



City Spotlight

SAN FRANCISCO'S BEACON INITIATIVE

The San Francisco Beacon Initiative has built its "accountability" system using a theory of change approach. With input from a wide variety of stakeholders, the Beacon Initiative constructed a road map for the project that articulates how its long term goals can be achieved through meeting key early and intermediate outcomes. To keep the project on track, the Beacon Initiative expects players at systems, intermediary and community levels to be held "accountable" for specific accomplishments within specified timeframes. This multi-tiered accountability model is based on the belief that the Beacon Initiative's success is contingent on change at all levels.

Accountability at the Systems' Level
While systems change is often difficult to measure, the Beacon Initiative has made it a priority to articulate those specific accomplishments believed to be pivotal to achieving broader goals. For instance, one early outcome identified for systems level partners was to help negotiate a preliminary, city-wide agreement between Beacon centers and their public school hosts. Another was the creation of unified reporting requirements by the city, 12 private funders, and the school district. This has allowed sites to avoid having to comply with differing forms, and requirements, thereby preserving resources for other initiative activities.

Site Level Accountability: Web-based MIS System

One of the unique features of the Beacon accountability model is its creation of a web-based MIS system that is used to collect program usage data from sites on a continuous basis. The type of data collected within this system was designed to match the initiatives' definition of "What it means to be a Beacon." Information on attendance, activity offerings and participation, hours of operation, room usage, and other items is collected through this system, which requires a full-time person at each site to maintain. This detailed documentation of site activity is believed to be critical to articulating the Beacon model for further dissemination and adaptation.

Contact Information:

Sam Piha, Managing Director
Community Network for Youth Development
Tel: 415-495-0622
Email: sam@cnyd.org

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Issue 1: Focus on Accountability

After School Issues

Measuring What Matters

Meeting the high-stakes accountability challenge on our own terms

Increasingly, leaders of large after-school initiatives are being held accountable for the results of their efforts. How is the expenditure of unprecedented sums of public and private money benefiting children, youth and families? Are projects delivering the outcomes they promised? Measuring the impact of initiatives that operate within complex and often daunting social conditions, however, is not easy. As expectations mount for projects to demonstrate results leaders must learn to master a balancing act that satisfies the public's desire for immediate benefits with the need to find authentic and effective ways to measure, track, and report on their efforts.

Accountability Focused on Results: Possibilities & Pitfalls

In the past two decades, the term accountability has undergone an evolution. Our society has moved away from a system that measures the value of programs by monitoring expenditures and activities, to one which emphasizes proven results. These days, the important question is not what have you done, but rather, what difference did it make? For

many initiatives, being able to show a documented impact is critically linked to financial survival, and, therefore, has become a subject of great urgency.

Initiatives using results as the focus of their accountability system must articulate their expected outcomes and use performance benchmarks and indicators to measure their progress. While this new approach brings with it a number of advantages, the shift to results-based accountability also brings challenges.

Potential Benefits, include:

- After-school initiatives that are more intentional, focused and effective.
- Increased public confidence in the efficacy of out-of-school time initiatives and programs.
- Increased recognition of the valuable role played by after-school intermediary organizations, and of the true cost of achieving desired outcomes at both site and systems levels.
- Fewer rules and regulations, thereby giving projects more local control



City Spotlight

BOSTON'S OUTCOMES MEASUREMENT PILOT PROJECT

In Boston, Mayor Menino's 2:00-to-6:00 After-School Initiative, in partnership with the United Way of Massachusetts Bay, has just launched a pilot project to measure outcomes and, ultimately, build an accountability structure based on program perspectives.

A Focus on Children and Youth

A direct outgrowth of the May, 2000, Mayor's Task Force Report, "Schools Alone are Not Enough" the Outcomes Measurement Pilot Project aims to help five sites better define their goals for children and become more intentional and effective in their approach. Through providing needed resources and consulting assistance, the Outcomes Pilot Project plans to help programs identify expected outcomes in five developmental areas, then track their progress in meeting the individual needs of children. By building their internal capacity to document and measure improvement, it is hoped that programs will be able to improve their practice as well as to articulate the impact of their work on the lives of children and youth.

