



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

Report IV

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Background

The implementation of high-quality evidence-based practices cannot occur without facilitative administration, systems-level partnerships, and decision-support data systems (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). We believe that understanding “what works” in program *implementation* is just as important as understanding “what works” in a program *model* (Metz, Espiritu, & Moore, 2007). Knowledge of both these factors will minimize the research-to-practice gap and facilitate the application of innovative, evidence-based practices throughout out-of-school time programs.

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.” (Fixen et al., 2005). A brief description of these implementation drivers is included below.

- *Staff 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*: Whereas skills needed by successful practitioners can be introduced in training, many skills can only really be learned on the job with the help of a consultant or coach. Coaching and mentoring include activities for individuals or groups, on-the-job observation, instruction, modeling, feedback, or debriefing of practitioners and other key staff in the program.
- *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 implementation research related to these six core components has yielded important information for program developers and practitioners in 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* (Bandy, Bowie, Burkhauser, & Metz, 2008). 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, which focused on:

- 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).

A third report and this current special report (Report 4) extend our earlier research by 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).

All four reports build upon current implementation research findings related to the drivers of successful implementation and assess the role these drivers play in the implementation of effective out-of-school time programs.

This current report synthesizes information collected from directors of evidence-based out-of-school time programs related to the implementation of innovative programs and practices. Both the third and fourth report focus on the three implementation drivers related to organization-level practices and external influences: 1) facilitative administration; 2) systems-level partnerships; and 3) decision-support data systems. The three drivers examined were chosen because research shows that the implementation of high-quality evidence-based practices cannot occur without effective management through facilitative administration, systems-level partnerships, and continuous assessment facilitated through decision-support data systems (Fixen et al., 2005).

Rationale and Purpose of Study

In light of the evidence that successful implementation processes appear to be independent of the content of the practice or program being implemented, we hypothesized that drivers related to the organization-level practices of implementation as identified in the broader field of human services would also play a critical role in the implementation of evidence-based programs in the out-of-school time field.

Findings from Report 3 indicated that effective out-of-school programs make use of similar facilitative administrative practices, systems-level partnerships, and evaluation strategies, which contribute to their successful implementation, and, in turn, positive youth outcomes. A review of the major findings suggests that:

- *Facilitative administrators* collaborate with program participants and other key stakeholders in order to set clear, relevant, and youth-focused program goals. Additionally, a facilitative administration ensures that program staff are selected, trained, and supported so that they are able to implement program practices with fidelity and achieve program goals. Facilitative administrators establish a positive program culture and climate by setting clear and relevant goals, valuing staff contributions, and promoting program improvement. They create support systems in order to collect data, which are then used to track implementation progress and guide implementation decisions.
- Out-of-school time programs create *systems-level partnerships* during all stages of program implementation in order to ensure the availability of the financial, organizational, and human resources necessary to support the work of frontline staff as well as to sustain the life of the program. Partnerships between out-of-school time programs and schools, families, and communities are consistently found to be a feature of high-performing programs; however,

programs should vet all potential partners, placing value on quality rather than quantity. In any partnership, clear communication is critical throughout the implementation process.

- *Decision-support data systems* are used to evaluate program implementation and outcomes, assist with staff assessments, and support effective implementation throughout a program's duration (Fixsen et al., 2005; Little, 1970). When creating a decision-support data system, multiple types of data (e.g., program quality, fidelity, outcomes, staff assessment) should be collected by programs in order to ensure that the data are representative and comprehensive. Additionally, decision-support data systems should be monitored to ensure that they are capturing the specific data needed to make programmatic decisions. Finally, administrators should use multiple methods when using decision-support data systems to assess staff (e.g., observational ratings, interviews, self-assessments) in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of staff performance.

