

Evaluation Spotlight

N.Y. Out-of-School Time Program Shows Sharp Improvement

Enrollment, retention, participation all rise at Beacons project.

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by [Jen Russell](#)

Bottom Line

Studies have repeatedly shown that youth benefit in myriad ways by participating in out-of-school time programs. However, as youth approach the higher-risk teen years, they are less likely to attend such programs, or to attend consistently. Those most in need of the services, opportunities and relationships available through out-of-school time programs tend not to participate at all.

The Youth Development Institute's Beacons Young Adolescent (BYA) Initiative has determined that part of the solution to stemming that attrition lies in examining how programmatic changes intended to help recruit, retain and engage young adolescents are being identified, supported, shared, disseminated and implemented within an initiative.

In their Year 2 evaluation update of BYA, OMG researchers Anita Baker and Elena Tamanas "focused on bringing the voices of youth to answer ... key questions" about their decisions to join and stay connected to Beacons. More than two-thirds of youth who planned to return to a Beacon program said they liked the staff, received help with homework, independently wanted to attend, had friends at Beacons and thought of Beacons as safe places. They also enjoyed being able to do more and different activities as they grew older.

This Year 3 report finds that such positive perceptions by young adolescent Beacon participants are more likely to occur – and thus more likely to improve enrollment and retention rates – when successful program-level strategies are well-documented, well-disseminated, well-supported and encouraged for use.

The report also documents increases in enrollment, retention and participation, over time, for programs receiving such supports.

Background

Beacons are programs based in public schools and community centers that offer a variety of services and out-of-school time activities – including mandatory academic programs. Begun in 1991 by the City of New York, Beacons now operate in six cities: Denver, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, New York, San Francisco and West Palm Beach, Fla. There is no charge to enroll or participate in a Beacon. Youth as young as age 6 may enroll, and there is no upper age limit.

Through a national partnership, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) aids cities nationwide in establishing and strengthening Beacons.

Eighty Beacons are operating in New York City and eight in San Francisco. Beacons generally receive funding through city tax dollars, state child and family services funds and federal community development block grants.

The BYA Initiative is a four-year pilot project that seeks to improve outcomes for youth ages 9 to 14 by improving the quality of 10 Beacon programs in New York City and San Francisco, and by increasing the enrollment, retention and participation of youth at those sites.

YDI, in partnership with the San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI) administers funds and provides incentive grants, technical assistance and training to the 10 BYA sites. YDI refers to itself and SFBI as initiative “intermediaries.” The intermediaries also oversee and coordinate the site-level implementation and evaluation of the initiative, and disseminate information on lessons learned.

BYA objectives include:

- Increasing the knowledge of Beacons as to why some youth participate and why some do not.
- Increasing participation levels of youth and engaging youth who are not participating (identified by Beacons as “hard to reach” youth).
- Strengthening the capacity of intermediaries to improve the quality of Beacon services to young adolescents.

- Applying and disseminating lessons learned.
- Strengthening policies geared toward young adolescents in initiative cities and nationwide.

The 10 BYA Beacons are further classified as either “Documentation Beacons,” which disseminate information about practices they’ve used effectively with target youth, or “Practice Development Beacons,” which test emerging strategies, including practices disseminated by Documentation Beacons.

Of the seven New York City Beacons, four are Documentation Beacons and three are Practice Development Beacons. All three San Francisco sites are Practice Development Beacons.

Methodology

OMG used a wide variety of mostly qualitative data collection methods to assess the documentation, dissemination and programmatic habits of Beacons and their intermediaries, including:

- Reviews of YDI’s monthly summaries of program meetings and trainings, relevant literature and documentation of communications among YDI, New York’s BYA initiative director and SFBI’s director throughout 2008-09.
- On-site visits to Practice Development Beacons in New York that included interviews with directors, key staff members and stakeholders, observations of site operations, and focus groups with youths.
- Phone interviews with SFBI site directors.
- Observations at various meetings and conferences in New York and San Francisco, including a presentation of BYA evaluations to key staff members of the New York Department of Youth and Community Development, which regulates New York programs.
- Analysis of data collected on young adolescent enrollment and attendance at the 10 BYA Beacons.

