



**The Role of Organizational Context and External Influences in the
Implementation of Evidence-Based Programs**

Report III

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Introduction

The implementation of programs and practices that reflect the best available research and evaluation is a new and very promising development in the out-of-school time field. However, successfully implementing a new, evidence-based program or practice is a major challenge for practitioners. This challenge is due, in large part, to a lack of information on strategies that promote effective and efficient program implementation. In most cases, implementation strategies have been limited to paper-based manuals that focus on describing interventions without providing complementary information on necessary implementation resources and activities. Because of this, they do not ensure the real-world application of innovative, research-based practice.

Recently, researchers have begun to study implementation in an effort to understand the key ingredients for successful program implementation. A synthesis of implementation research *within the human services field* completed by the National Implementation Research Network identified six core components that drive successful program implementation, referred to as “drivers.” These implementation drivers include:

- *Staff Recruitment and Selection:* Staff recruitment and selection are key components of implementation at practitioner and organizational levels. Staff selection begins with recruitment and is followed by interviewing, hiring, and/or re-deploying existing staff. Research suggests that both formal qualifications (e.g. education, background, certification) and non-trainable, personal and interpersonal characteristics (e.g., kindness, commitment) are important when recruiting and selecting staff.
- *Staff Training:* Staff members at all levels require training when a new practice is implemented. Effective training involves theory and discussion; demonstration of skills; and opportunities for practice and feedback.
- *Coaching, Mentoring, and Supervision of Staff:* Whereas skills needed by successful practitioners can be introduced in training, many skills can only really be learned on the job with the ongoing help of a consultant or coach.
- *Facilitative Administration:* Facilitative administration provides leadership to support implementation, makes use of a range of information to shape decision making, and provides structures and processes for implementing new practices and keeping staff focused on desired outcomes.
- *Systems-Level Partnerships:* Systems-level partnerships involve working with external partners to support program implementation and the frontline work of practitioners.
- *Staff and Program Evaluation:* Evaluation entails using measures of practitioner performance and adherence to the program model, along with program outcome measures, to assess overall program performance and develop quality improvement plans.

While the implementation research conducted to date has focused on a broad range of programs and services within the human services field (e.g., mental health, health, substance abuse, child welfare, and education), *almost no implementation research has been conducted in the out-of-school time field specifically*. In an effort to build the knowledge-base on effective implementation for out-of-school time programs, Child Trends prepared two special reports in January 2008. These reports focused on the first three of the six drivers described above:

- A synthesis of implementation research related to frontline staffing practices in the out-of-school time field (Report 1); and

- An exploratory, descriptive study of the frontline implementation activities conducted by identified evidence-based and promising out-of-school time programs (Report 2).

This current special report (Report 3) and a fourth report to follow extend our earlier research by examining the second three drivers and providing:

- A synthesis of implementation research related to organizational practices and external influences in the out-of-school time field (Report 3); and
- An exploratory, descriptive study of the organization-level implementation activities conducted by identified evidence-based and promising out-of-school time programs (Report 4).

As before, both reports build upon current implementation research findings related to the drivers of successful implementation, as well as assess the role these drivers play in the implementation of effective out-of-school time programs. Given that out-of-school time programs are a subset of human services, this work is an appropriate and much-needed extension of the current field of implementation research.

This current report synthesizes findings from the meager body of implementation research conducted in the out-of-school time field and provides recommended action steps for practitioners implementing evidence-based practices in their organization based on this research. As noted, it focuses on the three implementation drivers related to organizational practices and external influences: facilitative administration, systems-level partnerships, and decision-support data systems. While the first three drivers address issues for staff and other individuals in out-of-school time organizations, these three drivers address contextual and systemic issues at the level of the organization. Specifically:

- *Facilitative administration* refers to the proactive and ongoing measures taken by organizational administrative staff to minimize implementation barriers and create a work environment conducive to practitioners. Facilitative administrators provide organizational leadership; select, train, and supervise program staff; and identify and address implementation problems. Facilitative administration can positively impact program outcomes, implementation fidelity, and staff job satisfaction.
- *Systems-level partnerships* are linkages created between an organization and another organization, individual, or group. Systems-level partnerships can impact a program on its frontline (e.g., partnerships that lead to staff training and coaching), its organizational-level (e.g., partnerships that lead to administrative changes or supports), and its systems-level (e.g., partnerships that lead to other partnerships). Systems-level partnerships are often created to ensure the availability of financial, organizational, and human resources to support the work of practitioners.
- *Decision-support data systems* are management and program support tools that provide information on service delivery, participant outcomes, staff assessments, and program fidelity. These tools are used to assess key aspects of the overall performance of a program and support decision making to assure continuing implementation of the core intervention components throughout a program's duration.

These three drivers are important because research shows that the implementation of high-quality evidence-based practices cannot occur without effective management through facilitative administration, systems-level partnerships, and assessment facilitated through decision-support data systems.

Facilitative Administration

I. Purpose

Facilitative administration has been identified as a core component in the effective implementation of evidence-based practices and programs within the field of human services (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). The purposes of this chapter are:

1. *To define facilitative administration and to describe the research on facilitative administration as a tool for implementing evidence-based practices within the field of human services;*
2. *To synthesize the research on facilitative administration as a tool for implementing evidence-based practices within the field of out-of-school time;*
3. *To identify gaps in the current research; and*
4. *To outline action steps that practitioners can take to support the implementation of evidence-based practices.*

II. Background

Facilitative administration refers to the proactive and ongoing measures taken by organizational administrative staff to minimize implementation barriers and create a work environment conducive to practitioners (Fixsen et al., 2005). Facilitative administrators provide organizational leadership; select, train, and supervise program staff; and identify and address implementation problems (Baker, King, MacDonald, & Horbar, 2003; Fixsen et al., 2005; National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention [NCMHPYVP], 2007). They are responsible for the management process (i.e., staff recruitment, training, and supervision) and organization infrastructure. Facilitative administration promotes effective program implementation by ensuring that the practitioners delivering the services have the necessary supports to do so with fidelity and expertise (Ravichandran & Rai, 2000). For example, facilitative administrators will put into place systems and structures for ongoing technical assistance and coaching for newly-trained staff.

Strong facilitative administrative supports may include internal policy analysis, procedural changes, resource allocation, and the creation of a work culture that promotes implementation fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2005). Facilitative administrative supports can positively impact program outcomes, implementation fidelity, and staff job satisfaction (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Fixsen et al., 2005; Schoenwald, Sheidow, & Letourneau, 2004). The better an organization is managed through facilitative administration, the more equipped it is to achieve its program goals (Glisson, 2007).

Implementation research on facilitative administration conducted in the field of human services generally points to the importance of implementation fidelity, goal-setting, skillful leadership, staff support, and creating a positive organizational climate and culture (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Fixsen & Blasé, 2005). For example, as part of a study on the effectiveness of a behavioral safety intervention, Marsh et al. (1998) observed and collected implementation data. They found that management's commitment to the intervention was positively correlated with intervention success, practitioner commitment, and the quality of goal-setting. Marsh et al. also found that effective goal-setting by management helped to mobilize employees, guide their actions, and motivate them to achieve program outcomes.

Additional research in the field of human services has identified the following facilitative administrative supports as effective (Bays, 2004; Fixsen et al., 2005; Marvin et al., 2003; Rafoth & Foriska, 2006):

- Attentively listening to staff concerns;
- Establishing a shared program vision among staff, board members, participants, and other stakeholders;
- Acknowledging and effectively using staff skills;
- Validating staff efforts; and
- Eliciting and acting on staff input regarding service delivery and program management issues.

Facilitative administrators can use these supports to impact organizational culture (i.e., the accepted norms and procedures for how staff behave and the organization runs), which in turn can impact program implementation. In a study of 322 clinical and case management providers, Aarons and Sawitzky (2006) found that organizational culture directly influences work attitudes, program commitment, and staff job satisfaction. Additionally, incorporating a decision-making and feedback system into organizational culture can ensure effective program implementation outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2005). For example, Sutcliffe and McNamara (2001)'s study of how five bank branches implemented a new decision-making system found that a codified decision-making process can promote desired outcomes and job behavior. Similarly, Smylie, Lazarus, and Brownlee-Conyers (1996)'s study of a Midwestern school district concluded that a decision-making system not only improved program outcomes, but also practitioner accountability.

