

EVALUATING AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS: THE PROGRAM EVALUATOR'S MULTIPLE CHALLENGES

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Summary

Programs providing after-school activities have been available for decades, be they organized at the school level such as sports activities or student clubs, or by community agencies such as Boys Clubs, Girls Clubs, and YMCAs. The past decade has witnessed a broad expansion of after-school programs as recognition has grown that how children and youth use their out-of-school time relates to their safety and violence in the community. The Clinton administration accelerated the development of after-school projects in many communities when it established the 21st Century Community Learning Center Program (21st CCLC).

Projects funded through the 21st CCLC program are required to engage in program evaluation. While such a requirement is not new, working with a 21st CCLC project may be challenging for an evaluator since there are a number of issues that may impinge on a project and make the evaluator's role a fluid one.

WestEd evaluators have worked with projects funded under the 21st CCLC program since 1998. To date, our experience includes working with projects operating at over 45 urban schools. We view our role including data collection, analysis, and reporting and supporting projects so they may have positive effects on children and youth.

This paper explores a number of issues that we have found affect what we do as we work with 21st CCLC projects. Projects operate in complex environments and are affected by the contrast between grantsmanship and program implementation, organizational issues, and the differences in perspectives that stakeholders bring to their work. Our experience also indicates that an evaluator may be the primary link between a school and the community agencies participating in a 21st CCLC project. Additionally, the evaluator may be the one party who has had long-term experience working with the project. Together these factors mean that our involvement with a project may extend to helping stakeholders in many important areas including the following: defining the project; role clarification; communications; resource allocation; and securing sustained project funding.

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Programs providing after-school activities have been available for decades, be they organized at the school level such as sports activities or student clubs, or by community agencies such as Boys Clubs, Girls Clubs, and YMCAs. However, the number of after-school programs has increased in that past decade as recognition has grown that how children and youth use their out-of-school time relates to their safety and violence in the community.

The Clinton administration initiated the 21st Century Community Learning Center Program (21st CCLC), which since the program's inception, has grown to serve students in over 7,400 schools in more than 1,400 urban and rural communities. Program evaluation is an important aspect of the 21st CCLC program, as is evident in the emphasis the Department of Education has placed on continuous improvement management for local 21st CCLC projects and the requirement that grantees submit a two-part Annual Report. Additionally, the Department of Education has published two valuable guides related to the 21st CCLC program: *Working for Children and Families: Safe and Smart After-school Programs* (U. S. Department of Education, 2000) and *A Guide to Continuous Improvement Management for 21st Century Community Learning Centers* (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The *Guide to Continuous Improvement Management* offers a model program cycle that links needs assessment, project objectives, activities, outcomes, and evaluation. The model is useful to project planners and managers as it provides valuable guidance on how these elements are linked together in a well-functioning project. Additional information related to program evaluation has been available from the Harvard Family Research Project, which has provided such resources as its paper, *Learning from Logic Models in Out-of-School Time* (no date), and several issues of *The Evaluation Exchange* devoted to out-of-school time programs (2000, 2001, 2003).

WestEd evaluators have been working closely with local 21st CCLC projects since 1998. To date, we have worked with over 45 schools operating in three urban school districts. In our work, we have found there are many instances where after-school programs function differently from the models found in resources available concerning programs dealing with out-of-school time. The models provide very good guides for operating after-school programs. At the same time, it is important for evaluators to

understand what they will find when working with after-school programs because they impact the evaluator's work.

This paper summarizes key issues that we have found affect our work with 21st CCLC grantees. The issues relate to the following areas:

- Developing a project that secures funding may be the primary goal of grant applicants;
- Organizational issues may severely handicap a project; and
- Schools and outside agencies bring different perspectives to their work.

In our discussion, we do not mean to imply that the issues apply to every 21st CCLC grantee. That would be too broad a generalization. Indeed, we have found that there are some schools here some of these issues are not relevant. We do, however, wish to say that evaluators need to be aware of these issues and their implications since they impact evaluators' activities when working with after-school programs.

Grantsmanship Versus Program Implementation

One major tension affecting many of the after-school programs we have worked with relates to the contrast between strategies aimed at securing funding (successful grantsmanship) and operating an effective project. Some school districts assign grant writers to author proposals designed to secure funds for after-school projects. While the resulting proposals are elegant and incorporate critical data about a school including the results from needs assessments, the projects envisioned in the proposals may present idealized pictures of what may be accomplished through the grants and how the projects will operate.

We have found in many instances that even though a project is funded, there may be little teacher/principal interest in the project due to turnover or a change in school focus, and that the collaboration among community agencies that was envisioned in the project proposal may not actually come to pass. Principals welcomed an infusion of funds to support after-school programming, but had only a modest understanding of the proposed project and the demands it would place on school staff members.

When the project began, serious issues arose at some schools as teachers and administrators found the project did not reflect their priorities for the school. This was particularly true when a community agency administered the after-school program. At one school, the principal was only marginally involved with and interested in the after-

school project. The project was operated by a community agency that was responsible for all project activities. The principal chose to focus her time on school activities and left the after-school program operating to its own devices.