Methodology

The findings above are based on limited research within the out-of-school time field. To glean more in-depth knowledge of the role of these implementation drivers in out-of-school time programs, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with staff from out-of-school time programs which were identified as promising or evidence-based (i.e., experimentally evaluated and demonstrated positive results). The purpose of the interview was to gather information to better understand the ways that facilitative administrators, systems-level partnerships, and decision-support data systems facilitate the successful implementation of evidenced-based practices in out-of-school time programs. For the purpose of these interviews, "frontline staff" refers to staff members who deliver services directly to children and youth in a program, and "program management" refers to the organizational leadership responsible for program oversight activities, such as identifying and addressing program needs and overseeing staff selection, supervision, and training (Bandy et al., 2008; Gutierrez, Bradshaw, & Furano, 2008).

Program Selection

A web-based search was conducted to identify effective programs. The resources that were used to identify evidence-based programs are listed below:

- *Promising Practices Network*: This resource provides summaries of programs and practices that have been proven to improve outcomes for children. The website is organized into four main sections: programs that work; research in brief; service delivery; and partner pages. Users can search for programs by outcome area, indicator, topic, evidence level, or alphabetically. More information can be found at: <http://www.promisingpractices.net/>.
- *Child Trends Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully (LINKS)*: The LINKS guide is continually updated and presents information about experimentally evaluated programs found to "work" (or not work) in enhancing children's development. Users can search for programs by outcome, age, or developmental stage, as well as by key words. More information can be found at: <http://www.childtrends.org/>.
- *Child Trends City Scan*: City Scan provides an overview of programs within 15 major U.S. cities. These programs are for children and adolescents, ages 8 to 16, and focus on a variety of child outcomes. More information can be found at: http://www.childtrends.org/what_works/City_Scan/.
- *Communities in Schools*: Communities in Schools (CIS) is a drop-out prevention organization whose mission is to identify and address the unmet needs of young people by mobilizing existing community resources and creating partnerships for the benefit of students and their families. Their After-School Program Kit identifies best practices from

effective out-of-school time programs as well as other resources, including information about five experimentally evaluated out-of-school time programs that have been shown to be effective. More information can be found at: www.cisnet.org and http://www.cisnet.org/working_together/after-school.asp.

- *Harvard Family Research Project Database*: This resource includes information on evidence-based programs that prevent and reduce delinquency and other problem behaviors in youth. Programs in the database are rated according to their level of scientific rigor in demonstrating program effectiveness. Users can search for effective programs by risk or protective factors. Users can also access other tools such as a guide for conducting a community needs assessment. More information can be found at: <http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov/guide.cfm>.

Program Descriptions

After effective programs were identified, we contacted program directors through email and follow-up telephone calls to describe the purpose of the study and set-up interviews. Fourteen out-of-school time programs were contacted and 11 telephone interviews were conducted.

Interviewees were assured that their comments would be kept confidential. Telephone interviews were conducted with program directors or senior staff members from the following programs:

- *Across Ages*: Across Ages is a mentoring initiative designed for children between the ages of nine and 13 in which 1) elders mentor youth, 2) youth are involved in community service, 3) youth participate in a life skills/problem-solving curriculum, and 4) monthly activities involve the families of youth participants. The program is designed to increase child resiliency, promote positive child and youth development, and prevent youth from engaging in high-risk behaviors, such as substance use, early sexual activity, and violence.
- *All Stars*: All Stars is a school-based intervention program designed to reduce adolescent engagement in risky behaviors, such as substance use, violence, and sexual activity. The program is intended for middle school students and consists of a curriculum that uses class debates, games, small group activities, and individual meetings.
- *BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life) Accelerated Learning Summer Program*: The BELL Summer program is an ongoing initiative during non-school hours designed to increase children's reading, writing, and math mastery; raise children's academic expectations and self-esteem; develop effective mentoring relationships between children and positive adult role models; and empower parents.
- *Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT)*: GREAT is a school-based program facilitated by law enforcement officers. It is designed to prevent delinquency, youth violence, and gang membership by teaching elementary and middle school students problem-solving strategies and life skills.
- *National Indian Youth Leadership (Project Venture)*: Project Venture focuses on preventing substance abuse and developing peer relationships and group skills among high-risk American Indian youth and other youth through outdoor experiential activities, adventure camps, community-oriented service learning, and classroom-based problem-solving activities. As a part of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, Project Venture draws from American Indian values in order to develop leadership skills among American Indian youth, enabling them to positively contribute to their communities.
- *Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN)*: PYN is a system of youth workforce development programs designed to improve educational and economic outcomes for young people coming from challenging circumstances (e.g., low-income communities, foster care, low academic achievement). The PYN uses internships and field-based learning projects to make connections between academics, work-readiness, and college awareness.

