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Publication #2009-33

June 2009

BUILDING SYSTEMS-LEVEL PARTNERSHIPS

Part 5 in a Series on Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in Out-of-School Time Programs: The Role of Organization-Level Activities

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BACKGROUND

As out-of-school time programs become larger and more complex, they are collaborating more and more with outside individuals, groups, and organizations—in other words, with systems-level partners.¹ Partnerships among out-of-school time programs, schools, and the community have been recognized as a feature of high-performing programs.² In addition, systems-level partnerships can play critical roles when programs decide to implement new evidence-based practices or activities.

In an effort to expand what is known about systems-level partnerships, Child Trends recently conducted a review of research on this topic. Child Trends also collected data on systems-level partnerships as part of a study on the role of organization- or management-level activities in the effective implementation of out-of-school time programs.¹ This brief presents findings from that study and the review of research and links these findings to effective strategies for building systems-level partnerships in out-of-school time programs.

WHAT ARE SYSTEMS-LEVEL PARTNERSHIPS?

Systems-level partnerships refer to formal or informal relationships between an out-of-school time program and another organization, group, or individual. Systems-level partnerships can help to ensure that an out-of-school time program has the financial, organizational, and human resources it needs to support the work of practitioners and the program as a whole.³ For example, program directors of effective out-of-school time programs interviewed by Child Trends' staff reported partnering with community leaders, who advocated on their behalf to obtain resources such as grant money and rent-free office space.⁴

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¹ For this study, Child Trends' researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine program directors of evidence-based out-of-school time programs (that is, programs that have been experimentally evaluated and demonstrated positive outcomes). Child Trends also held a Roundtable with program staff from eight additional evidence-based out-of-school time programs. The purpose of the interviews and Roundtable was to gather information to better understand how facilitative administrations, systems-level partnerships, and decision-support data systems can help bring about the successful implementation of evidence-based, promising, and innovative program models in the out-of-school time field.

Systems-level partnerships have been identified as one of six core implementation components—or *implementation drivers*—necessary for helping practitioners implement evidence-based and innovative services effectively. These core components include:⁵

- Staff selection and recruitment
- Pre-service and in-service training
- Coaching, mentoring, and supervision
- Facilitative administration
- Systems-level partnerships
- Decision-support data systems

This brief focuses on the fifth driver: *systems-level partnerships*.

WHY ARE SYSTEMS-LEVEL PARTNERSHIPS IMPORTANT FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

Out-of-school time programs can derive numerous benefits from systems-level partnerships. Evidence from the available research and from a recent Child Trends study on effective implementation strategies has found that systems-level partnerships are a feature of many high-performing programs and that these partnerships can assist programs as they implement evidence-based practices. It is important to note, however, that only a limited amount of rigorous research on systems-level partnerships is available within the out-of-school time field. Additional research is needed to determine best practices for identifying and building relationships with systems-level partners.

Systems-Level Partnerships Are a Feature of High-Performing Programs

- **Partnerships between out-of-school time programs and schools are a feature of many high-performing programs and may positively affect student outcomes.** One study found that out-of-school time programs that forged partnerships with schools had several advantages over programs that did not. In particular, the programs with school partners were better able to leverage physical resources, such as rent-free space or supplies; financial resources, such as donations or other funding opportunities; social resources, such as established relationships with difficult-to-recruit, high-risk teens; and intellectual resources, such as grant-writing expertise or mentoring experience.^{6,7} Another study found that out-of-school time programs connected to schools tended to score higher in staff engagement, engaging/challenging activities, and high-quality homework time. 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.⁸ One program director reported partnering with local schools to access student data, such as tardiness, suspension, and report card grades in order to monitor student progress and collect information to share with parents.⁹ Additionally, when asked to name the organization with which they would partner to create “the perfect community partnership,” one answer frequently given by directors of high-quality programs was “schools and school districts.”¹⁰
- **Partnerships between out-of-school time programs and community organizations are a feature of many high-performing programs.** One study found that high-quality out-of-school time programs tended to have strong partnerships with neighborhood and community organizations.¹¹ Directors of high-performing out-of-school time programs interviewed by Child Trends staff all reported having at least one, if not multiple, formal community partners.¹² Some out-of-school time programs recruit program participants by partnering with organizations or local systems that work with the same target population, for example, partnering with the local police department in order to recruit high-risk youth.¹³ Other programs partner with local colleges and universities to recruit qualified program staff or with members of the local health and business communities as a way to augment program services. For example, through a partnership with the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center (AHC) in New York, one program was able to offer its participants wellness and long-term mental health care.¹⁴

