

## AYPF Forum Brief

Beyond the Numbers: Data Use for Continuous Improvement of Programs Serving Disconnected Youth  
December 7, 2012

### Overview

AYPF's recent report, *Beyond the Numbers: Data Use for Continuous Improvement of Programs Serving Disconnected Youth* notes that we are bombarded with information and data on a daily basis. Yet, how we use this information is more critical than just collecting the facts and figures themselves. In our knowledge society, we must move beyond the simple act of collecting data and rather determine what information is valuable for our purposes and how that information will promote our efforts to continually improve.

To consider this challenge in the context of youth-serving programs, AYPF investigated data collection and use at three successful programs which serve a disconnected youth population. At the core of these programs' success with the hard-to-serve population is an ability to collect, analyze, and utilize data to drive program decisions. This capacity does not exist by simply developing a data system, rather it requires a program to gather relevant information about performance, reflect on its outcomes, make adjustments aimed at improvement, and continue to monitor its progress.

The intent of this forum was to discuss what information the programs collect, how they collect it, and how this information is utilized by the organization to drive decision-making and program improvement. This discussion was framed using the release of AYPF's report *Beyond the Numbers*, which discussed how three high-quality organizations effectively utilize data for continuous improvement.

Forum speakers included:

- **Molly Baldwin**, Executive Director, Roca
- **Bob Rath**, President/CEO, Our Piece of the Pie
- **Akili Moses Israel**, Executive Director, Diploma Plus
- **Jennifer Brown Lerner**, Senior Director, American Youth Policy Forum

### Presentations

Presenters discussed their organizations, their theories of change, and how they have used data to strengthen their programming. They described how their use of data had evolved, and what information they had found useful in their effort to continuously improve.

**Molly Baldwin**, Executive Director of Roca, began by describing the seven-year journey Roca had taken to become worthy of the young people they serve. Roca's programming primarily serves young men who are involved in the justice system or the juvenile justice systems with risk indicators predictive of adult criminal justice system involvement. They also serve a secondary population of about 200 young mothers. Baldwin then explained that the theory of change employed by Roca hinges upon engaging youth in comprehensive intervention strategies in an

effort to sustain positive life skills and employment. The Roca model is a four year program, with two years of intensive intervention and two years of follow-up. Due to the nature of the high-risk population served Roca engages in extensive, relentless outreach to ensure that the participants continue to participate in the program.

Baldwin concluded her presentation by discussing the role of data in organization-wide decision making. She said that data has helped Roca run its programming for youth who do not always show up, and that Roca tracks the efforts it takes to keep the participants engaged. Baldwin also provided concrete examples of how data had been used to improve programming at Roca. Baldwin mentioned that in a review of the data collected the numbers suggested that their former program model with three years of intensive intervention fell short of providing youth with sustained behavior change, and in some cases, caused regression into old habits. She said that these insights informed the organization to change their model from a three-year to a two-year timeframe for intensive intervention, which has been more successful.

**Bob Rath**, President/CEO of Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) described OPP's Pathways to Success model. He provided an overview of OPP in context of Hartford, Connecticut, which has the largest racial achievement gap of any state in the country. Rath then provided an overview of the guiding principles for OPP, which are to place the youth first; build relationships throughout the community; and to focus on positive results. He then reviewed the major fields of practice which OPP touches upon, including education, workforce development, and youth development. Rath next detailed the OPP model, and described how each student is paired with a youth development counselor. Since the expected outcomes for every student are to gain a post-secondary credential and employment, OPP students work together with their assigned counselor to create their individualized youth development plan which includes preparation for education and the workforce.

Rath concluded his presentation by providing context as to how OPP has used data to inform program improvement. As an organization, OPP has focused on what has proven successful, and Rath has ensured that program staff employ these best practices to foster success with each student. The data shows that this process has produced results, with OPP successfully engaging nearly 3,000 disconnected youth, with 61 percent obtaining a post-secondary credential and over 80 percent retain employment for at least one year.

**Akili Moses Israel**, Executive Director of the Diploma Plus network of schools, began her presentation by describing the Diploma Plus national network, which provides alternative high schools, usually for students who are over-aged and under-credited. The goal of Diploma Plus is to ensure that these at-risk youth work toward a high school diploma and graduate college and career ready. Moses Israel then described the population served by Diploma Plus, comprised mostly of students who have failed classes and/or are behind grade level. As a means to ensure quality across the national network of 17 schools across six geographic regions, Diploma Plus provides several supports to schools. These supports include Implementation Coaches which provide guidance to school leaders in the continued work of full implementation of the Diploma Plus model, as well as Network Directors, which work across several schools within a geographic region to serve as a liaison to the school districts. Alongside these supports, Diploma Plus teachers work to integrate a competency-based curriculum which provides students multiple ways to demonstrate mastery of content. This, along with a focus on college and career readiness

provides the foundation of the Diploma Plus model. Moses Israel concluded her presentation by describing the important role data collection and use has within the organization. She said that the Diploma Plus national network looks at outcome data to best see how students are advancing in their course of study. They implemented more predictors to catch students before they fall, and ensure student growth and support. They found that they needed a cultural shift when it came to data, because many staff members were very data-phobic at the beginning.

### Panel Discussion

Jennifer Brown Lerner, Senior Director of the American Youth Policy Forum asked how the presenters had developed their theories of change, how they used data, and what they have meant to the organizations and programs.

Rath noted that the theory of change is essential for an organization to understand how it intends to achieve its goals. He acknowledged that an organization cannot know if it is doing harm if it does not have a theory of change. In order to continuously improve a program, Rath said an organization needs to understand what it aims to accomplish, and to create a comprehensive plan that is based upon those outcomes. Moses Israel agreed, and added that a primary focus of Diploma Plus is to ensure that the data collection and program development process mirrored what is relevant to the schools.