III. Facilitative Administration within the Out-of-School Time Field

Within the out-of-school time (OST) field, facilitative administrators affect program quality by hiring staff who can develop positive relationships with children, offering challenging program activities, promoting child participation, and providing continued professional development (American Youth Policy Forum [AYPF], 2006). They are responsible for establishing and maintaining the program infrastructure as well as ensuring staff support, which is essential to staff retention and ongoing youth participation (AYPF, 2006; Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004).

The chief aim of this chapter, as noted, is to synthesize the research on facilitative administration in out-of-school time programs. Recognizing that some aspects of research on facilitative administration is limited, this synthesis will also examine whether implementation findings about organizational infrastructure in other areas of human services are relevant to the out-of-school time field. Below we present our methodology for conducting this synthesis of the research and evaluation literature.

A. Methodology

Our initial search was limited to research studies that addressed the effect or impact of facilitative administration on the implementation of out-of-school time programs and expected youth outcomes. Search terms included: out-of-school time, after school programs, program implementation, facilitative administration, internal management support, organizational support, leadership, and organizational context and culture. Given the scarcity of such studies, our search was expanded to include insights from out-of-school time practitioners as well as evaluation studies and reports of out-of-school time programs where staff recruitment and characteristics of

program staff were described and examined as a component of the overall evaluation. We used the following sources to locate information:

- Electronic databases, including EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ERIC, and Ingenta;
- Peer-reviewed journals and organizational websites, including Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, The After-School Project, The After School Corporation, Public/Private Ventures, National Institute of Out-of-School Time, the William T. Grant Foundation, the RAND Corporation, and Policy Studies Associates, Inc.;
- Reference lists of relevant articles and reports; and
- Program and clearinghouse websites, including Idealist.org, Girls Inc., etc.

Syntheses of these findings are provided below.

B. Findings

Findings have demonstrated the following key issues to be critical in the successful implementation of facilitative administrative support:

1. Leadership,
2. Support for staff,
3. Data-driven decision-making, and
4. Organizational culture and climate.

Below is a discussion of these issues in the context of the out-of-school time field.

1. Leadership: Leading Program Implementation

Out-of-school time administrators identify program needs, supervise staff, and are ultimately responsible for leading program implementation. Depending on the program, administrators may be referred to as program directors, content experts/trainers, site managers, or coordinators (Gutierrez, Bradshaw, & Furano, 2008). Regardless of title, effective facilitative administrators must be knowledgeable about the program model as well as able to set relevant program goals and garner stakeholder support around implementation (Barwick, Boydell, Stasiulis, & Ferguson, 2005; Fixsen & Blasé, 2005).

An example of how effective out-of-school time program administrators set clear and relevant program goals is provided by a study of 120 community-based youth organizations. McLaughlin (2000) found that effective programs set clear, youth-focused program goals. Programs guided by youth-centered goals adapt their activities according to participants' interests, strengths, and needs (Ibid). Program goals should also set high standards for participants and use positive statements to convey goals to youth (Ibid). Participants' family, community, and cultural needs should be considered when goal-setting to ensure that programming is both relevant and beneficial (Borkowski, Smith, & Akai, 2001). Program activities should then be aligned with these goals and used to gauge areas for program improvement (Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007).

In order to achieve effective implementation, facilitative administrators collaborate with program staff, participants, and other key stakeholders (i.e., people with a vested interest in the program whose decisions can affect the program's future progress) when initially setting program goals (Ames, 2007; Borkowski et al., 2001). Successful program outcomes are more likely when all

stakeholders “buy into” both the necessity and feasibility of program implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005). For example, in Sheldon and Hopkins (2008)’s study of the CORAL Initiative (Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning) in five California cities, staff working for effective programs understood and were able to articulate program goals. Collaboration in goal-setting can produce more relevant program goals, which in turn can decrease program attrition and increase participants’ investment in the program (Borkowski et al., 2001).

Effective programs allocate management time for goal-setting and program improvement efforts (Sheldon & Hopkins, 2008). Staff doing this work are knowledgeable about the program field and have teaching and/or training experience (Ibid). Some programs choose existing staff members to take on these responsibilities, while other programs may turn to a program consultant or purveyor. A *purveyor* is an individual or group of individuals, who represent a evidence-based program and actively work to implement it with fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2005). While the role of a purveyor may differ for each organization, s/he can be especially helpful in preparing an organization to implement a program, explaining the rationale behind program components and trouble-shooting (Ibid).

2. *Support: Providing Practitioner Support*

Staff working for successful out-of-school-time programs are well-supported and well-qualified. Cooper (1998) studied the implementation of the school-wide Success for All program at 350 sites and found that all high-quality program implementations had staff who were supported by program administrators and knowledgeable about program goals and components. Different program models support staff differently, but supportive program administrators generally listen attentively and respond to staff concerns, instill shared goals in staff and participants, use staff members effectively, and validate staff input and efforts (Bays, 2004; Marvin, LaCost, Grady, & Mooney, 2003; Rafoth & Foriska, 2006). Providing staff training and coaching can teach staff relevant implementation knowledge.

Staff Training

Staff training is critical to the successful implementation of out-of-school programs. Studies have found that training out-of-school program staff can result in better staff practices, improved program quality, and greater positive youth outcomes (Fancsali, 2002; Hall & Cassidy, 2002; Westat & Policy Studies Associates [PSA], 2001). Such positive results, however, cannot be attained without administrators who ensure the occurrence of staff training and oversee the successful implementation of training practices thereafter (Marvin et al., 2003). Practitioners of the BEST Initiative cited supportive administrators as among the most critical aspects to their incorporation of training components into their everyday program practices (Fancsali, 2002).

Facilitative administrators can manage staff training by ensuring that staff have opportunities to practice training content, receiving feedback, and accessing technical assistance. The BEST Initiative found that program staff who were given opportunities to practice training knowledge were better able to incorporate youth development training into their everyday program tasks (Fancsali, 2002). Moreover, program staff working with the CORAL Initiative found it helpful for its administrators to conduct regular implementation observations and subsequent coaching in addition to providing training on evidence-based strategies (Public/Private Ventures [P/PV] & James Irvine Foundation, 2008).

In order to provide useful staff support, it is important that program administrators are knowledgeable about training content. The BEST Initiative found that administrators who were

knowledgeable about program implementation and supportive of practitioners were more likely to retain qualified staff (Fancsali, 2002). Administrators can also support staff by ensuring that they have access to technical assistance should problems outside of their purview arise. Whether seeking consultant expertise or using a telephone hotline, technical assistance can help programs obtain the knowledge necessary to institute norm changes, build viable community partnerships, and strategize on the best methods for implementing new practices into their program context (Prevention Institute, 2006).

3. Data-Driven Decision-Making: Instituting Decision Support & Feedback

Many effective out-of-school programs use data-driven decision-making systems or performance measures to determine program goal attainment and consider methods for maximizing implementation outcomes. *Data-driven decision-making* systems help program administrators make decisions based on analysis of program information (Henke, 2007). Similarly, *performance measures* assess program effectiveness by gathering data on program service delivery (Little, Harris, & Bouffard, 2004; Watson, 2000).

Instituting a Decision Support System

Program data can be used to identify participant needs, evaluate the achievement of goals, track the effects of professional development, and keep stakeholders informed of program success (Little et al., 2004). Instituting an effective data-driven decision-making system requires collaborative goal-setting, data collection, action based on performance measure outcomes, systems of accountability, and the institution of safeguards to prevent any ill-treatment of program participants.

- *Devise program goals collaboratively.* Collaborative goal-setting between program administrators, practitioners, and stakeholders is particularly important in instituting an effective data-driven decision-making system. Including practitioners and other stakeholders in goal-setting can help identify the most appropriate framework (including performance measures and methods for attaining identified performance goals) for program implementation, enrich problem-solving solutions, and invest staff and stakeholders in the data-driven decision-making process (Watson, 2000; Yeo, Brooks, & Patti, 2007).
- *Collect data.* Information on program implementation, participants, and staff should be collected to evaluate program goal achievement and determine any participant or staff needs (Bouffard & Little, 2004). Out-of-school time programs have used a variety of data collection methods, including surveys and questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, program observations, tests or assessments, and data reviews (Watson, 2000). While different programs may find different organizational methods beneficial, it is helpful to develop a system for organizing data and for aligning data with program goals (Fixsen et al., 2005; Gutierrez et al., 2008).
- *Use data to guide implementation decisions.* Just as staff observations should be used to guide staff training and coaching, collected data should be used to improve and/or identify resources, programming, and professional development, (Henke, 2007). Collected data should be shared with relevant parties (i.e., staff or stakeholders) in ample time for improvement efforts to be incorporated (HFRP, 2007).

