

Forum Brief

Increasing Capacity and Quality in Afterschool Programs: Lessons Learned from New York City's Beacons

A Forum – Friday, March 12, 2010

Beacons, an afterschool initiative established in New York City (NYC) in 1991, currently operates in six cities nationwide and serves more than 150,000 children, youth, and adults annually. Beacons offers a multitude of services including education, recreation, adult education, arts, and family programming before school, after school, on weekends, and during vacations. In 2006 the Youth Development Institute (YDI), with funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies, engaged in a four-year initiative—the Beacons Young Adolescent Initiative (BYA)—aimed at improving outcomes for young people ages 9-14 by increasing youth participation, engagement, and retention at Beacon sites in NYC and San Francisco (SF) and by improving the quality of the Beacons and the activities they offer. This forum provided an overview of BYA, discussed the initiative's capacity-building strategies and their impact, presented the findings of BYA's recently released 3rd year evaluation report, and identified implications for policy in this area.

Sandra Escamilla, Director of Programs at YDI, began with a brief history of YDI and its mission to promote youth development and build the capacity of organizations such as schools, juvenile justice centers, and community-based organizations (CBOs) to offer high-quality youth services. Escamilla cited YDI's involvement with Beacons since its inception in 1991. She also introduced the BYA initiative implemented in 2006 at ten sites in NYC and SF, highlighting the initiative's goal to increase the engagement, participation, and retention of middle school youth, ages 9-14. The Beacon centers involved in BYA fell into two categories: Practice Development (PD) Beacons and Documentation Beacons. PD Beacons tested new strategies to improve program quality, participation, engagement, and retention; they also received coaching, training, and technical assistance from YDI. Documentation Beacons were designated as such according to the success they had already achieved in one or more areas of participation, engagement, or retention. They served as mentors for PD sites and documented their "Promising Practices" to share with Beacons and other after school programs.

Sarah Zeller-Berkman, Director of Beacon National Strategy at YDI, spoke briefly of the Beacons' establishment in 1991 as part of Mayor Dinkens' Safe Cities Safe Streets program, a violence and drug prevention program that sought to create positive opportunities and activities for youth. Since 1991, Beacons has developed a national presence, operating in NYC, SF, Minneapolis, Denver, and West Palm Beach as well as other cities. Run by community-based organizations, Beacons are, "making public schools a community resource," by offering programs for youth and adults.

Rob Abbot, Program Director for the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, introduced the Cypress Hills/East New York (CHENY) Beacon and discussed the impact of BYA at the site. CHENY currently serves more than 8,000 residents in Cypress Hills/East New York, Brooklyn, a low-income community with a large population of immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America.

CHENY Beacon runs an afterschool program for youth in grades K-11, while its evening and weekend programs are multigenerational, offering a range of programming for youth and adults. During the week, from 3-6 pm, youth in grades K-5 receive homework help and engage in project-based learning, sports, and arts enrichment activities. Through its involvement in BYA, CHENY altered its program for middle school youth, establishing several groups focused on leadership and youth development, and allowed young people to select which group they wanted to join. Youth in grades 6-8 can choose to participate in Heirs 2 the Community, a group that focuses on community exploration, assessment, and service; Intergenerational Services, a group that provides services to senior citizens; or Leaders-in-Training, a group that develops and implements arts and recreation projects for children in lower grades. CHENY also offers a Counselor-in-Training Program that pays volunteers in grades 9-11 a small stipend to assist with the elementary and middle school programs, programs from which most of the Counselor-in-Training volunteers previously graduated.

In the evenings and on weekends, CHENY Beacon offers sports, martial arts, dance, and fitness classes for a variety of age groups; it also provides a drop-in program for youth, ESL courses for adults, and a GED program for young adults and adults. Additionally, CHENY collaborates with and provides space for other community programs such as youth sports leagues and Girl Scouts.

Four years ago, CHENY Beacon began participating in BYA, an experience Abbot described as both positive and productive. Prior to its participation in BYA, CHENY Beacon was already running a number of productive programs. However, CHENY wished to establish better communication and collaboration among these programs, improve the programs to reach a more diverse population, and develop a more clearly articulated ladder of leadership for adolescent participants to pursue. BYA helped CHENY in each of these facets by working with the organization to develop outcomes-based plans, use data more effectively, and improve its approach to supervision. BYA also connected CHENY with a network of other Beacons to establish an exchange of information around successes individual Beacons achieved and challenges they continued to face.

Through its participation in BYA, CHENY successfully increased the diversity of its participants, attracting and retaining more female participants and hard-to-reach youth. It also increased the participation, retention, and engagement of youth ages 9-14 by developing programs that gave youth greater ownership of their own development while simultaneously providing the necessary support services.

Zeller-Berkman continued the discussion by providing a more general explanation of the four major strategies YDI applied to build capacity at BYA Beacons: building city-wide networks, offering on-site support, providing training and learning opportunities, and developing local and national partnerships.

By building city-wide networks of BYA Beacons, YDI facilitated the development of a learning community focused on sharing and discussing various challenges and successes related to the participation, retention, and engagement of adolescents at Beacon sites. To engage in this discussion, practitioners from seven NYC Beacons met monthly to review research, analyze data, and address specific issues such as how to increase family engagement or target hard-to-

reach youth. At meetings, PD Beacons also had the opportunity to pair up with Documentation sites to discuss challenges of implementation and learn about successful programs or practices.