Systems-Level Partnerships Can Help Programs Implement Evidence-Based Practices

Systems-level partnerships can assist programs in a variety of ways as they work through the process of implementing an evidence-based practice or program. Implementation activities that may benefit from systems-level partnerships include deciding which evidence-based program or practice to implement; training staff members to implement a program or practice effectively; and obtaining funding to promote program sustainability.

- **Systems-level partnerships can assist programs as they decide which evidence-based practice or program to replicate or adopt.** Programs sometimes require outside assistance as they identify and prioritize program needs and participant outcomes, explore “what works” in the out-of-school time field, and contact consultants with expertise in a specific intervention. In one Child Trends interview, the director of an out-of-school time program that helps young people find jobs in their community reported that partnering with community employers provided insights into what they were looking for in an employee. In turn, the program drew on these insights to inform its services.¹⁵ The experience of the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, which promotes youth and family centers in the city’s schools, provides another example. The program partnered with the Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD), an intermediary, which, in turn, worked with principals, youth, and families to identify and prioritize outcomes and develop the program’s theory of change.¹⁶
- **Systems-level partnerships can provide staff training opportunities.** Staff training (both pre-service and in-service) constitutes one of the six core implementation components mentioned above, and an earlier brief in this series presented research on the importance of staff training for out-of-school time programs.¹⁷ Evidence supports a connection between systems-level partnerships and the ability of some out-of-school time programs to improve staff training.¹⁸ For example, staff members of New York City Beacons, a school-community-family initiative, were able to attend workshops and training sessions on how to support academic and enrichment activities because of the program’s partnership with the Youth Development Institute (YDI), an intermediary organization.¹⁹ In the Child Trends interviews, program directors of evidence-based out-of-school time programs also spoke of collaborating with outside organizations to obtain additional training for their staffs.²⁰ As an illustration, one program director reported “cross-training” his staff with another out-of-school time program, in which each program’s staff members provided training in their own areas of expertise.
- **Systems-level partnerships are often critical when it comes to finding financial support and promoting sustainability.** Although, over the years, federal investment in out-of-school time programs has increased, funding continues to be a barrier to program sustainability.^{21,22} In a recent profile of 32 out-of-school time programs that successfully sustained themselves through varied funding strategies, several of the strategies reviewed required systems-level partners.²³ One funding strategy, for example, involved building a base of community support and gradually increasing program visibility through the creation of task forces, advisory committees, and other collaborative structures. Indeed, program directors interviewed by Child Trends staff reported that systems-level partnerships contributed to their program’s sustainability by providing direct financial and in-kind contributions, as well as by expanding the program’s visibility and influence.²⁴

WHAT STEPS CAN PROGRAMS TAKE TO BUILD SYSTEMS-LEVEL PARTNERSHIPS EFFECTIVELY?

Given the wide range of potential roles that system-level partnerships play throughout program implementation, it is to be expected that out-of-school time programs can build targeted systems-level partnerships through a variety of strategies. On the basis of available research evidence and the Child Trends study on effective implementation strategies, we recommend the following strategies to support the use of systems-level partnerships as an implementation driver.