- *Consider data-driven decision-making system costs.* While the institution of data-driven decision-making systems can improve program implementation, data collection materials may require additional funds, staff training, or time (Bouffard & Little, 2004). For programs choosing to use a management information system (MIS), which stores multiple data collection methods, there are additional costs to consider (Ibid).

4. Organizational Climate & Culture: Establishing an Effective Environment

A positive organizational culture and climate is essential to high-quality program implementation and outcome success (McLaughlin, 2000). *Organizational culture* refers to an organization's norms, values, and expectations (i.e., the behaviors that are rewarded), while *organizational climate* includes the environmental conditions affecting employees' psychological health and affective response to their work environment (Glisson, 2007). While organizational culture and climate are independent concepts, they inform one another and similar strategies apply to the creation of both positive organizational culture and climate. Thus, the two will be discussed in collaboration.

High-quality out-of-school program environments have program administrators that support participants; institute clear goals and evaluation procedures; involve stakeholders; promote physical and psychological well-being (i.e., safety and positive emotional climate, respectively); and provide purposeful activities and related materials (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). In McLaughlin (2000)'s report on the benefits of youth organizations, youth participants in supportive and caring programs felt safe, supported by staff, and held to clear expectations (i.e., rules and responsibilities they expected youth to abide by and participate in, respectively, as part of program participation). To promote a supportive and caring program culture and climate, it is critical to hire (and retain) staff who are able to build positive relationships with participants as well as encourage, respect, and put children and youth at ease (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000).

For staff, positive organizational cultures and climates have administrators who are concerned and supportive of practitioners, responsive to staff input, and committed to program improvement (Salisbury & McGregor, 2002). Practitioners are enthusiastic, respectful of colleagues, and participate in staff camaraderie (Ibid).

In addition to positive staff interactions, staff education and/or training can positively contribute to program environment (Early et al., 2007). High-performing out-of-school programs offer an assortment of enriching activities and experiences; intentional opportunities for children to build relationships with staff and other participants; and effective usage of staff (i.e., identifying strong managers, purposefully matching staff to tasks, and providing staff support) (Little, 2007). Staff education and/or training can guide teachers' purposeful selection of program materials and activities.

C. Research Gaps

Out-of-school time program implementation research typically focuses on the effects of evidence-based practices, rather than the influence of organizational components, such as facilitative administration, on the implementation of their practices. There is little, if any, research on specific strategies for establishing strong out-of-school time leadership, staff support, incorporating data-driven decision-making systems, or creating a positive program culture and climate. As a result, there is a need for research studies that specifically examine:

Leadership

- What leadership qualities are necessary for facilitative OST administrators;
- Can leadership be taught and, if so, how;
- How should OST stakeholders be identified and involved?

Practitioner Support

- How can facilitative administrative supports be effectively used and who is charged with that task;
- What are the components of OST facilitative administrative supports;
- What roles do administrators play in effective OST and coaching models?

Data-Driven Decision-Making Systems

- What types of information should be included in decision-support data systems;
- How can OST programs use decision-support data systems to promote effective program implementation and improve program functioning?

Organizational Culture and Climate

- What are the indicators of organizational climate and culture for OST programs;
- What specific steps should be taken to create positive OST environments?

IV. Action Steps for Practitioners

Based on existing OST research literature, four key issues emerged as critical to providing and maintaining effective facilitative administrative supports. Below are recommendations based on these findings:

Leadership: Facilitative administrators should collaborate with program participants, stakeholders, and staff to set clear, relevant, and youth-focused program goals.

Support Staff: Facilitative administrators should institute an OST infrastructure that selects staff appropriate for program participants and goals, offers relevant training and staff support, and implements the program with fidelity.

Data-Driven Decision-Making Systems: Facilitative program administrators should maintain and use a data system to track implementation progress (i.e., observe strengths and identify weaknesses) and inform program implementation decisions (e.g., identify improvement areas, methods for addressing challenges, and relevant topics for staff training and coaching).

Organizational Culture and Climate: Facilitative program administrators should establish a positive program culture and climate by setting clear and relevant goals, valuing staff contributions, and promoting program improvement. Both administrators and staff should be knowledgeable about program implementation and remain current on related research in the field.

Systems-Level Partnerships

I. Purpose

Systems-level partnerships have been identified as one of six core components, or drivers, for the effective implementation of evidence-based practices in out-of-school time programs. The purposes of this chapter are:

1. *To define systems-level partnerships and to describe how systems-level partnerships are being thought of and used within the field of human services.*
2. *To synthesize the empirical evidence for systems-level partnerships as a core component of implementation within the field of out-of-school time.*
3. *To identify gaps in the current research; and*
4. *To outline action steps that practitioners can take to use systems-level partnerships to support the implementation of evidence-based practices in out-of-school time programs.*

II. Background

The successful implementation of evidence-based practices depends on components that span three broad levels of influence: frontline-level components (e.g., staff coaching), organizational-level components (e.g., program administration), and systems-level components (e.g., community resources) (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Systems-level partnerships are linkages between an organization and another organization, individual, or group. Systems-level partnerships can impact all three levels of influence (i.e., frontline, organizational, and systems-level components) and are often created to ensure the availability of financial, organizational, and human resources to support the work of practitioners (Ibid).

Fixsen et al. (2005) suggest that the simultaneous measurement of all three levels of influence would provide evidence of the impact that systems-level partnerships have on implementation. Unfortunately, no such studies have been undertaken, and the lack of empirical evidence on systems-level impact makes it difficult to draw conclusions (Ibid).

Despite this lack, there has been growing interest in the adoption of a more systemic approach within the field of human services. In an article addressed to the medical community, Waddell (2001) lamented long-standing dissemination and uptake problems with respect to evidence-based practices and called for structures and processes that would create “connective tissue” between researchers, clinicians, and decision makers. She suggested the use of “knowledge brokers,” who would be “both research literate and knowledgeable about the settings and needs of decision makers” (p. 5).

Barwick et al. (2005) conducted an extensive literature review and interviewed children’s mental health experts on issues relating to readiness for change, knowledge transfer, and implementation science. The need for learning organizations and professional development, for consumers and decision-makers in addition to practitioners, was discussed as well as a need for the “systemic involvement of key stakeholders,” including families, community leaders, funders, universities, independent research and policy advocates, and consumer advocacy groups. Such systems-level partnerships have the potential to assist in the development, evaluation, and dissemination of evidence-based practices, as well as inspire and motivate stakeholders to contemplate change and apply pressure for change across multiple levels of influence (e.g., community, state, federal).

Program evaluations and synthesis reports highlighting promising practices provide examples of what systemic stakeholder involvement or other “connective tissue” might look like. Fixsen et al. (2005) point out that several of the elements contributing to the success of the evidence-based DOTS (Directly Observed Therapy System) program are examples of systems-level partnerships, including garnering the support and commitment of the government and other stakeholders and hiring outside consultants. Promising implementation practices from the fields of violence prevention and teen pregnancy prevention also engage the systems-level, including identifying partners and building a strong base of support, winning the influence of champions from outside the organization, and securing technical assistance (Mihalic, Irwin, Elliot, Fagan, & Hansen, 2001; Summerville, 2006).

In the introduction to this report, we describe six core components or “drivers” that Fixsen et al. (2005) have identified as necessary for the successful implementation of evidence-based practices. Fixsen, Blasé, Naom, and Wallace (2006) raise excellent questions around who will provide these core implementation components. Who, for example, will conduct staff trainings? Who will evaluate the program? Core implementation components can either be taken care of in-house, for example, when program supervisors conduct staff assessments, or arranged through a purveyor or intermediary organization, for example, when the developer of a particular evidence-based practice is hired to lead training sessions and provide coaching. In the latter case, a systems-level partnership between the organization and the program developer is required.

Ideally, systems-level partners, communicate frequently and work across multiple levels to affect implementation. For example, a particular evidence-based practice has a better chance of being implemented effectively if the program developer being partnered with 1) is available for on-site coaching rather than just an initial training (i.e., communicates frequently) and 2) has worked and is working with the research community and other programs as they implement and evaluate the evidence-based practice (i.e., works across multiple levels) (Fixsen, Blasé, Naom, Van Dyke, & Wallace, 2007; Fixsen et al., 2006). Unfortunately, programs are often faced with limited options. Purveyors and intermediary organization may not always be available. When they are available, they may not be very helpful.