Each organization was then asked how they were able to achieve staff buy-in when faced with the challenge of increased data collection and use. Rath said that OPP staff were able to see the strong connection between their day-to-day responsibilities and the data that was to be collected. For example, while youth workers are required to document their interactions with the youth participants which takes time, they ultimately find value in how this data is used by the organization's leadership to inform decision making. In Rath's view, the role an organization's leadership is to help bridge the gap between front-line staff and data, and to popularize data use within the organization as a flashlight, not a hammer. Moses Israel added that Diploma Plus worked hard to make sure that staff were comfortable with data, providing periodic trainings and including staff in the data collection and analysis process. She found that a lot of staff were uncomfortable with data at first, but through professional development, became more comfortable. Throughout the entire national network, leadership made sure that everyone saw how data could help them, and held summer institutes to compare data throughout the network. Baldwin emphasized that the leadership at Roca embraced data from the beginning. When they transitioned to daily data entry for frontline staff, they had to be clear to all staff that it was necessary to ensure program improvement, and leadership was committed to regular entry as a means for staff to see the outcomes of their efforts.

Lerner also asked how the panelists built the capacity to deal with internal data needs as well as the external accountability necessary for funders. The panelists agreed that at a certain point, you just have to account for the needs of both. Baldwin noted that Roca has been very careful to not take funding that would take them off message, but to follow the needs of the funders when necessary. Moses Israel said that because it is a nation-wide network, Diploma Plus has built a glossary so that data can be compared across the country, even if it is collected differently.

Lerner also asked what the next steps for each organization are, with regards to data use and collection. Rath wants OPP to use the data to see how they can improve their graduation and

employment numbers. He said that while OPP is effective at reaching 80 percent of its participants, they need to investigate why their model is not working for the remaining 20 percent of the population, and to make the necessary adjustments. They are also trying to become more efficient with their delivery. Moses Israel mentioned that Diploma Plus is in the process of implementing a new data system which will minimize the data entry burden on teachers and provide a clearer picture of the entire national network of schools. Data has also been used to ensure fidelity to the Diploma Plus model. In assessing the outcomes of each school, Diploma Plus national network leadership has identified the schools that were not doing well and provided time and resources to improve these schools. Those schools that were unable to improve were removed from the network, and by decreasing the number of schools in this manner, Moses Israel noted that Diploma Plus has a clear focus of quality over quantity. Baldwin noted Roca's focus on daily data entry, requiring youth workers to record at least 80 percent of their required two to three contacts with each youth per week.

### Question and Answer Period

Forum attendees had an opportunity to ask the presenters a few questions. The first questioner asked the presenters to talk more about how they assess their students. Moses Israel noted that it is difficult to correlate the state assessments with their own assessments. Diploma Plus works to train the teachers to better assess their students. They use project assessments to show mastery of knowledge and to relate the subjects to the real world. Diploma Plus gives students narrative report cards that show progress and help the students raise their confidence. They translate these report cards to the GPA scale, when necessary for the schools. Baldwin discussed the initial assessment of youth which includes their educational background, involvement in the justice system, and employment history to ensure that they are high enough on the risk spectrum for Roca programming to be beneficial. Once in the program, they use benchmark assessments to keep the youth on track. Roca has also developed a workforce readiness assessment to keep the youth focused on employment. Rath explained that OPP uses several indicators to assess students, for example levels of parental engagement to assess students in its Opportunity High School. He also mentioned that OPP has developed a career competency assessment to show employers that alumni of OPP are qualified candidates.

Another participant asked how many staff each organization has devoted to data. Roca has one full-time data manager, one full-time computer technician, and two part-time people dedicated to data collection. All staff also perform data entry on their own. OPP has two full-time senior staff working on data, and is adding one part-time employee. Diploma Plus's Executive Director analyses data. They hired a data manager to chase down the data, but that job has now been added to other staff duties. Data is considered a whole-staff effort at Diploma Plus.

The next question focused on what programs are emerging from the data in schools. Moses Israel described how Diploma Plus helped New York Metro regional network improve its career education by using the model from Diploma Plus Schools in California, where discussion and consideration of career training is integrated into all classes.

Another questioner asked if the panelists had worked with the employment community to see what is needed to best train the participants for attainable employment. Baldwin noted that, due to the population served at Roca, they focus on realistic programming for careers where felons can be hired. They are also working on partnerships with organizations that will hire Roca

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alumni. Rath noted that the Youth Development specialists at OPP serve as case managers for their participants. The workforce specialists build demand. He also noted the success of these efforts, with some organizations dedicating large portions of their available jobs to OPP alumni.

Another question asked if the presenters had used their data to discover best practices and used that insight throughout the system. Moses Israel alluded again to the use of career education in California. She said that they are always looking for pockets of success. Baldwin commented that data works two ways; it is used to see both what is working and what is not. Rath noted that a particular OPP employee was found to be very effective doing behavior work. His colleagues began to adopt the same method, and now the whole organization does that work.

The final questioner asked how each organization balances its use of data for internal use and external reporting. Baldwin noted again that Roca is very careful to not take money that would take them off model. She said they are willing to use a second database if the funder requires. During periodic updates, Roca will give funders the reports they request, but will also include a more comprehensive report which is aligned with Roca's model and data collection strategy. Rath agreed, adding that OPP educates the funders about what it is doing, and influences them to support what is found to work.

Lerner concluded, noting that the commitment seen in the three organizations is phenomenal. Understanding the importance of data has opened organization-wide conversations, and continues to strengthen the organizations and their programming.