- *Project Toward No Drug Use (PTNDU)*: PTNDU is a multi-session, school-based program designed to prevent drug use among high school students. The program curriculum alerts students to the health risks associated with drug-use and helps students develop skills that are relevant to drug-resistance. While the program was initially developed for students in alternative high schools, it has been successfully implemented in general high schools as well.
- *Protecting You, Protecting Me (PY/PM)*: PY/PM is an alcohol prevention program, which educates first- through fifth-grade students about alcohol and vehicle safety. The 40 science and health-based lessons are designed for inclusion in students' core school curriculum, and they meet educational standards. Curriculum topics include health and safety, stress management, decision-making, and media awareness, among others.
- *Teen Outreach Program (TOP)*: TOP is a teenage after-school program designed to prevent teen pregnancy, high school drop-out, school suspension, and poor academic achievement by promoting positive youth development. The program seeks to engage young people in regular community service, community improvement projects, and weekly discussions on topics such as peer pressure and effective decision-making.

Protocol Description

Findings are summarized here without identifying individual respondents. Our goal is to present general themes that emerged across the interviews, illustrating them where appropriate, but without identifying particular programs. Program staff were informed that the information collected was to be included in a special report on implementation to Atlantic Philanthropies and disseminated more widely to the out-of-school time field. The interview was structured to focus on the following topics:

- General background and role of the interviewed staff member
- Basic program information
- Program Management and Administration
 - Role of program management in services and activities
 - Strategies program managers use to support frontline staff
 - Challenges managers encounter in supporting frontline staff and strategies used to overcome barriers
 - Lessons learned regarding the role of program management in program implementation
- Community Partnerships
 - Nature of community partnerships
 - How community partnerships can support program implementation
 - How community partnerships can sustain programming
 - Challenges in forming community partnerships and strategies used to overcome barriers
 - Lessons learned regarding the role of community partnerships in program implementation
- Program Evaluation and Staff Assessments
 - Nature of program evaluation
 - Process of assessing staff performance
 - Ways data are used to inform program decisions and improvement
 - Challenges in conducting program evaluations and assessments and strategies used to overcome barriers
 - Lessons learned in the role of program evaluation and staff assessments in program implementation

Study Findings

In this section we report interview findings for each of the implementation drivers assessed: program management and administration; community partnerships; and decision-support data systems, which includes program evaluation and staff assessment. Findings are presented within the context of literature review findings for each of the implementation drivers.

Program Management and Administration

Facilitative administration, as defined by Fixsen et al. (2005), refers to the proactive and ongoing measures taken by program managers and administrative staff to minimize implementation barriers and create a work environment conducive to practitioners. Specifically, program management has been shown to influence program outcomes, implementation fidelity, and staff job satisfaction (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Fixsen et al., 2005; Schoenwald, Sheidow, & Letourneau, 2004).

In a review of the implementation literature, Bandy et al. (2008) found that effective program managers and administrators support the implementation of evidence-based practices by ensuring program fidelity, demonstrating skillful leadership, supporting frontline staff, and encouraging a positive organizational climate and culture (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Fixsen & Blase, 2005). Interview findings related to program management and administration are reported within the following framework: 1) program fidelity, 2) skillful leadership, 3) staff support, and 4) organizational climate and culture. Challenges, suggested improvement strategies, and lessons learned are also discussed.

