

Use of Continuous Improvement and Evaluation in After-School Programs

**Final Report
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Acknowledgements

This final report includes findings that are based on a review of the relevant literature related to evaluation and continuous improvement, in-depth telephone interviews with key players involved in the design and use of evaluation and continuous improvement strategies in after-school programs, and focus groups held around the U.S. with administrators and practitioners working in after-school programs. These activities were completed during the winter and spring of 2001.

Patricia Seppanen served as the principal investigator, providing general direction and oversight. This report was written by (in alphabetical order) Carol Freeman, Tina Kruse, Jane Schleisman, Patricia Seppanen, and Robin Stubblefield. In particular, we wish to acknowledge other members of the study team who played invaluable roles. Two colleagues, Lynne Havsy and Gayle Zoffer, participated in the design of the study, data collection, and data analysis, but left for other positions before the report was written. Nancy Brigham, Sue McCormick, Sheila Marcus, and Sheila Rosenblum played key roles in arranging and conducting focus groups across the country, data analysis, and assisting in the interpretation of the findings.

Even greater contributions were made by more than 180 respondents who most graciously answered our questions and who sent us examples of the evaluation and continuous improvement models they are developing or using. A full listing of these individuals appears in the final report.

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Section I: Introduction

Background

Before- and after-school, weekend, and summer programs for school-age children have a long history in the United States. Such programs are typically designed to augment the school day and/or the school calendar, creating a “second tier” of services that may focus on supervision, enrichment, recreation, tutoring, and other opportunities for school-age children and youth.

Care for school-age children—before school, after school, and during school holidays and vacations when parents must work—has increasingly been cited as a “. . . national problem that affects more and more families every year . . . The variety of models being used to meet the need is remarkable. School-age care is being provided in or by a wide variety of groups, including park and recreation departments, churches, Y’s, day care centers, family day care homes” (Baden, Genser, Levine, & Seligson, 1982, pp. 2-3). After-school programs have emerged as a national priority because of the learning, care, and safety issues they appear to resolve (Chung, de Kanter, & Kugler, 2000). Funders of these initiatives, however, may vary in the social goals they are trying to promote: for example, the social goals of programs include promoting learning, protecting children from hazards on the streets, keeping children from risky experimentation, helping children explore new interests, or forming adult-child relationships (Behrman, 1999; Seppanen, Love, deVries, Bernstein, Seligson, Marx, & Kisker, 1993).

A Growing Push for Evaluation and Outcomes

The most recent national study of before- and after-school programs found that programs are generally very limited in their capacity to conduct program evaluation directed at improvement or reporting impact to their external stakeholders (Seppanen et al., 1993). As of the early 1990s, efforts at quality control centered on state licensing or approval to operate by their state department of education (84% of the programs) or accreditation by a state or national accrediting organization (23%). Directors reported their evaluation procedures were primarily geared to the monitoring of program implementation. Further, given the high reliance of programs on parental fees as their primary source of revenue (estimated at almost all of the budget revenue in programs serving middle- to higher-income families to two-thirds of the revenue in programs serving concentrations of children from lower-income families), programs are hard pressed to set aside scarce financial resources to contract for evaluation services.

The growing press for empirical program and child outcome data may be linked to two related needs: (1) the need to improve programming based on the specification of desired outcomes and assessment of program strengths and challenges linked to these outcomes, and (2) the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of a program in order to engage community collaborators, retain or gain additional funding, recruit staff, gain public recognition, and increase program participation.

After-school programs operating across the United States are increasingly turning to program improvement tools, including accreditation, to focus on accepted standards of program quality. This attention to quality, however, does not necessarily include the identification and measurement of individual child outcomes as part of evaluation and improvement efforts (Chung et al., 2000).

The justification for public investment in after-school programs has heightened the need for evidence to document the impact of these initiatives on children. The proposed evaluation models to address these needs vary widely, however.¹ Lerner, Zippiroli, and Behrman (1999), for example, recommend the launching of a limited number of rigorous evaluations of program models that are important because they are based on strong theory or are being implemented on a wide scale. They posit, "The value that these new studies will have for policymakers, program designers, and advocates will rest on the rigor of the evaluation design and the choice of outcomes measured" (p. 17). To address the challenge of program improvement, they offer three substantive recommendations that focus on the financing of after-school programs: the identification and retention of qualified staff, and the promotion of public/private partnerships that afford programs access to resources and suitable facilities.

In contrast, Chung et al. (2000) advocate the more broad-based adoption of a continuous program improvement model that creates a seamless system between program improvement and evaluation. They consider the process of establishing clear goals and outcomes as a first step in integrating the school and after-school curricula and designing appropriate, specific programming. Desired outcomes related to quality programming and public support for financing these initiatives are seen as an outgrowth of this model.