YDI also provided on-site support to BYA Beacons by working with Beacon staff to create multi-level teams of supervisors and staff. Teams worked together to develop outcomes-based plans, to strengthen programming to focus on early adolescent issues, and to build capacity at the supervisory level in order to better support program staff. Throughout this process, YDI worked to ensure all strategies and programs applied at the site were infused with strong youth development principles. YDI also assisted Beacon sites with data analysis and using data to better inform programming. BYA Beacons received support in conducting quality assessments of programs, gathering student and staff input via focus groups, analyzing quantitative data, and continually using data to revise their outcomes-based plans. YDI modeled these practices initially and then trained sites to carry them out on their own.

Additional training and learning opportunities arose at BYA national conferences. These conferences were run by practitioners for practitioners and represented another forum for the discussion and sharing of promising practices in the field. YDI also worked to develop local and national partnerships for BYA Beacons. YDI collaborated with the Neighborhood Family Services Coalition and other advocacy groups to protect Beacons' funding sources, and worked with Beacon sites in NYC to assist them with their own advocacy efforts.

Anita Baker, Evaluator for the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, discussed the multi-year evaluation of BYA that OMG began in spring 2007. The evaluation set out to answer several key questions:

- To what extent did BYA change Beacon programming and structure?
- How effective were the BYA intermediaries in terms of support for individual Beacons and for the Beacons network?
- How and to what extent did enrollment, attendance, and retention change over time?
- How did youth feel about their Beacons experiences?
- How had BYA contributed to participants' engagement and retention?
- Was there evidence of sustained change?

OMG's evaluation collected both qualitative and quantitative data over a period of three years, from 2007-2010. To collect this data, OMG conducted multiple site visits; interviewed Beacon directors, key staff, and BYA intermediaries; held focus groups with youth participants; and analyzed online enrollment and attendance data.

The evaluation produced several key findings and indicated that several of the goals BYA set out to accomplish had been achieved. OMG concluded that YDI had developed important mechanisms for supporting BYA and affecting positive change at BYA Beacon sites, that practice at all 6 PD Beacons had changed to better meet the needs of adolescents ages 9-14, and that as a result enrollment, attendance, and retention had increased. OMG also recognized the successful documentation and dissemination of information regarding promising practices and the potential for sustained change.

OMG found evidence of substantial change in enrollment and participation at all BYA Beacon sites. Changes in programming at PD sites attracted new participants and helped retain participants at higher rates. OMG also detected an increase in the intensity of attendance: Between the first and the second year of the study, the average number of hours participants spent at PD Beacons in New York City nearly doubled. PD Beacons also experienced a sustained increase in attendance from one year to the next. Data showed that returning participants attended more regularly than new participants, and in focus groups youth acknowledged the importance of their attendance and recognized the Beacons' efforts to engage them. Surveys indicated that 91% of youth participants thought the activities were interesting, 79% recognized they were doing things to improve their neighborhoods, and 76% appreciated that they had been able to control how they participated in the program.

Baker concluded that BYA also created the potential for ongoing improvement. The evaluation showed PD Beacons were continuing to try out new programming and adjust existing offerings according to the outcome-based planning approach they learned through BYA. PD Beacons also continued to develop programs that allowed for youth to grow and pursue leadership opportunities. Staff across all Beacons reported improved communication and intentions to continuing collaborating with other Beacons locally and nationally.

Peter Kleinbard, Executive Director of YDI, addressed BYA's implications for policy in the area of after school and youth programs. He called attention to the Beacons' multi-generational appeal and their success in creating opportunities for young people and adults to work together to support one another and improve their communities. Pointing out that adolescence is a time of both possibility and vulnerability for youth, Kleinbard noted the potential for afterschool programs to provide additional supports to young people at this age. He cited the need to garner more support for afterschool programs at the school-system level and the need to prioritize funding local organizations like Beacons that are multi-generational, thus providing youth with social capital from adult participants, and that provide youth with the opportunity to contribute to their community, build skills, and exercise their voice. Kleinbard emphasized the need to create additional incentives for programs targeting hard-to-reach youth and suggested increasing funding for high-quality afterschool programs in order to cover the costs of hiring, training, and retaining strong program staff and supervisors. Finally, he discussed the need to create systems for collecting data and information in order to assess program performance and acknowledged the critical work of advocacy groups such as the Neighborhood Family Services Coalition, arguing that ongoing support for advocacy was essential to the success of programs like Beacons.

Question and Answer Period

Several questions arose regarding funding for Beacons. Kleinbard indicated that Beacons was the largest municipally funded afterschool program in NYC at the time it was established. Zeller-Berkman listed funding sources such as the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant. Abbot added that additional funding came from the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development and from the New York State Advantage After School Program.

Another question probed the short- and long-term effects of Beacon participation on students—whether it led to academic improvement or higher graduation rates. While the OMG evaluation did not address this issue, Kleinbard mentioned another study underway by Policy Studies Associates that was looking at Beacon participation and its relationship to school attendance and performance. Additionally, it was noted that while students’ school performance is critical and worth evaluating, the BYA’s purpose is to build program capacity and quality, two areas that are too often overlooked in policy discussions around the role of CBOs.

In response to questions about Beacons’ staff profile and its recruitment of volunteers, Abbot described the staff profile of CHENY Beacon—six full-time staff members and an additional 30-35 part-time staff working in afterschool programs—and the standard process for engaging and screening volunteers. Abbot also spoke about how BYA affected staff configurations at CHENY, and that specific staff now worked consistently with specific age groups. BYA also helped CHENY develop leadership programs for adolescents that often led to their later participation as youth volunteers working with younger participants. Abbot indicated that while other efforts to attract volunteers varied from Beacon to Beacon, all Beacons received assistance from the NYC Department of Education in the form of free background checks and fingerprinting services for volunteer applicants.