Program Fidelity. Program fidelity refers to the extent that program curricula and procedures are delivered as intended (The National Implementation Research Network, 2006). Fidelity is a critical component of effective out-of-school time programs because research-proven practices are only as useful as they are consistently implemented by staff. Program administrators play an important role in ensuring that program activities are implemented with fidelity. Program administrators reported using the following management strategies to ensure that their programs were implemented with high fidelity:

- *A multi-tiered management system.* Respondents of larger programs reported using site managers, regional managers, and national managers to oversee program implementation. Program administrators of smaller programs reported having evaluation administrators to oversee program evaluation systems. Both management systems were developed to maximize the time and preserve the quality of interactions between frontline staff and program participants.
- *Dual staff roles.* Some respondents noted that staff members assumed multiple staff roles. For example, staff members were responsible for both frontline and management activities or management staff assumed frontline staff responsibilities in their absence to ensure that program activities were consistently and effectively implemented.

Skillful Leadership. Because program managers are responsible for supporting frontline workers in delivering out-of-school time services, it is important that they are knowledgeable about program curricula and related content (Bandy, Burkhauser, Collins, & Metz, 2008). Additionally, administrative knowledge impacts how well program managers are able to effectively support staff, manage programs, and in turn, achieve intended outcomes (Ibid). The following insights on administrative qualifications and training were highlighted during interviews with program administrators:

- *Hire knowledgeable individuals.* Respondents noted that they hire program managers from related fields (e.g., education, youth development) because they possess experience and training related to children, youth, and program-related topics.

- *Train managers.* Respondents reported that they provide managers with on-the-job training as well as ongoing professional development opportunities in order to equip them with the program knowledge and relevant research necessary to effectively oversee program activities.
- *Provide individualized staff development opportunities.* Some respondents noted that they establish individualized staff development programs to ensure that program managers receive training tailored to meet their needs.
- *Use program goals.* Respondents noted that due to the breadth of services and programs offered within the out-of-school time field, program staff and managers have typically been involved in a wide range of trainings and program practices. Program administrators found it helpful to use their program standards, goals, or mission to orient managers with different professional backgrounds to program needs.

Staff Support. In addition to highly qualified managers, effective out-of-school time programs have well-trained and well-supported frontline staff. The majority of program managers reported that they avoided a top-down managerial approach in favor of including frontline staff in program decision-making. One respondent reported having an “open-door policy,” in which staff members were encouraged to share problems or concerns with program management. Program administrators also discussed, however, the need to make executive decisions or uphold program goals above individual staff preferences when the two come into conflict. Administrators reported supporting their frontline staff through the following training and professional development offerings:

- Staff orientation;
- On-the-job training;
- Ongoing professional development;
- Individualized staff training plans;
- Staff development allowances to be used by staff for trainings of their choice;
- Staff retreats;
- Regular staff and leadership meetings;
- Staff observations;
- Ongoing mentoring or coaching;
- Technical assistance; and
- Program best practices and youth development models.

Administrators also reported that they supported frontline staff by:

- Providing email or telephone updates on new program policies;
- Eliciting feedback from frontline staff on program implementation procedures during staff meetings and retreats;
- Conducting sporadic conference calls with all program implementers to discuss program successes and problems; and
- Providing technical assistance through site visits, provided materials, and/or coaching.