III. Systems-Level Partnerships within the Out-of-School Time Field

As out-of-school time (OST) programs become larger and more complex, they engage more and more at the systems-level (Weimer, 2007). Capacity building intermediary organizations are growing in strength and number, and some cities (e.g., San Diego) have gone so far as to develop their own citywide initiatives run through a municipal office. The main aim of this chapter is to synthesize the research for systems-level partnerships in out-of-school time programs in order to gain a deeper understanding of how systems-level partnerships can contribute to the successful implementation of sustainable evidence-based practices in these programs.

This synthesis will explore questions such as: What do systems-level partnerships look like in the out-of-school time field? Which stages of the implementation process are they impacting? And which partnerships are most valuable with respect to implementation? Below we present our methodology for conducting this synthesis of the research and evaluation literature.

A. Methodology

To learn how systems-level partnerships contribute to the implementation of evidence-based practices in the field of out-of-school time, we used the following procedures to locate articles, project evaluations, practitioner insight, and other relevant information:

- Computer searches of EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Web of Science;
- Inspection of the reference lists of relevant articles;
- Website searches of the National Implementation Research Network, the Harvard Family Research Project, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, the William T. Grant Foundation, Public/Private Ventures, MDRC, the RAND Corporation, the Afterschool Corporation, and Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

To the best of our knowledge, no rigorous outcomes evaluations using an experimental or quasi-experimental design have been conducted to examine systems-level partnerships and their impact on program implementation and participant outcomes. What is known about systems-level partnerships within the field of out-of-school time and, more generally, systems-building, comes mostly from process evaluations, descriptive studies, synthesis reports, and practitioner insight. As in other fields of human service, the importance of a systemic approach is often discussed and strong partnerships are often listed as a shared feature of high-performing programs.

B. Findings

Below we present findings related to systems-level partnerships in three sections: 1) as a component of high-performing programs, 2) as part of out-of-school time systems-building initiatives, and 3) as a facilitator throughout implementation.

1. Systems-Level Partnerships as a Component of High-Quality Programs

In a recent review of their online out-of-school time database, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) declared that “good things can happen” when programs partner with schools (Weimer, 2007). They also noted the importance of family connections in out-of-school time programming. The importance of partnerships between out-of-school time programs and schools, families, their communities, and other organizations, however, is not new. In an edition of their Evaluation Exchange, HFRP outlined the benefits that partnerships can bring to out-of-school time programs (Bouffard, Little, & Weiss, 2004):

- School-OST partnerships are a feature of high-performing programs, and youth participating in such programs have better outcomes. These partnerships can improve recruitment, attendance, and programming overall.
- Family-OST partnerships are a feature of high-performing programs. These partnerships can improve attendance and programming overall.
- Community-OST partnerships, which can refer to partnerships with businesses, libraries, youth related services and agencies, etc., are less-well researched than partnerships with schools and families. Programs that partner with the community, however, are better able to leverage resources and provide youth with a variety of afterschool choices. Additionally, they have the potential to affect both youth and community outcomes.

Wimer, Post, and Little (2004) examined the process studies of programs managed or operated by community-based organizations but located in public schools. They found that programs in successful partnerships with schools were better able to leverage physical (e.g., rent-free space or supplies), financial (e.g., donations or other funding opportunities), social (e.g., relationships with high-risk teens), and/or intellectual resources (e.g., grant-writing expertise or mentoring experience).

The Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (MARS) evaluated 78 after-school programs across Massachusetts, using data from interviews, observations, school district student data, attendance data, and surveys (Miller & Hall, 2007). Significant correlations between program characteristics and program quality indicators were reported. Programs more strongly connected to schools tended to score higher in staff engagement, engaging/challenging activities, and high quality homework time. Significant correlations between program characteristics and child outcomes were also reported. Students participating in programs more strongly connected to schools, teachers, and principals tended to score better in areas such as homework completion and overall effort, initiative, and relations with peers.

A Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA) report on outcomes linked to high-quality afterschool programs, found that high-quality programs tended to have strong partnerships with neighborhoods, schools, and community organizations (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). These partnerships helped both to establish the programs in their communities and to make them sustainable over time. Additionally, in an extensive literature review, RAND identified aspects of out-of-school time programs associated with positive outcomes, including “integrated family and community partners” (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005).

2. OST Systems-Building Initiatives

It is difficult to discuss systems-level partnerships in out-of-school time programs without touching upon systems-building initiatives more generally. Systems-building can be defined as those tasks which work to increase “interrelationships and interdependence among providers, clients, funders, and the larger community to ensure a more coherent and more regular pattern of services to meet needs” (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005, p. 90). Examples of systems-building tasks in the field of out-of-school time include: developing a conceptual model of a local out-of-school time system, strengthening a program’s funding base, developing quality control and financial accountability mechanisms, and supporting the development and functioning of intermediary and resource institutions (Halpern, 2003).

Our interest is in examining how systems-building initiatives can affect a program’s ability to implement evidence-based practices. The types of systems-building initiatives included in this review are: city-level initiatives and intermediary organizations, which can operate on the community-, city-, state-, or national-level. Additionally, we discuss purveyors, who can also operate across multiple levels and are capable of carrying out many systems-building tasks. A brief description of each type follows:

City-Level Initiatives

City-level systems-building initiatives in the out-of-school time field work to increase interrelationships and interdependence among stakeholders (e.g., programs, families, funders) within the geographical boundaries of a particular city (Halpern, 2003). Organizing stakeholders to support the evidence-based work done by frontline staff and administrators is one of the key roles that systems-level partnerships can play with respect to promoting effective implementation (Fixsen et al., 2006). Additionally, city-level initiatives may support effective implementation through professional development opportunities, financial assistance, etc. Because cities “embody most of the key elements of after-school systems” (e.g., providers, cultural and arts institutions, a concentration of low- and moderate-income families) and because each city has its own distinct history and infrastructure, Halpern (2003) believes that it is most logical for systems-building processes to take place at this level. In most cases, he notes, this is the pattern that is emerging.

City-level initiatives can take on many forms. In some cases, the lead organization in a city-level partnerships is a municipal office, for example, San Diego's "6 to 6" Extended School Day Program. This program is a partnership between the City of San Diego's Community and Economic Development Department, the San Diego Unified School District, and other community-based organizations (Hall and Harvey, 2002). In other cases, the lead organization is a local intermediary. For example, The After-School Corporation (TASC) is a self-standing intermediary organization in New York City that connects schools, community groups, and out-of-school time providers with key policymakers and funders (TASC, 2008a). The San Francisco Beacons are another example of this type of governing model. City-level systems-building can also be coordinated through school districts (e.g., Beyond the Bell in Los Angeles), public/private partnerships (e.g., Children and Youth Investment Corporation in Washington D.C.), or any combination of the above.

Hall and Harvey (2002), in a paper highlighting the experiences of eight cities engaged in citywide out-of-school time initiatives, noted that each governing model (e.g., municipal office, intermediary, school district) has both advantages and disadvantages. What really matters is that "the governance structure be a magnet for collaboration" (p. 48). Data were collected from each city through network meetings, site visits, surveys, phone calls, interviews, and publications. Again and again, the leaders of these initiatives stressed the importance of partnerships in order to "accomplish tasks, broaden support, and to increase and sustain resources" (p. 48).

Intermediary Organizations

An intermediary organization, within the field of out-of-school time, is an organization dedicated to working with and for youth-serving organizations (Wynn, 2000), and intermediary organizations have the potential to effect implementation across its various stages. Halpern (2003) lists "supporting the development and functioning of intermediary and resource institutions" among the key systems-building tasks facing the out-of-school time field.

Johnson, Rothstein, and Gajdosik (2004), writing about the intermediary role in youth worker professional development, make a distinction between national and local intermediaries. National intermediaries make connections between and build capacity for local intermediaries. For example, The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) is the national intermediary organization that launched the BEST (Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers) Initiative. Local intermediary organizations, on the other hand, work *directly* with out-of-school time programs in various capacities, including but not limited to convening and networking, knowledge development and dissemination, standards identification and setting, training and coaching, management assistance, advocacy and representation, and accountability (Halpern, 2003; Wynn, 2000). The BEST Initiative, for example, relied on local intermediary organizations for the delivery of their professional development curriculum to youth workers (Center for School and Community Services, 2002). The D.C. Children's Trust Fund (DCCTF) is another example of a local intermediary. DCCTF supports out-of-school time programming in Washington, DC, by raising and leveraging millions of dollars in public and private funds, convening local organizations who share the same mission, and improving program quality through technical assistance (TASC, 2008g).