- **Look to schools and the community.** Partnerships among out-of-school time programs, schools, and community groups are consistently found to be features of high-performing programs. Such partnerships can provide valuable resources.
- **Seek out partners that can contribute to program sustainability.** Because it can take time to develop a strong working relationship, such partnerships should be sought out and forged as soon as possible. Consider the following systems-level sustainability strategies:²⁵
 - 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.
- **Vet all potential partners.** One program director compared selecting program partners to selecting program staff, noting that in both situations she looks for “compassion, commitment, and alignment with the program mission.”²⁶ It is the *quality* of the partnerships and not their *quantity* that is most important. Partnerships that cannot deliver the needed resource, whether it is high-quality staff training or an effective fidelity assessment, may not be worth the time and effort it takes to build a strong relationship. Another program director advised against “lopsided” partnerships that add little value, as well as partnerships that may steer the program away from its mission.²⁷ Programs should consider the following questions when vetting potential program partners:²⁸
 - Are the mission and overall vision of this organization aligned with the program’s mission and vision?
 - What aspect(s) of implementation will this partnership affect?
 - What resources will this partnership bring to implementation efforts?
 - What is the quality of these resources?
 - What outcomes are expected if the partnership is effective?
- **Maintain clear channels of communication throughout the implementation process.** All program partners—whether they are the lead organization in an initiative or are in a consultant role—should maintain clear and regular channels of communication. Although some partnerships are more formal than are others, roles and expectations of all partners should be made clear from the beginning, and changes in expectations should be communicated as soon as possible.

CONCLUSION

Systems-level partnerships are one of six implementation drivers necessary for supporting practitioners’ effective implementation of innovative, evidence-based services. (The others, as noted, are staff selection and recruitment; pre-service and in-service training; coaching, mentoring and supervision; facilitative administration; and decision-support data systems). To achieve optimal results—for out-of school programs, for their staffs, and, ultimately, for the young people served by these programs—attention must be paid to all six of these drivers. More research is needed to determine best practices for identifying and building relationships with systems-level partners. At the same time, it is pertinent to acknowledge that some clear ideas have emerged about effective strategies for working with systems-level partners to implement practices effectively and achieve positive outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING SYSTEMS-LEVEL PARTNERSHIPS

- **Look to schools and community organizations.** Partnerships among out-of-school time programs, schools, and the community are consistently found to be features of high-performing programs. Such partnerships can provide valuable resources.
- **Seek out partners that can contribute to program sustainability.** Partners that contribute to sustainability are essential; because it can take time to develop a strong working relationship, such partnerships should be sought out and forged as soon as possible.
- **Vet all potential partners.** It is the quality of the partnerships and not their quantity that is most important. Partnerships that cannot deliver the needed resource, whether it is high-quality staff training or an effective fidelity assessment, may not be worth the time and effort it takes to build a strong relationship.
- **Maintain clear channels of communication throughout the implementation process.** All program partners, whether they are the lead organization in an initiative or serve as consultants, should maintain clear and regular channels of communication. Although some partnerships are more formal than are others, roles and expectations of all partners should be made clear from the beginning, and changes in expectations should be communicated as soon as possible.

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PROGRAMS INTERESTED IN BUILDING SYSTEMS-LEVEL PARTNERSHIPS

- **Child Trends**
The Child Trends Web site includes additional briefs on implementing evidence-based practices, as well as briefs on other topics relevant to out-of-school time programs; available at: <http://www.childtrends.org/youthdevelopment>
 - For example, the research brief *Building Community Partnerships: Tips for Out-of-School Time Programs* discusses additional ways in which community involvement can be important for out-of-school time programs and describes how programs can begin to identify valuable community resources and develop strategies for leveraging community support; available at: http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2008_03_12_PI_CommunityPartner.pdf
- **FindYouthInfo.gov**
This new Web site offers tools and resources to help federal agencies, youth service providers, and the youth-serving community build partnerships to support youth. The Web site's tools and resources can help organizations form effective partnerships, assess community assets, understand risk and protective factors, find local and federal resources, and identify evidence-based youth programs; available at: <http://findyouthinfo.gov/>
- **The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)**
Researchers at NIRN are responsible for developing the framework on which this brief is based (that is, the six core implementation drivers, one of which is systems-level partnerships). Those interested in more details about the framework will want to read *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*; available at: <http://nirn.fmhi.usf.edu/>

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SUPPORTED BY: The Atlantic Philanthropies
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