Organizational Climate and Culture. Creating a positive organizational climate and culture is critical to effective program implementation and its related outcomes (McLaughlin, 2000). Organizational climate and culture refer to program norms and values as well as how program procedures are implemented (Glisson, 2008). While the majority of program administrators reported positive interactions between program managers and frontline staff, approaches taken by administrators to foster a positive program climate and culture differed. Program directors and senior staff reported using the following strategies:

- Ensuring that new hires speak with a variety of program staff during their orientation in order to acclimate them to the program culture;
- Instilling program values in new staff members during orientation activities, enabling them to incorporate the program’s mission into their daily work from day one;
- Undertaking frontline staff roles when necessary to alleviate staff stress and demonstrate a commitment to the program’s collaborative work environment; and
- Cultivating a relationship-driven environment by supporting staff camaraderie and eliciting staff feedback during regular staff meetings.

Challenges to Effective Program Implementation. Respondents noted several challenges related to program management and administration in facilitating the implementation of evidence-based practices:

- *Conflicts among staff members.* Respondents noted differences of opinion among staff on program interventions and approaches, resulting in the inconsistent implementation of certain program practices. For example, one respondent reported that staff members had differing opinions on the behavior management system in place for program participants, resulting in inconsistent practices among staff.
- *Manager/supervisor qualifications.* Respondents noted that applicants for management positions did not always possess the skills necessary to effectively implement program components. For example, respondents mentioned that applicants sometimes possessed management training and relevant degrees but lacked experience with the program’s target population or with translating academic knowledge to the out-of-school time field.
- *Management of multiple responsibilities.* One respondent discussed the difficulty of serving high numbers of participants and maintaining contact with families, participant mentors, and school partners. Another respondent noted the challenge of effectively supporting frontline staff while at the same time overseeing program funding.

Suggested Improvement Strategies. Respondents discussed strategies that their respective programs have used to overcome challenges related to effective program implementation:

- *Include “the ability to relate to program participants and colleagues” among staff selection criteria.* Respondents reported several methods for ensuring that staff were appropriately selected for program positions, including:
 - Conducting thoughtful analyses around the ability of potential staff members to accomplish program tasks;
 - Selecting staff members who already have experience with the program’s target population (e.g., who have experience working with the age group that the program targets and with the cultural backgrounds of program participants); and
 - Offering training opportunities that supplement experience.
- *Introduce new hires to existing program staff.* Respondents reported creating collaborative work projects for new hires to interact with multiple existing staff members and become acclimated to the program culture.
- *Create individualized staff development plans and opportunities for professional development.* Respondents reported offering regular training opportunities to develop or hone staff skills. For example, respondents mentioned:
 - Referring particular staff to specific distance learning master’s degree programs or specific trainings for staff improvement;
 - Providing staff development allowances for staff members to pursue individualized training relevant to their job descriptions;
 - Coaching staff members before, during, and after challenging situations;

- Soliciting feedback from training sessions to maximize the usefulness of future trainings.
- *Collaborate with program evaluators.* Some respondents noted establishing close relationships with program evaluators in order to monitor program progress and identify areas for program improvement. For example, one respondent reported using the program evaluation team to conduct weekly phone calls with program mentors in order to monitor mentor-participant relationships. The program established a mentor interview protocol to ensure consistency in data collection, and mentors needing additional support were identified.
- *Build strong staff relationships.* Respondents noted the importance of building positive relationships between program managers and frontline staff. For example, one respondent reported organizing a welcoming staff orientation, during which both trainers and the program developer were easily accessible to staff trainees. Respondents also reported eliciting staff input in program decisions, recognizing staff contributions, and encouraging staff members, regardless of job title, to assist in tasks.

Lessons Learned in Program Implementation. Program directors reported learning the following lessons in implementing innovative evidence-based program models:

- Strive to prevent administrative tasks from interfering with frontline staff’s program responsibilities. Respondents reported minimizing the administrative tasks assigned to frontline staff by reserving staff positions for evaluative and administrative work or by enlisting a community partner to handle administrative responsibilities.
- Include “the ability to relate to program participants and colleagues” among staff selection criteria.
- Maintain positive, ongoing relationships between program management and frontline staff, enabling open communication and a positive program climate overall.
- Continue to support staff after program orientation and initial training activities. One respondent stressed the importance of clearly conveying to staff what post-orientation and training resources are available.
- Use research-based models and best practices for out-of-school time programs.