Purveyors

A purveyor is "an individual or group of individuals...representing a program or practice who actively work to implement the defined practice or program with fidelity and good effect"

(Fixsen, Blasé, Naoom, & Wallace, 2007). Purveyors are typically program developers or, in some cases, experts on a particular evidence-based program. Surprisingly little is said about purveyors in the out-of-school time literature, considering their importance during implementation. In some cases, an intermediary organization might be considered the purveyor. For example, TASC “funds, supports, and monitors programs operated by community-based organizations” (TASC, 2008d). Although individual program leaders have latitude in the combinations of curricula and activities that their program offers, each TASC program follows an evidence-based model designed by TASC, which includes components such as employing a full-time, paid site coordinator; operating at least three hours a day every day that school is in session; building strong relationships with host schools and parents; and delivering activities that are connected to the school day, including academic support, arts, sports, and community service (Reisner, White, Russell, & Birmingham, 2004; TASC, 2008f). TASC provides programs with materials, trains frontline staff members, and offers on-going technical assistance to staff members (TASC, 2008c).

We found one process evaluation that spoke to the value of clear communication between programs and purveyors during the implementation of evidence-based practices. Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) assessed how well the Youth Education for Tomorrow (YET) program, a research-based literacy model developed by P/PV, was being implemented across twenty-three sites (Hangley & McClanahan, 2002). Student outcomes were also measured. The quality of program implementation varied across sites. In general, problems developed when communication between P/PV, the purveyor, and site staff broke down. For example, P/PV was not always clear about their expectations, which program staff found frustrating. P/PV found that effective implementation demanded “a highly directive and interactive relationship between P/PV and site staff” (p. 35). More effective implementation was correlated with higher gains in reading.

3. Systems-Level Partnerships as an Implementation Facilitator

Although systems-level partnerships are often a feature of high-quality programs and their presence has been correlated with higher scores on program quality indicators, they are rarely discussed as a facilitator of effective implementation. Looking more closely at what effective implementation entails, however, we begin to see that systems-level partnerships are a valued implementation component in the out-of-school time field.

According to an earlier brief in this series, implementation involves six stages that typically take place over two to four years (Metz, 2007).

- Stage 1: Exploration;
- Stage 2: Preparation;
- Stage 3: Early Implementation;
- Stage 4: Full Implementation;
- Stage 5: Sustainability; and
- Stage 6: Innovation.

Systems-level partnerships can play a critical role at every stage of implementation.

Stage 1: Exploration

During this stage, programs begin to consider the idea of adopting or replicating an evidence-based program or practice, searching various options, examining the “fit” of various programs

and practices with their target population, assessing the feasibility of implementing a new program or practice, and investigating whether technical assistance is available from program developers or other sources (Metz, 2007). Systems-level partnerships can assist programs during this stage of implementation by “strengthening [their] capacity to collect and analyze information and to engage in planning and priority-setting” (Halpern, 2003, p. 85). Smaller programs often need help finding and/or accessing resources (Halpern, 2003), including knowledge resources such as the latest research on an evidence-based practice or information regarding the availability and quality of a practice’s purveyor. Even larger programs often require outside assistance as they make decision about outcome goals and identify priorities. Examples are provided below.

One example of how systems-level partnerships can assist programs in planning and priority-setting is the partnership between the San Francisco Beacon Initiative and the Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD), a local intermediary. Hall and Harvey (2002), in their report on the experiences of the Cross-Cities Network, noted that a key strength of the San Francisco Beacon Centers was their planning and improvement strategy. Their theory of change was developed by CNYD, with the help of another independent contractor (Eldredge, Piha, & Levin, 2002). CNDY worked with key stakeholders, including principals, youth, and families, to identify and prioritize outcomes. The final theory of change identified outcomes, necessary resources, and indicators of success as well as divided responsibilities between three stakeholder groups: site-level, initiative-level, and intermediary-level. According to CNDY, this theory of change “became the most important tool for management, planning, and implementation” (p. 103).

Stage 2: Preparation

Once a decision to adopt a certain program or practice is made, preparation begins, including hiring staff; securing funding; arranging space, equipment, and organizational supports; and creating new operating policies and procedures (Metz, 2007). Systems-level partnerships can assist programs during this stage of implementation in multiple ways, including providing financial assistance as well as in-kind contributions (e.g., transportation, supplies, custodial assistance, rent-free use of space). Examples are provided below.

One example of how systems-level partnerships can assist programs during the preparation stage is the partnership between the North Carolina Support Our Students (SOS) Initiative and the public school system. Many SOS sites collaborated with public schools in order to finance frontline staff, utilizing teachers whom the school paid to stay and thus saving funds for other needs (Wimer et al., 2003). Additionally, SOS sites collaborated with hundreds of other agencies across the state (e.g., food banks and universities), bringing in an estimated 5.4 million dollars worth of in-kind contributions (Johnson, 2005). Another example of this type of assistance is the partnership between TASC, a local intermediary, and its affiliated programs. TASC supplies programs with lending libraries as well as other needed materials and pays for programs to staff school librarians or literacy teachers (TASC, 2008b).

Stage 3: Early Implementation

At the early stage of implementation, staff members have been hired, participants recruited or referred for program services, and organizational supports put in place. This stage is often characterized by frequent problem-solving at practice and program levels (Metz, 2007). Systems-level partnerships can assist programs during this stage of implementation by providing technical advice, consultation services, and/or professional development. Examples are provided below.

One example of how systems-level partnerships can assist programs during the early implementation stage is the partnership between the New York City Beacons Initiative and The Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York. YDI is a local intermediary organization that provides technical assistance and consultation to the Beacons. Through YDI, Beacons staff attend workshops and staff trainings on how to best support academic and enrichment activities. YDI also published a handbook on literacy-based out-of-school time programming. When surveyed, almost all Beacons directors reported feeling positive about YDI's technical assistance, and over half felt that it was "essential to the success of the Beacons initiative" (Warren, Brown, & Freudenberg, 1999). YDI also supports the Beacons financially and works to engage policy makers, funders, practitioners, and others interested in the Beacons.

RAND, in an extensive literature review of the out-of-school time field, has found evidence that supports the connection between systems-level partnerships and the ability of some providers to offer better staff training (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). In an earlier report on the role of frontline staff during the implementation of evidence-based programs, we discussed the importance of professional development and examined four initiatives in particular (Bandy, Bowie, Burkhauser, & Metz, 2008). It is telling to the importance of systems-level partnerships with respect to professional development in the out-of-school time field that all of the initiatives discussed in our earlier report are examples of systems-building at work. Unfortunately, as discussed in the report, not all of these initiatives have been successful (Ibid). While the successes of the BEST Initiative point to the potential of systems-level partnerships to successfully assist programs during implementation, the failures of some of the other initiatives demonstrate that simply having the partnership in place is not sufficient. The assistance given, whether it is professional development, technical assistance, or fidelity monitoring, has to be of high-quality, or it will not promote effective implementation.

Additional evidence for the importance of systems-level partnerships during early implementation comes from a PSA report. PSA interviewed over sixty experts and program leaders, focusing on programs that served at-risk youth, showed evidence of positive outcomes, and had sustained themselves for more than three years beyond their initial funding (Pechman & Fiester, 2002). They found that many of these programs had been working with technical advisors, staff developers, and curriculum designers, as well as assistance centers such as The Finance Project and The National Institute for Out of School Time (NIOST).

Stage 4: Full Implementation

A program or practice is considered fully implemented when new staff members have become skillful in their service delivery, new processes and procedures have become routine, and the new program or practice is fully integrated into the agency or organization (Metz, 2007). Staff and program evaluation is necessary to determine if and when this stage has been reached. Through evaluation, programs use measures of practitioner performance, compliance with the new practice or program model, and expected outcomes to help assess and improve overall program performance (Ibid). Systems-level partnerships can assist programs during this stage of implementation by conducting, funding, and/or otherwise assisting in staff and program evaluation. Examples of this are provided below.

Within the out-of-school time field, data-driven evaluation is receiving more and more attention (Shah & Coloretti, 2004). Evaluations have the potential to improve program implementation as well as garner the support of funders interested in seeing results before they "buy into" a program. Finding the resources necessary to conduct an evaluation, however, can be challenging.

Program evaluations are expensive, and most programs need at least some assistance in developing and implementing effective evaluations (Pechman & Fiester, 2002). Evidence from case studies supports the ability of systems-level partnerships to help some providers better evaluate their progress (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005).