Purpose of this Study

This study was designed to provide information from two perspectives: (1) a review of the literature related to evaluation and continuous improvement, and (2) the perspectives of evaluators and practitioners working in or with after-school programs. The report includes findings that are based on in-depth telephone interviews with 32 key players involved in the design and use of evaluation and continuous improvement strategies in after school programs, and focus groups or structured interviews involving approximately 150 administrators and practitioners working in these programs across the U.S.

Findings have been organized into the following sections:

- Key themes from the literature
- Common characteristics of model processes
- Self-reported factors associated with effective processes
- How programs are making sense of evaluation and continuous improvement
- Current capacity and resource needs of after-school programs
- Suggestions from the field
- Implications and recommendations

¹ Although the models may vary, the authors (e.g., Lerner, Zippiroli, & Behrman, 1999; Chung et al., 2000) do agree on the current lack of, and need for, comprehensive, well-designed, longitudinal studies that focus on the cumulative effects of after-school programs.

Section II: Key Themes from the Literature

As a first step to conceptualizing what questions to ask after-school providers and evaluation consultants, we conducted a search of the literature associated with several evaluation approaches and organizational processes that focus on program quality and improvement.² Five common characteristics of successful use of these approaches or processes emerged in our comparison of them:

- A focus on clear, measurable goals and outcomes;
- Involvement of players;
- A culture in the organization that fosters the approach;
- Adequate support for the efforts and for the players; and
- A belief that growth is never done.

A Focus on Goals or Outcomes

First, a clear purpose keeps everyone working toward the same target. This not only affects staff buy-in (as discussed below), but also fosters heightened clarity in staff decision-making. A shared vision for the evaluation, continuous improvement (CI), or other endeavor ensures not only team sentiment and cooperation, but also helps people to align their improvement actions toward the goal. The conditions fostering organizational learning that are related to goals and outcomes include:

- A clear mission and vision that is understood and shared by staff; and
- Clear and established short-term and personal/professional goals (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998, pp. 74-75).

Second, the goal of evaluation should be clear and operationally defined so that progress can be measured. The literature regarding CI emphasizes that experiencing and celebrating small successes along the way will help change a culture to be focused on achieving results. Third, well-defined program goals and agreed-upon desired outcomes (both for the program and for service recipients) help staff members at all levels of the program align their actions and decisions and help make progress measurable.

² The following content areas were reviewed: action research, continuous improvement (CI), empowerment evaluation, learning organizations/organizational learning, participatory evaluation, total quality management in education and business, and utilization-focused evaluation.

Involvement of the Stakeholders

Importance of buy-in. Enabling significant levels of active involvement from all levels of an organization is identified as key by several evaluation and CI approaches. Such involvement allows practitioners to:

- Engage in authentic analysis of their activities (e.g., action research);
- Develop a sense of ownership (e.g., empowerment evaluation); and
- Be more likely to use the evaluation findings because they are self-invested (e.g., utilization-focused evaluation).

This key characteristic of effective efforts is linked to the “buy-in” of the staff who are usually on the front-line in gathering the information for evaluation and in implementing any changes. Not all approaches may agree on the foci of their goals. Accreditation approaches, for example, tend to focus on industry standards of quality, including the use of evaluation, but may not emphasize a process that is explicitly driven by a mission or set of goals and measurable outcomes focused on children.

Importance of the “personal factor.” Without stakeholder buy-in, as described above, the success of any approach will be hindered. Patton (1997) refers to this as the “personal factor,” emphasizing that the interests and commitment of an evaluation’s users must under gird an evaluation for it to work well. In the business improvement literature, this personal factor ranks highly, as well. According to Deming, a critical feature of TQM is to “involve everyone in the transformation” (Hughes et al., 1996, p. 521). Likewise, action research claims that dealing personally with people—rather than with representatives or agents—is a key factor to successful improvement efforts.

Importance of engaging and empowering the stakeholders. Most of the approaches examined here emphasize that the more that a project is “determined, implemented and used by participants, the more empowering the experience will be” (Upshur & Barreto-Cortez, 1995). For example, utilization-focused evaluation stresses that evaluators facilitate decision-making during evaluation, but the stakeholders must ultimately be in charge. Closer to the field of after-school programming, we see that active engagement of various key stakeholder groups is a core idea in the self-study phase of accreditation processes and some emerging program evaluation models [e.g., National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA), North Central Regional Educational Laboratory].