What They Were Looking For

The evaluation was designed to document and assess programmatic changes at Practice Development Beacons and changes in the recruitment, participation and retention of young adolescents at BYA sites. The evaluation was also designed to document and assess how well YDI and SFBI disseminate and

deliver strategies, how Documentation Beacons inform, and are influenced by, the initiative and how partner organizations in the BYA initiative work together.

What They Found

Most of the BYA Beacons had fully implemented the initiative by Year 3 (2008-09), and substantial programmatic changes had been made since the previous year. There were also significant increases in youth participation.

Programming: All three Practice Development Beacons in New York engaged in outcomes-based planning and introduced new activities and approaches influenced by BYA. Examples included aligning programs internally so activity themes dovetailed with one another; adding “girls only” programming; honoring youths’ requests for specific activities; and limiting activity choices but extending the amount of time spent in activities.

Recruitment and Retention Strategies: One of the New York sites focused recruitment efforts on presentations in host school classrooms, word of mouth and “trial” sessions at the Beacon. Another site created a parent directory and sent regular e-mails regarding activities. Across the 10 sites in the BYA Initiative, 43 percent of the targeted population of 9- to 14- year-olds who enrolled in a Beacon during Year 2 of the evaluation returned for Year 3.

Intermediary Support: Both YDI and SFBI convened BYA sites at regular meetings and offered individualized technical assistance to all Practice Development Beacons.

Dissemination: In January 2009, more than 100 people representing five Beacon cities gathered for the second national conference on engaging young adolescents, and each of the Documentation Beacons provided information about a promising practice.

Attendance: Enrollment increased overall for most BYA Beacons from Year 2 to Year 3 of the evaluation. The total number of participants increased by 18 percent at New York’s Practice Development Beacons and by 12 percent at its Documentation Beacons. In San Francisco, BYA Beacon enrollment was uneven: up 10 percent at one site, down 10 percent at another, and unchanged at the third.

In 2008-09, each of the seven New York’s BYA Beacon sites enrolled more than 200 youths – the number set by the city’s Department of Youth and Community Development as a measure of success. In addition, each participant in New York’s BYA targeted population (youths who were designated at the beginning of

the school year) attended a total average of 236.5 hours in the program year of summer 2008 through spring 2009 – exceeding the 216 hours the department set as a measure of success. Participants in San Francisco BYA Beacons attended a total average of 137.8 hours during the 2008-09 period.

From Year 2 to Year 3 of the evaluation, the average number of participation hours for all youths enrolled for the school year in one of the three New York Practice Development Beacons jumped 86 percent, from 78.6 hours to 146.5 hours. During the same period, participation in the city's Documentation Beacons increased 26 percent, from 132.4 hours to 166.9 hours. The average number of participation hours per youth enrolled in the San Francisco BYA Beacons remained the same during the period.

Program: Youth Development Institute's Beacons Young Adolescent Initiative.

Evaluating Organizations: The OMG Center for Collaborative Learning. (OMG)

Type of Evaluation: This interim report covers the third year of a four-year evaluation. Data collection methodologies included a literature and document review, on-site observations and interviews, phone interviews and on-site participant enrollment and attendance tracking using online databases.

Sample Size: Nearly 5,500 youth ages 9-14 in 10 Beacon partner sites in New York (seven sites) and San Francisco (three sites).

Evaluation Period: June 2008-May 2009.

Cost of Evaluation:\$214,000.

Funded by: Atlantic Philanthropies.

Contact: Anita Baker, project director, OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, (215) 732-2200, anita@omgcenter.org.

Availability: A two-page executive summary of Youth Development Institute's Beacons Young Adolescent Initiative: Evaluation Update, June 2009 is available online at <http://www.omgcenter.org/PDF/BYAReportSpring09ExecSummaryfinalforSF.pdf>.