Project Team Cohort” model and entail workshops as well as on-site consultations.