Building an Accountability Structure from the Bottom Up

Based on the experiences of the five programs involved in the pilot, the Outcomes Measurement Pilot Project hopes to identify a set of expected outcomes for children and youth that is common to a wide variety of programs. This information could then be used to build consensus around suitable indicators of success.

The 2:00-to-6:00 Initiative and the United Way believe this project will contribute to an increased understanding of which outcomes can be appropriately and feasibly attributed to out-of-school time programs as well as an increased recognition of the level of resources needed if programs are to achieve these positive outcomes for children.

Contact Information:

Marinell Yoders, Senior Program Manager
Boston 2:00-to-6:00 Initiative
Tel: 617-635-2098
Email: Marinell.Yoders@ci.Boston.ma.us

Don Buchholtz
Sr. Dir. of Community Investments
United Way of Massachusetts Bay
Tel: 617-624-8121
Email: dbuchholtz@uwmb.org

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and the opportunity to become more innovative, collaborative, and flexible.

Potential Risks, include:

- Initiatives and programs may be drawn towards activities that yield immediate successes and away from complex problems and difficult cases.
- Reduced procedural protections may result in discrimination, fraud, or poor service.
- If expectations for desired outcomes are not realistic, and, therefore, are not achieved, a negative public image and reduced financial support could result.

(HFRP, 1998; Schorr, 1997; C. Weiss, 1998)

Measuring What Matters

Amidst the flurry of political attention and unprecedented allocation of dollars, the out-of-school time field faces both opportunities and risks. How can after-school initiatives sustain public hopes for their projects when, as Ken Wing (2000) asserts, "Many worthy results take a lot longer to accomplish than the attention span of most stakeholders?" Will initiatives succeed if they attempt to answer to stakeholders' expectations—or will they end up falling short and ultimately jeopardizing the current wave of public support?

So much of the accountability challenge is wrapped up in what gets measured. Which data genuinely

reflect what initiatives are doing—and how well they're doing it? Which benchmarks are likely to reveal progress, and which are likely to disappoint? Which outcomes are realistic and appropriate to the scope of the project? How can projects find indicators that satisfy a wide range of audiences and provide information that stakeholders will value and understand? How do initiatives balance public demands for immediate, quantifiable results with the desire of practitioners for individualized, qualitative feedback to guide improvements?

Perhaps part of the answer lies in shaping public expectations to more closely and authentically align with what projects are actually trying to achieve. After-school initiatives should communicate the distinction between the specific outcomes that can and should be linked to their efforts and the broader societal benefits towards which they may play a positive and influential role but for which they should not be held exclusively accountable. Finding ways to accurately track progress and communicate the value of contributions made by out-of-school time programs may require a substantial investment of time and resources, but it will be well worth the effort if it ensures that initiatives are held accountable for what matters.

— *Wendy Boynton Surr,
NIOST Associate*



Thoughts on Accountability

"Accountability is not reserved for the community-level stakeholders. Systems' level people have to be accountable too. It's not about writing a check and passing along the responsibility to the community."

—Sam Piha, San Francisco Beacon Initiative, San Francisco, CA

"It's a challenge to meet their expectations. But it's an even greater challenge to have the courage to go beyond what they want to hear, to what they need to hear."

—Billie Young, Project Lift-Off, Seattle, WA

"It's very difficult to get people to agree on what is valuable and what's worth knowing. The biggest lesson we've learned is that "no one size fits all."

—Connie Spinner, Children and Youth Investment Corp., Washington, DC

"In Baltimore, we believe that when organizations are held accountable for their own improvement, the system needs to be program-driven. They need to use standards to assess where they are, where they want to grow, and what they need to do to get there."