One example of how systems-level partnerships can assist programs evaluate their progress is the partnership between San Francisco's Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families (DCYF) and its grantees. For the use of its grantees, DCFY developed the web-based Contract Management System (CMS) to assist in the collection of outcome-based data (Shah & Coloretti, 2004). Results were collected and shared with policymakers and other stakeholders. CMS has gone on to become a best practice and is being implemented in locations nationwide, including Washington, DC, Providence, and Chicago. Other programs partner with non-profits, private research organization, or higher education institutes for evaluation purposes (Sandel, 2007).

Stage 5: Sustainability

When a program is no longer new, the focus of implementation becomes sustaining the program through continuous training for practitioners and other staff and members and seeking new funding to support the program in future years. However, sustainability should not be thought of as a sequential stage which only follows full implementation. Rather, sustainability should be an active part of each stage above. For example, it is important to identify and maintain funding and other start-up resources during the early stages of implementation as well (Metz, 2007). Although "federal investments in after-school programs are at an all-time high," funding continues to be a barrier to program sustainability (Halpern, 2003; Little, 2007, p. 2). Systems-level partnerships are often critical when it comes to finding financial support. Examples of this are provided below.

The Finance Project, a non-profit research and consulting organization, recently profiled thirty-two out-of-school time initiatives that were successfully sustaining themselves through the use of funding strategies (Sandel, 2007). Several of the strategies discussed require programs to form systems-level partnerships, including:

- Teaming up with other community organizations in order to access federal and state funding;
- Building a base of community support and increasing visibility through the creation of task forces, advisory committees, or other collaborative structures;
- Cultivating key champions within the community and/or government; and
- Collecting and communicating results.

In order to answer questions about sustainability in school-linked out-of-school time programs, PSA interviewed over sixty experts and program leaders, focusing on programs that served at-risk youth, showed evidence of positive outcomes, and had sustained themselves for more than three years beyond their initial funding (Pechman & Fiester, 2002). They learned the following:

- Leaders of sustainable, successful programs are well-connected and politically savvy; know where and how to find support; inspire confidence in parents, investors, and community partners; and emphasize community roots.
- It is not necessarily the quantity but the quality of the partnerships that matters most. Partners that contribute to sustainability are key.
- Sustainable programs diversify their funding sources. That is, they receive funding from multiple sources.

Stage 6: Innovation

Once a program has been implemented effectively and adheres to the original model, an organization may choose to test innovations or improvements. This often involves consultation with the original program developer or expert consultants to ensure that essential elements of the program or practice are not lost when changes are made (Metz, 2007). Systems-level partnerships can assist programs during this stage of implementation by working with them to tailor or add onto a particular evidence-based practice. Examples are provided below.

One example of how systems-level partnerships can assist programs tailor an evidence-based practice to meet local needs is the partnership between the New Haven BEST site and NTI, the national intermediary organization that launched the BEST Initiative. All BEST sites use the same core curriculum, the Advancing Youth Development (AYD) curriculum, which is a training for youth development workers (Johnson et al., 2004). At the New Haven BEST site, there was an additional demand for a professional development course for supervisors. In response to this demand, NTI worked closely with the New Haven BEST site to create a supervisors' training course.

C. Research Gaps

Although program evaluations, synthesis reports, promising practices, and practitioner advice point to the need for systems-level partnerships in order to successfully implement evidence-based practices, the empirical evidence for the impact that such partnerships have on implementation is non-existent. Additionally, it is clear that not all systems-level partnerships are effective. There is a clear need to design research studies that better examine:

- The simultaneous measurement of all three levels of influence (frontline-level, organizational-level, and systems-level) in order to assess the impact that systems-level components have on implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005);
- The implementation and effectiveness of out-of-school time systems-building efforts in general and, more specifically, systems-level partnerships (Weimer, 2007);
- The role that systems-level partnerships play as purveyors of evidence-based practices;
- The role that systems-level partnerships play during the six stages of implementation;
- The relationship between systems-level partnerships, effective implementation, and participant as well as community outcomes;
- The qualities of an effective systems-level partnership; and
- The combinations of systems-level partnerships that are most valuable for implementation, given the circumstances of particular programs.

IV. Action Steps for Practitioners

After reviewing the evidence presented above, we recommend the following action steps to support the implementation of evidence-based practices in out-of-school time programs:

Schools, Families, and the Communities: Partnerships between out-of-school time programs and schools, families, communities are consistently found to be features of high-performing programs. Additionally, such partnerships are a rich source of resources. Programs should keep this in mind throughout each of the six stages of implementation.

Communication: Programs and purveyors, whether the lead organization in the initiative or a consultant, should maintain clear channels of communication throughout the implementation process. Roles and expectations of all partners should be made clear from the beginning and changes in expectations should be communicated as soon as possible.

Sustainability: Partners that contribute to sustainability are key and such partnerships should be sought out as soon as possible. Consider the following systems-level sustainability strategies:

- Do not depend on one source of financial support. Diversify your base by reaching out to multiple potential partners.
- Team up with other community organizations in order to access federal and state funding.
- Increase visibility through the creation of task forces, advisory committees, or other collaborative structures.
- Cultivate key champions within the community and/or government.
- Collect and communicate results.

Quality Versus Quantity: Programs should vet potential partnerships. It is the quality of the partnerships and not their quantity that is most important. Partnerships that cannot deliver the needed resource (e.g., high-quality staff training, an effective fidelity assessment) may not be worth it. Programs should consider the following questions:

- What aspect(s) of implementation will this partnership affect?
- What resources will this partnership bring to the implementation table?
- What is the quality of these resources?
- What outcomes are expected if the partnership is effective?

Decision-Support Data Systems

I. Purpose

Decision-support data systems have been identified as a core component in the effective implementation of evidence-based practices and programs in the human services field (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). The purposes of this chapter are:

1. *To define decision-support data systems and to describe the empirical evidence for these systems as a tools for implementing evidence-based practices within the field of human services;*
2. *To synthesize the empirical evidence for decision-support data systems as a core component of implementation within the field of out-of-school time;*
3. *To identify gaps in the current research;*
4. *To outline action steps that practitioners can take to support the implementation of evidence-based practices using decision-support data systems.*

II. Background

A decision-support data system is a management and program support tool that provides information on service delivery, participant outcomes, staff assessments, and program fidelity. These tools are used to assess key aspects of the overall performance of a program and support decision making to assure continuing implementation of the core intervention components throughout a program's duration (Fixsen et al., 2005; Little, 1970). While there is a scarcity of implementation research on data-driven support systems specifically (Fixsen & Blasé, 2006), examining relationships across different levels and multiple forms of program data has been shown to provide new insight into strategies that can improve program delivery and implementation fidelity. Data-driven support systems can “replace hunches and hypotheses with facts; identify root causes of problems, not just the symptoms; assess needs and target resources to address them; set goals and keep track of whether they are being accomplished; and focus staff development efforts and track their impact” (Bernhardt, 2000). Additionally, data-driven support systems can help:

- Program administrators recognize when there is a need to probe for further information;
- Service staff responsible for program implementation obtain information on effective implementation strategies and program outcomes in a timely manner; and
- Stakeholders access information that is organized and synthesized in a way that facilitates decision making (Metzger & MacDonald, 2002).

Data collected through process and outcome evaluations are a critical aspect of building decision-support data systems (Blasé, Naoom, & Van Dyke, 2007), as evaluation data provide information on the quality of program implementation and outcomes achieved as a result of implementing program services.

Evaluations are typically divided into two components: process evaluations and outcome evaluations. *Process evaluations* assess whether an intervention or program model was implemented as planned, whether the intended target population was reached, and the major challenges and successful strategies associated with program implementation. Process data can be used to inform decisions on needed changes in service delivery or staffing. *Outcome evaluations* determine whether, and to what extent, the expected changes in participant outcomes occur and

whether these changes can be attributed to the program or program activities. Outcome data can be used to inform decisions regarding intervention components and dosage.

Decision-Support Data Systems in the Human Services Field

In the human services field, *quality improvement information, measures of fidelity, measures of client outcomes, and staff performance assessment data* are major components of decision-support data systems. Below is a discussion of each component.

1. Quality Improvement Information

In order to differentiate “high-quality” organizational practices from “low-quality” organizational practices, individual practices (e.g., staff training, staff coaching, staff/client interactions) can be compared to research-based standards of quality developed by the field, if such standards exist, or evaluated with instruments designed to measure quality (Granger et al., 2007). For example, the Administration for Children and Families developed and published Head Start Program Performance Standards, which include items related to services, partnerships, and management supports (Fixsen et al., 2006). These standards be used to assess the quality of individual Head Start programs as well as similar program in the early childhood field. Quality improvement information is a key aspect of decision-support data systems because it helps to analyze program performance and systematize efforts to improve the operations of the program.