Systems-Level Partnerships

A systems-level partnership, as defined by Fixsen et al. (2005), is a relationship between an organization and another organization, individual, or group. Systems-level partnerships can impact programs at all levels—frontline, organizational, and systems-level—and are often established to ensure the availability of the financial, organizational, and human resources necessary to support the work of frontline staff (Ibid).

In a review of the implementation literature, Bandy et al. (2008) found that systems-level partnerships are consistently found to be a feature of high-performing out-of-school time programs and can facilitate all stages of program implementation. Interview findings related to systems-level partnerships are divided into the following two sections: 1) the nature of program partnerships and 2) the ways program partnerships support or sustain program implementation. Challenges, suggested improvement strategies, and lessons learned in maintaining program partnerships are also discussed.

The Nature of Community Partnerships. All program directors interviewed reported that their program had at least one community partnership. The level of influence which these partnerships had on program implementation varied among respondents. Below are descriptions of the types of partnerships discussed by respondents:

- *Referral Partnerships.* Programs partnered with referral agencies or other organizations to obtain or recruit program participants. For example, one program received office space from an organizational partner (YMCA) in exchange for including the organization's youth in its program activities.
- *Training Partnerships.* Program directors reported collaborating with outside organizations in order to obtain additional training for their staff, provide training to another organization's staff, or participate in cross-training opportunities in which their staff both provided and received training.
- *Funding or Resource Partnerships.* Programs reported the effectiveness of partnerships in providing additional funding (e.g., grant money) and resources (e.g., office space, internship opportunities for program participants) as well as facilitating the establishment of relationships with community leaders who could later advocate on behalf of program interests.

Programs reported partnering with the local health department, colleges and universities, school districts or specific schools, the juvenile justice system, and national and international organizations with missions similar to their own.

The Ways Community Partnerships Support or Sustain Program Implementation. The majority of respondents indicated that community partnerships were influential in assisting frontline staff to successfully implement evidenced-based programs. In fact, all program directors, with the exception of one, reported that community partnerships helped support or sustain their program implementation in the following ways:

- Contributing to program funding;
- Offering specialized program instruction (e.g., health professionals providing reproductive health instruction or business professionals teaching entrepreneurship);
- Conducting administrative work so program staff were able to focus on frontline activities;
- Providing access to potential staff applicants;
- Expanding program partnerships, visibility, and influence;
- Broadening program perspectives by bringing a variety of outlooks and experiences to the table; and
- Assisting in the identification of program needs.

Challenges to Effective Program Implementation. Program staff identified the following factors as challenges to forming effective community partnerships:

- Sufficient time and staff to ensure that partnerships run smoothly;
- Staff turnover;
- Partners with conflicting interests (e.g., different perspectives, priorities, or perceptions about the program population);
- Partners with varying levels of commitment or ability (e.g., their organizational climate, leadership, funding, or priorities impede effective collaboration).

Suggested Improvement Strategies. In order to address these challenges, program directors reported:

- Hiring additional staff members and/or allocating additional time for staff to monitor partnerships;
- Having intentional, focused dialogues with potential partners to determine partnership logistics (i.e., how partners will collaborate and handle obstacles);
- Stressing the common purpose that the partners are working toward;

- Building trust among partners by establishing ground rules and identifying the purpose of the partnership;
- Discussing the infrastructure and resources necessary for program implementation with potential partners; and
- Acquiring partner input by holding regular meetings of a community advisory council to address challenges.

Lessons Learned in Maintaining Program Partnerships. Program directors reported learning the following lessons related to community partnerships:

- Ensure that partnerships are mutually beneficial to all parties involved.
- Maintain transparency around the benefits the program is receiving and offering to a partnership.
- Prepare to oversee partnerships to ensure that program integrity is not compromised.
- Welcome partner insight and creativity.
- Make no assumptions on partner perspectives or intentions; instead, keep lines of communication open.
- Elicit and use partner input so partners feel that their contributions are valued and that their organizational identity is preserved.