—Jackie Schroeder, Family League of Baltimore City, Baltimore, MD

"Traditionally...accountability has been limited to inputs-what was bought and how wisely the money was spent. This "audit" mentality may have ensured that the ledger books were in order, but it provided little information about whether programs had their intended impact."

—Karen Horsch, Harvard Family Research Project, Cambridge, MA

"The out-of-school landscape in Boston is diverse. There are so many different types of programs serving different age groups. The question is; How do we use that diversity as a strength? How can we build consensus and ultimately, an accountability structure, which focuses on kids?"

—Marinell Yoders, 2:00-to-6:00 After-School Initiative, Boston, MA

"...the shift to results-based accountability must be made carefully and thoughtfully...it must be led by those who care about both the process and the results, and not left to those who find it easy because they don't understand the issues."

—Lisbeth Schorr (1995)

Some Ways to Improve Your Accountability System...

- 1 Begin with a strategic plan that identifies key early, intermediate and long-term outcomes.
 - 2 Select a small number of measurable outcomes that you are confident will demonstrate impact within a reasonable time frame.
 - 3 Select indicators that are relatively easy to measure and most relevant to the primary purpose and stage of your efforts.
 - 4 Select indicators that are considered important and meaningful by the widest range of stakeholders: policy makers, funders, front-line practitioners, administrators, and citizens. They should be persuasive to skeptics as well as to supporters.
 - 5 Plan to collect some data documenting activities and processes, to increase your ability to report on progress
 - 6 and be able to explain unexpected positive and negative outcomes down the road.
- (HFRP, 1998; O'Donnell & Galinsky, 1998; Schorr, 1995 & 1997; United Way of America, 1999)



City Spotlight

BALTIMORE'S OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME STRATEGY

In the past year, the Safe and Sound Campaign has spearheaded an ambitious new initiative designed to expand and improve out-of-school time programs for children and youth throughout the city of Baltimore. With 7 million dollars in funding to oversee at 96 sites during the first year, Baltimore's new Out-of-School Time Strategy has made accountability a priority.

Building a Responsive Accountability System

Partnering with the Family League of Baltimore City, the OST Strategy Team has worked to design an accountability system that involves and reflects the community.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE SYSTEM INCLUDE:

Quality Standards: The NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care were modified with input from the community to reflect both programming for adolescents and the range and types of Baltimore programs.

Individual Improvement Plans: Each program was asked to conduct a self-assessment and to articulate the steps and resources needed to meet the Standards within a three-year period. Programs will be held accountable for implementing these plans.

Management Information System: A user-friendly data collection system was created to aid programs in tracking and reporting enrollment, attendance, program offerings and participation data.

Site Visits: Contract Managers visit sites to observe practitioners and facilities, review records and monitor progress.

Links with Schools to Collect Baseline Data: The OST Strategy Team is working with Baltimore Public Schools to collect information on individual student performance. This data is seen as critical for monitoring progress and demonstrating the impact of the initiative down the road.

Contact Information:

Rebecca Atanau, After-School Strategist
Safe and Sound Campaign
Tel: 410-625-7976
Email: RebeccaA@safeandsound.org

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Additional Resources

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National Institute on Out-of-School Time

Wellesley College
106 Central Street
Wellesley, MA 02481-8203

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The Cross-Cities Network for Leaders of Citywide After-School Initiatives

The Cross-Cities Network is composed of 25 leaders of citywide after-school initiatives in major cities across the United States. The Network brings leaders together on a regular basis to explore common issues and develop personal relationships to sustain their work. The project is staffed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. In addition to bi-annual meetings, NIOST provides staff support for the following Network activities; weekly email updates from members; topical briefs on requested issues; research reports; and a database of initiative members.

For further information,
contact Mary Frederick at 781-283-2547,
or visit our web site at www.nios.org.

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