2. Measures of Fidelity

Organizational fidelity assesses the extent to which an organization’s operations (e.g., scheduling, hiring, managerial assistance) facilitate the implementation of a program or intervention as envisioned by program developers. Information directly related to staff availability, staffing patterns, client demographics, and organizational materials and resources is often included in a decision-support data system. These data then provide a transparent view of changes or improvements that need to be made at the management and administrative levels to carry out programs with fidelity.

Intervention fidelity measures the degree to which a program or intervention is carried out in accordance with essential theoretical and procedural aspects of a program model. Fidelity data are primarily captured through assessment of staff practices and staff behaviors. When data of this type are included in a decision-support data system, the data can help managers and administrators make decisions about whether and what type of staff training and coaching are needed as well as what staff characteristics are ideal.

3. Client Outcomes

Client outcomes, which represent the changes demonstrated by clients as, hopefully, a result of interventions or programs, may also be included in a program’s decision-support data system. Client outcome data provide information that can help program developers and administrators make changes that have direct results on the services delivered to clients.

4. Staff Assessment Data

Staff performance assessment data are widely considered to be a key component of a decision-support data system (Fixsen et al., 2005; McLaughlin, 1987; Metz, Blasé, & Bowie, 2007; Patton,

1978). Staff assessments are designed specifically to assess the extent to which frontline staff incorporate new skills into their practice (Fixsen et al., 2005). It is through staff assessment data that program administrators are able to make decisions about the training and coaching needs of staff. Staff assessment data also help program developers to better understand the level and type of staffing needed to effectively implement the program and to make these recommendations to the future adopters of the program model (Fixsen et al., 2005).

III. Decision-Support Data Systems within the Out-of-School Time Field

Within the out-of-school time field, decision-support data systems are considered an effective tool for supporting the implementation of new practices. However, limited research has been conducted on the development and use of decision-support data systems or their impact on program implementation or program outcomes. The following questions still need to be addressed: What types of decision-support data systems are being used in the field? What measures are most important? What impact, if any, do decision-support data systems have on staff practices and service delivery?

The overall aim of this chapter is to synthesize research on decision-support data systems in the out-of-school time field. This synthesis will explore the relationship between the use of program data systems and the effective implementation of evidence-based practices and programs.

A. Methodology

To understand the roles that decision-support data systems play in the implementation of out-of-school time programs, our search was initially limited to experimental studies. Search terms included: decision-data support systems, data-driven support systems, staff performance evaluation, staff performance assessment, fidelity measures, quality improvement, consumer outcomes, out-of-school time programs, after-school programs, program evaluation, and implementation research on decision-data support systems and staff performance assessment. Given the scarcity of such studies, our search was expanded to include insights from out-of-school time practitioners as well as evaluation studies and reports of out-of-school time programs where decision-support data systems and staff performance assessments were examined as a component of overall process and outcome evaluations. We used the following sources to locate information:

- Electronic databases, including EBSCOhost, ERIC, and Ingenta;
- Peer-reviewed journals and organizational websites; and
- Reference lists of relevant articles and reports.

To the best of our knowledge, no rigorous outcomes evaluations using an experimental or quasi-experimental design have been conducted to examine decision-support data systems and their impact on program implementation and participant outcomes. What is known about decision-support data systems within the field of out-of-school time comes mostly from process evaluations, descriptive studies, and practitioner insight. Below we outline important findings in the out-of-school time literature related to decision-support data systems.

B. Findings

Decision-support data systems are an essential component in the operation of out-of-school time programs. Out-of-school time programs are under increasing pressure to meet accountability

standards (Ertle, Ginsburg, & Lewis, 2006); thus, “good” data documentation is becoming more important. The quality of a program’s data documentation directly affects whether it is identified as a “quality program” as well as the degree to which it can demonstrate meeting requirements and the extent to which students perform and benefit from the program. Furthermore, high-quality data documentation facilitates effective program management, reduces the likelihood of reliance on anecdotal information, and ensures that data can be used for program improvement purposes.

Decision-support data systems can provide a range of information for out-of-school time programs, including whether the program has been structured as originally intended and how well the program has met its goals for participating children and youth. The following four types of data are typically included in decision-support data systems for out-of-school time programs: 1) program quality data; 2) fidelity data; 3) student (client) outcomes; and 4) staff assessment data. Each type of data is discussed in further detail below, with focus on how these data can be used to inform decision-making and continuous program improvement.

1. Program Quality Data

Program quality assessments can provide information on overall program quality as well as on the quality of individual program components (e.g., staff management practices, program management practices). In the out-of-school time field, program quality assessment has been identified as a critical tool in the decision-making process (Rozsnyai, 2003). According to Sheldon and Hopkins (2008), when out-of-school time programs fail to find impacts from program activities, program quality is generally identified as the reason. Moreover, research has linked program quality to a variety of youth outcomes, including feelings and attitudes, behavioral adjustment, academic and school performance, work habits, and long-term developmental trajectory (Little, 2007).

A baseline set of quality standards, informed by the school-age care literature, the youth development literature, and literature on quality in educational settings, exist for out-of-school time programs (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Kahn, Bronte-Tinkew, & Theokas, 2008; Little, 2007). TASC’s “essential elements of program quality” fall into categories such as program environment/climate, administration/organization, staffing/professional development, youth participation/engagement, and program sustainability, among others (TASC, 2008e). Quality assessment tools, such as TASC’s list of essential elements, provide structures for assessment that can be used by programs for self-evaluation, research, and/or planning purposes (Kahn et al., 2008). A wide variety of quality assessment tools are currently in use by programs for self-assessment and program improvement purposes (Little, 2007). Below are examples of how out-of-school time programs can use program quality data to facilitate implementation and improve service delivery.

- ***Forum for Youth Investment:*** The Forum for Youth Investment published a review of nine instruments designed by teams of researchers and practitioners to measure youth program quality (Granger et al., 2007). Each instrument defines the “core concept” that it is designed to evaluate (e.g., youth engagement, physical and psychological safety) and provides “indicators of effective practice” for evaluators to use during observations. Although these instruments are relatively new, they are based in early childhood assessment and the youth development/education literature.
- ***The MOST Initiative:*** The MOST Initiative is a multi-year project of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) aimed at improving the quality and availability of out-of-school-time programming for children, particularly low-income children, in

Boston, Chicago and Seattle (Halpern, Spielberg, & Robb, 2001). Program evaluators collected data on staff training and development, facilities improvement, and program linkages to external resources. Quality improvement efforts were then guided by the NSACA (NAA, formerly the National School-Age Care Association) Standards for Quality School-Age Care as well as the child development literature and work from the field (Ibid).

2. *Fidelity Data*

Fidelity measures assess the extent to which programs keep to or deviate from prescribed protocols and are used by program administrators and purveyors to evaluate the integrity of program implementation (Weller, Rose, & Bowen, 2006). Fidelity data can also be analyzed in order to identify possible reasons for ineffective or inconsistent program implementation and used to create a roadmap for decision-making around program delivery. Below are examples of out-of-school time programs which have collected and used fidelity data as part of their decision-support data system.

- **21st Century High School ASSETs Program:** The 21st Century High School After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) Program was established as a federal initiative aimed at addressing the underachievement of California youth by providing opportunities to become well-adjusted adults and constructive citizens. Hipps, Diaz, and Wingren (2006), in their evaluation of ASSETs, gathered fidelity data on the extent to which the program was being implemented with integrity to the original model. The overall question was: To what extent do the program activities address and integrate a youth development approach within the program design? The fidelity data they gathered helped to target and improve areas where staff practices did not adhere to components of the original program design.
- **New York City Beacons Initiative:** An evaluation of the New York City Beacons' program operations was conducted to determine the extent to which the Beacons were implementing activities, programs, and services as planned (Warren, Feist, & Nevarez, 2002). Fidelity data were collected during the evaluation and used to help formulate recommendations in order to improve staff's use of program practices. These improvements, in turn, enhanced academic performance among participants.