Decision-Support Data Systems: Program Evaluation and Staff Assessments

A decision-support data system is a management and program support tool that provides evaluation data on service delivery, participant outcomes, staff assessments, and program fidelity (Bandy et al., 2008). Decision-support data systems are used to evaluate program implementation and outcomes, assist with staff assessments, and support effective implementation throughout a program's duration (Fixsen et al., 2005; Little, 1970). Specifically, data-driven support systems can be used to monitor participant progress (e.g., grades, attendance), set and track participant and staff goals, and assess and address program needs.

A review of the implementation literature (Bandy et al., 2008) found that out-of-school time programs use decision-support data systems to evaluate program quality and implementation fidelity as well as to assess participant outcomes and staff performance. Interview findings related to decision-support data systems are reported in the following three sections: 1) the role of program evaluation in effective implementation of evidence-based and promising practices, 2) the process of assessing staff performance, and 3) the ways evaluation data are used to inform program decisions and improvement. Challenges, suggested improvement strategies, and lessons learned in administering program evaluations are also discussed.

The Role of Program Evaluation. Interview findings indicate that program evaluation is a critical prerequisite to program improvement and, ultimately, to successful program implementation. Multiple programs reported using a management information system (MIS) in order to collect program data. In addition to collecting their own evaluation data, several out-of-school time programs used independent evaluators to conduct the following evaluation activities:

- Program outcome assessments, using pre/post or retro/post surveys completed by program participants;
- Participant focus groups to glean child and youth insights into their program preferences as well as the strengths and weaknesses of various program approaches;
- Participant progress monitoring, including participant grades, school attendance, and standardized test performance;
- Program quality evaluation, using assessment tools such as the High School Youth Quality Assessment Tool;

- Participant assessments, using periodic quizzes to identify participant knowledge and inform staff instruction; and
- Parent surveys to gather parent insight on program effectiveness and needs.

The Process of Assessing Staff Performance. Equally important to assessing program participant outcomes is assessing staff performance. In pursuit of this, program managers reported working with staff to set measurable goals, periodically assessing progress toward goal achievement, and providing ongoing feedback in order to discuss progress toward performance goals.

- *Setting measurable goals.* Program managers discussed the importance of having staff set specific, measurable goals (a.k.a. “critical objectives” or “stretch goals”). They noted that these goals may be created independently or with a program manager. Goals are based on the staff member’s job description as well as overall program goals. One program director mentioned the importance of establishing goals that are reflective of high expectations for all staff members.
- *Assessing goal achievement.* Program managers reported periodically assessing the extent to which staff members achieved their pre-established goals. Staff progress is evaluated using field observations of staff program implementation as well as related end products (e.g., managers may consider the number of program recruits in relation to the staff member’s recruitment goal).
- *Providing ongoing feedback.* Managers noted that they meet with staff in order to review progress toward their performance goals. One program manager mentioned that, in addition to monitoring staff goal achievement, staff are also measured on specific quality indicators (e.g., the quality of staff interactions with youth and colleagues). Managers often complete a written evaluation of staff performance, which is used to guide performance review discussions. Most respondents reported conducting a formal staff performance review once a year as well as conducting ongoing informal evaluations and coaching.

The Ways Data are Used to Drive Program Decisions and Improvement. All respondents reported using program evaluation and staff assessments to drive decisions around program improvements. Program evaluations and staff assessments enable programs to identify:

- Staff members requiring additional support and the types of supports needed;
- Adjustments that need to be made to staff training content;
- How best to allocate program funding;
- The effectiveness of specific program components; and
- Which research-based program models would be most beneficial to continued program improvement.