At many sites, teachers balked at the project's presence in the school when they realized their classrooms had to be shared with the after-school project. While teachers supported providing programs for their students, they were concerned about the use of classroom space. Programs found it difficult to find teachers who would make their classrooms available to the project because the teachers were concerned about the loss or theft or misplacement of materials. In such situations, the attitudes of principals and teachers did little to foster the kinds of positive ties between the school and after-school programs that are associated with effective after-school projects (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

We have seen after-school programs suffer because there is weak collaboration between a school and the outside agencies that are involved in a project or among those participating community agencies. Poor communication is often the culprit in these situations. Agencies may not receive clear guidance from a project's director or even have trouble establishing service agreements in a timely fashion. Weak collaboration and poor communication lead to children receiving services that are not well connected to their needs or that project's goals.

Organizational Issues

A number of organizational issues may affect after-school projects. These issues, while not unique to after-school projects, still may hinder a project's functioning. Two particular issues that we have noted in our work relate to staff turnover and to the level of support a project receives from its school district.

The 21st CCLC projects we evaluated were funded under the federal program before the No Child Left Behind legislation transferred the program's administration to the state level. Each grant was for a three-year period. The reality of after-school programming is that salaries staff members receive are often low and the work is part-time, with no benefits. The result is that staff turnover is high. Additionally, we found that the district and school-level staff associated with these programs change. As a result, the staff involved with an after-school project may have little historical knowledge about the project, such as why it was established and how it has operated. A new project director who assumes that position after its first year of operations may find that the

funded grant proposal is one of the few sources of information available to guide his/her work.

We have also found that school districts show varying levels of leadership towards after-school projects with the individuals in the district office being an important factor affecting project success. In one district, for example, during the initial years of the federal 21st CCLC program, local projects received little supervision and coordination from the central administration. This lack of supervision over budgets and expenditures problematic meant that there was weak project implementation at some school sites. Tens of thousands of dollars were expended to provide services to between 50 and 100 students although project proposals envisioned significantly higher levels of student participation. Central district leadership would have also been useful since most of the project directors were new to their roles and needed guidance on how to build strong programs.

Fortunately, this situation changed as the district recognized the need for stronger central coordination of its after-school projects and instituted monthly project director meetings that supported projects, improving the quality of project implementation. By the same token, districts need to be sure that they do not institute a level of central coordination that is too controlling and does not allow projects to adapt central policies to school specific needs and realities.

Differences in Perspectives

One final area we have found affects after-school projects is the difference in perspectives that personnel from schools and community agencies bring to their work. School staff approach their work from an education perspective, a model whose elements come from a tradition that focuses on teaching, learning, and assessment. Staff members who work at community agencies often have a somewhat different set of concerns in their work with children. They are more focused on delivering services and related to youth development including the need to feel competent, respected, and that one has some control over one's life.

Both school and community agency personnel focus on and are committed to children and youth. However, there are subtle differences in their general concerns, although some schools are beginning to incorporate a youth development perspective into their work. Quite often, when schools and community agencies work together, they do not recognize the different nuances in their approaches. Thus, while they attempt to work toward what they perceive as similar ends, there is friction in their relationship because

the two parties are focusing on different end results and methods of achieving them. This situation leads to what we have seen in some cases as a “not-so-happy” collaboration between school and community service providers as they provide after-school programs. The tension may be more pronounced when the community agency has primary responsibility for the after-school program. In any case, there is a mismatch between the approaches and ends that the two parties bring to their work, a mismatch that may not be recognized and then bridged.

Implications for the Evaluator’s Work

Working with after-school projects may challenge an evaluator because the project may be in disarray and the perspectives and goals of various stakeholders are varied. We approach our work with projects vitally interested in providing data that will increase both operational effectiveness and project impacts. However, we also see ourselves as project partners who seek to support projects so they may have positive effects on children and youth.

To us, the role of the evaluator working with after-school programs is fluid and dynamic. Since our work involves people from each stakeholder group, we may be the only party in contact with each stakeholder. When this occurs, we function as a bridge that works to build communication between stakeholders. We also look at proposals and project plans to see whether they provide the logic model that links services to proposed activities to actual activities and outcomes. If these are lacking, we work with our clients to develop them. Furthermore, because of turnover at both school sites and the community agencies that provide services through a project, evaluators may find they have the most knowledge of the project based on their previous work with it.

Depending on the circumstances, we provide technical assistance that helps move a project forward. Our focus may be on many different areas as a function of a project’s needs. Our activities may include and of the following:

- Helping stakeholders develop a common vision;
- Needs assessment;
- Project development, planning, and coordination;
- Role clarification;
- Communication;
- Coordinated data systems;

- Developing and maintaining collaborative relationships;
- Resource allocation;
- Linking in-school and after-school activities; and
- Developing plans for sustained funding.

The needed role or roles are added to the information gathering, analyzing, and interpreting that we do as evaluators, processes that unfold both formally and informally as we work with stakeholders.

Since the federal 21st CCLC grants are for three years and there are changes in project and school staffs, we have sometimes found ourselves to be the one of the perhaps few constant factors in the life of a project. We know the project's history and have helped new project staff understand what has happened before they arrived. Those new to a project, be they school or agency personnel, have found such assistance valuable because it helps them understand where a project is and any issues it is confronting. Such information often eases staff transitions and makes it easier for them to plan how to proceed.

Summary

After-school programs are complex entities, born of many forces, operated under a variety of circumstances, and seeking to achieve many outcomes. Such programs offer evaluators a rich environment where they may gather data about project outcomes and operations. However, the complexity and needs of projects may offer evaluators opportunities to support them in a range of ways that use an evaluator's skills in a variety of areas related to operating effectively to achieve positive outcomes for children and youth. This paper has examined many of the realities that after-school projects faced and shown how evaluators may support the projects and help them proceed ahead productively.

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