3. *Student Outcome Data*

Student outcomes are the most common type of data incorporated into decision-support data systems, and are often used by programs to track outcomes for participants. Student outcomes include *monitoring data* and *impact data*. Many out-of-school time programs collect *monitoring data* through quasi-experimental studies which monitor outcomes over time for a single group or compare outcomes among individuals receiving program services to a similar population, a comparison group, or to national data. Some out-of-school time programs collect program impact data through experimental evaluations that assess the overall impacts of a program or program activities using random assignment designs that allow for conclusions to be drawn about cause and effect (Allen & Bronte-Tinkew, 2008). Several evaluations in the out-of-school time field have utilized student outcome data to inform decision-making and improvements or changes to program practices. Examples of such evaluations are included below.

- **Massachusetts After-School Research Study:** The Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (MARS) evaluated 78 after-school programs across Massachusetts, using data from interviews, observations, school district student data, attendance data, and surveys (Intercultural Center for Research in Education, 2005). The evaluation examined connections between program quality and student outcomes. Findings indicated that program quality and participant behavior in the program were closely linked. There was a less direct connection, however, between program activities and performance on academic outcomes. These findings led to critical changes in program concept and activities. As a result of the findings, program staff were encouraged to place greater emphasis on academic outcomes, including academic performance, homework completion and effort, behavior in the program/classroom, initiative, engagement in learning, analysis and problem solving, communication skills, relations with adults, and relationships among youth.

4. *Staff Assessment Data*

In the out-of-school time field, direct service staff carry out the interventions; therefore, the successful implementation of evidence-based practices requires that practitioners acquire and apply new skills and that their newly applied skills are assessed regularly. Evaluating how well program staff implement program activities is helpful to program developers who must make decisions about restructuring program activities as well as for program managers and administrators who must assess the training and support needs of their staff in order to implement programs effectively (Smith, Akiva, Arrieux, & Jones, 2006). In the out-of-school time field, staff assessment data are generally conducted via observational assessments, interviews, and surveys with program participants. Findings indicate that such data can promote effective implementation by providing information on staff's:

- Training and supervision needs;
- Commitment to the new program or practice; and
- Ability to implement the new program or practice.

Below we provide examples of out-of-school time programs that use staff assessment data to improve program implementation.

Information on Training & Supervision Needs

As part of the Massachusetts After-School Research Study (MARS), the Intercultural Center for Research (2007) assessed staff performance using the Assessment of Afterschool Program Practice Tool—Research Version (APT-R). Data gathered during this evaluation helped administrators identify staff who needed further training and coaching to meet high-quality implementation standards. Furthermore, managers were better able to make decisions about recruiting and selecting staff with specific types of skills that were necessary for effective implementation.

Information on Commitment to New Practices

Quinn and Kahne (2001), in a case study of a multi-year after-school arts program, collected staff performance data in an effort to gain insight on staff behaviors and practices that affect the implementation of a new program. Findings indicated that teaching staff were only marginally committed to the program and that their lack of commitment led to inadequate implementation of

the program. Based on these findings, administrators put greater effort into recruiting staff members who were invested in their mission and willing to devote the time required by the program.

Information on Ability to Implement New Programs and Practices

As part of an evaluation of the New York City Out-of-School Time program, Russell et al. (2006) assessed the degree to which program staff were able to deliver activities and services in accordance with an innovative program plan. Interview and observational data were collected from program staff. Data revealed that staff with certain personality traits (e.g., caring, helpfulness) were better able to deliver the innovative program model effectively. These findings helped administrators decide to emphasize interpersonal skills as well as educational background when selecting and hiring staff.

Empirical and theoretical evidence from related fields (e.g., education) suggest that specific feedback on staff skills is necessary (Guskey, 1995). Research indicates that lack of feedback to staff may lead to resistance to change, inconsistent implementation, and carelessness (Gersten, Morvant, & Brengleman, 1995; Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiller, 1997). Research concludes that “immediate feedback is better than delayed feedback, and feedback that is specific, positive and corrective holds the most promise for bringing about lasting change in...behavior” (Scheeler, Ruhl, & McAfee, 2004). Moreover, Van Hourten (1980) suggests that the greater the frequency of feedback, the more learning that occurs.

C. Research Gaps

Decision-support data systems are an important component in the effective implementation of evidence-based practices and programs. In the out-of-school time field, the implementation of data-driven support decision is fairly new. As a result, very few evaluations of out-of-school time programs focus on the relationship between decision-support data systems and program improvement, client outcomes, or program quality. There is a clear need to design research evaluations and studies that specifically examine:

- The effect that decision-support data systems have on implementation: *How can decision-support data systems effectively be used to facilitate implementation and improve programs in the out-of-school time field?*
- The ways in which different types of data (e.g., program quality data, fidelity data, staff performance data) are used to inform decision-making: *What types of data have the greatest impact on effective decision-making for program improvement?*
- The use of comprehensive assessment standards that incorporate a feedback cycle for staff responsible for implementation: *What is the effect of staff assessments that incorporate multiple sources (e.g., observational ratings, interviews, program participants) versus. single source assessments on effective program implementation?*
- The impact of providing critical feedback to staff on their performance: *Do staff improve practice following feedback? Do they implement program activities with greater fidelity?*

D. Action Steps for Practitioners

Out-of-school time programs have a developmental cycle that begins with program design and extends through the continuing operation of a stable, ongoing program. Throughout this cycle, implementation is facilitated by decision-support data systems. Findings presented in this chapter demonstrate how different types of data (e.g., program quality, fidelity, outcomes, staff assessment) can be used to inform decision-making and improve service delivery. After reviewing the evidence presented here, we recommend the following action steps to support the effective implementation of evidence-based out-of-school time programs.

Incorporate decision-support data systems: Incorporating decision-support data systems into out-of-school time programs will lead to a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses in programs and will help develop more effective interventions for students.

Collect multiple types of program data: To effectively incorporate a decision-support data system and ensure that program data are representative and comprehensive, multiple types of data (e.g. program quality, fidelity, outcomes, staff assessment) should be collected. Each type of data provides useful information for decision-making and program improvement.

Monitor decision-support data systems: Managers and administrators should monitor systems to ensure that they are capturing the specific data needed to make decisions.

Establish comprehensive methods to assess staff performance: Assessment of staff using multiple methods provides a more comprehensive picture of staff performance and of the types of training and coaching needed to effectively implement program practices. Assessment methods may include observational ratings, interviews, participant surveys, and self-assessments.

Conclusions: Implications for Future Research and Evaluation and Action Steps for Practitioners

Our review of the implementation research in the out-of-school time field reveals that, while the research has been meager, there are consistent themes that indicate that facilitative administration, systems-level partnerships, and decision-support data systems appear to be critical to the effective implementation of evidenced-based programs. Moreover, findings from this synthesis are similar to findings from implementation research in other areas of human services, indicating that the current knowledge-base on effective program implementation is relevant and useful to the out-of-school time community. Additional research is necessary to determine best practices for selecting and recruiting facilitative administrators, achieving sustainability through systems-level partnerships, and developing decision-support data systems that effectively facilitate implementation and improve programs in the out-of-school time field.

Facilitative administration, systems-level partnerships, and decision-support data systems all play important roles in ensuring positive outcomes for adolescents participating in out-of-school time programs. Based on the review of current available research, we offer the following recommendations and action steps to support the implementation of evidence-based practices in out-of-school time programs:

Recommendations Based on Available Research for Facilitative Administration

- Facilitative administrators should collaborate with program participants, stakeholders, and staff to set clear, relevant, and youth-focused program goals.
- Facilitative administrators should institute an OST infrastructure that selects staff appropriate for program participants and goals, offers relevant training and staff support, and implements the program with fidelity.
- Facilitative administrators should maintain and use a data system to track implementation progress and inform program implementation decisions.
- Facilitative administrators should establish a positive program culture and climate by setting clear and relevant goals, valuing staff contributions, and promoting program improvement.
- Both administrators and staff should be knowledgeable about program implementation and remain current on related research in the field.

Recommendations Based on Available Research for Systems-Level Partnerships

- OST programs should find ways to form partnerships with schools, families, and the community throughout the implementation process.
- OST programs and purveyors should maintain clear channels of communication with one another throughout the implementation process.
- OST programs should find partners that can contribute to sustainability early on in the implementation process.
- OST programs should vet potential partnerships.

Recommendations Based on Available Research for Decision-Support Data Systems

- OST programs should use decision-support data systems.
- OST programs should collect multiple types of data (e.g., program quality, fidelity, outcome, staff assessment).
- Managers and administrators should monitor systems to ensure that they are capturing data needed to make programmatic decisions.
- OST programs should collect staff assessment data using multiple methods in order to build a comprehensive picture of staff performance (e.g., observational ratings, interviews, participant surveys, and self-assessments).

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