Challenges to Data Collection and Program Evaluation. Program staff identified the following challenges in collecting data for a decision-support data system and using it to inform program evaluation:

- Investing the time required to conduct program evaluations and assessments;
- Interpreting evaluation data;
- Collecting data consistently from staff (e.g., ensuring that every data collector collects the same data, in the same way from each staff member and that the information is valid);
- Training staff members who are unfamiliar with evaluation methods and who lack the skills required to administer assessments;
- Financing follow-up studies of program participants once they have graduated high school;
- Overcoming participant discomfort with staff administering surveys and conducting assessments, especially at the beginning of the program before relationships between staff and participants have been formed; and

- Managing frontline staff who feel micro-managed with respect to the evaluation and assessment process.

Suggested Improvement Strategies. To address these challenges, program administrators reported using the following strategies:

- Allocating program resources, including time, for program evaluation activities before adding additional program initiatives;
- Assessing and reassessing the effectiveness of the program evaluation system and making necessary changes;
- Providing staff trainings on how to properly conduct evaluation activities;
- Vigilantly overseeing all program evaluation activities in order to ensure the efficiency and the quality of the data collection process is high (e.g., supplying pre-addressed envelopes for staff to use when mailing in evaluation surveys);
- Including survey questions to determine whether participants are truthfully responding to pre-test questions, despite their initial comfort level with survey administrators

Lessons Learned in Administering Program Evaluations. Program staff reported learning the following lessons related to conducting program evaluations and staff assessments:

- Conduct program evaluations and staff assessments, despite the challenges, because they can provide insights into program implementation and suggest necessary improvements.
- Ensure that sufficient time and resources are allocated to program evaluation activities.
- Know that program evaluations and staff assessments require specialized knowledge to administer.
- Evaluate program activities throughout the program's duration, not just at the close of program activities.
- Communicate program evaluation results to staff and relevant program constituents (i.e., staff, participants, and other stakeholders) in a timely fashion to maintain staff investment in program activities.
- Elicit and use staff feedback because individuals are more likely to participate in evaluation and assessment activities if they see evidence of their contributions.

Conclusions

The effective implementation of out-of-school time programs is as important as the components of the intervention or program itself. For example, it is possible to implement an ineffective program well, or an effective program poorly. Neither of these approaches would lead to good outcomes for children and youth. Desirable outcomes are more likely to happen when effective interventions are implemented well (Fixen et al., 2005, Metz et al., 2007).

Results from this study support what has been found in the limited implementation research conducted in the out-of-school time field. Specifically, program directors noted that facilitative administrators provide ongoing support to frontline staff and create a positive organizational culture and climate that positively effects program implementation and its related outcomes. Additionally, facilitative administrators build systems-level partnerships in order to boost program referrals, provide additional staff trainings, and fund program activities. Finally, ongoing program evaluation and staff assessments are critical to program improvement and, ultimately, successful program implementation. Collecting and organizing program data, as in a decision-support data system, requires an investment of program resources but is ultimately worth it.

Findings from these interviews, and a review of the implementation literature (Bandy et al., 2008), underscore the importance of organizational practices and external influences in the

implementation of evidence-based program models. Program directors reported that facilitative administrators, systems-level partnerships, and data-driven decision making contribute to the successful implementation of out-of-school time programs.

The correspondence between the meager research literature and reports from out-of-school time programs delivering rigorously evaluated programs is encouraging. It suggests that we do know something about how to manage frontline staff, create productive partnerships with outside organizations, and use evaluative data to drive decision making. However, there is much more to learn. For example, what management strategies most effectively support the implementation of evidence based practices? How can programs most efficiently and effectively identify and vet potential partners? How can programs fund ongoing program assessment? What decision-support data systems are most appropriate for out-of-school time programs? Future research on the issues that have emerged from this exploratory study is critical for the field to learn more about how evidence-based programs can be implemented and replicated successfully.

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