Culture of the Organization

Characteristics of culture to promote improvement. Having the appropriate atmosphere is crucial to the success of evaluation and CI efforts. The program must have a climate of cooperation, trust, good communication, security, sensitivity, and fairness. In such an environment, people involved in the program’s activities and improvement will be most able to risk changes and admit the need for on-going growth. The eight crucial characteristics of an improvement-focused organizational culture, as described in the TQM literature (Sashkin & Kiser, 1993, p. 77), are:

1. Quality information must be used for improvement, not to judge or control people;
2. Authority must be equal to responsibility;

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3. There must be rewards for results;
 4. Cooperation, not competition, must be the basis for working together;
 5. Employees must have secure jobs;
 6. There must be a climate of fairness;
 7. Compensation should be equitable; and
 8. Employees should have an ownership stake.

Establishing the right culture. The characteristics of the needed TQM culture include reducing centralized control, de-emphasizing organizational structure, emphasizing open communication, and strongly encouraging creativity in developing new and better ways to do their jobs and cooperation among coworkers. In addition, there is an emphasis on group or team work on projects.

Support

Each of the approaches and processes reviewed here stressed the need for support in a number of areas in order for program staff and other key stakeholders to effectively using evaluation and CI processes, including:

Technical support. Several of the reviewed approaches addressed the role of a professional evaluator in supplying some of the needed technical assistance. For example, empowerment evaluation acknowledges that an outside evaluator should be charged with monitoring progress in order to keep the evaluation effort credible, useful, and in check. In addition, this evaluator should provide additional rigor, reality checks, and quality control throughout the process. Ongoing technical assistance and support is needed to make methods readily available and accessible to any practitioner who wants to practice them.

Leadership support. A number of the approaches reviewed explicitly note the need for commitment by the top administrators and the availability of a peer-based support network for these administrators. For example, in the business literature, sustained commitment by management is identified among the essential components of TQM (Berk & Berk, 1993).

Training. Training the stakeholders of an evaluation or the participants in any improvement effort is essential. To participate, they need to know how to design and conduct their plan to evaluate and improve. They also need training, at times, in the terminology and concepts that are associated with an approach, such as CI.

Time and money. Not surprisingly, among the listed factors that facilitate success for each reviewed approach, the need for adequate time and adequate funding appeared again and again. It is a seemingly universal experience for organizations, whether business, education, for- or not-for-profit, large or small, that the lack of an ongoing time commitment by staff members and the lack of ongoing funding to support activities related to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data figure as major obstacles to organizations as they engage in improvement efforts.

A Belief that Growth is Ongoing and Never Done

The idea that improvement processes are ongoing in nature is central to many of the approaches reviewed here. This theme centers on the perspective that certain actions result in ongoing improvement—specifically, a cycle of planning, acting, and reflecting—and a certain belief system that the work of improvement is never finished.

Conclusions

The literature reviewed here holds lessons for the processes of improvement in today's world. Similarly, lessons from these areas, gleaned from improvement theory in business, education, and social service, may tell a valuable story to the field of before- and after-school programming. Clearly, key ingredients include a focus on clear, measurable goals and outcomes and the availability of technical support. At the same time, these ingredients, alone, are probably not sufficient. Two additional aspects of any process must be attended to.

First, the people in the process, and not the process itself, are of utmost importance. The message is clear from this review of the literature that in order for improvement efforts to be successful, the stakeholders/staff/participants/users must be involved. They must be firmly planted in the middle of the process, making the major decisions about the evaluation or improvement effort; working together or with an evaluator to gather, analyze, and interpret the learning; and motivating the changes that result. This involvement helps improvement efforts be effective because it keeps the focus customized to the particular organization, keeps the staff interested and willing to invest time and work for improving, and keeps the staff committed to making the changes that are needed. Involving after-school program staff to the extent suggested by the literature may be difficult in evaluation situations where a very large organization wants to evaluate multiple sites or needs to standardize an improvement plan.

Next, the onus is on the organization to create an atmosphere that is fertile for engaging effective change processes. Conscious attention to climate variables, such as trust, honesty, and sensitivity to diverse perspectives, can help create an organizational culture that is conducive to CI or the evaluation approaches reviewed here. The literature also indicates that the purpose of the evaluation should be clearly communicated to help keep everyone “on the same page.” The purpose of the evaluation or other change initiative may also affect how stakeholders think about why they should engage in the process (e.g., to report work done or apply for continued funding).

If a program focuses its evaluation or CI efforts solely to these ends, their efforts may be in some ways contrary to CI ideas. This issue is similar to determining whether an evaluation is intended to be formative, for growth opportunity purposes, or summative, for the purpose of determining final worth. If a program's evaluation purpose is to demonstrate success versus develop its own strengths (CI), they will experience different processes and foci than if they aimed for CI. One may reason that, if forced to choose between the two, most programs will choose the first (i.e., demonstrating success) when funding is an incentive. The implication of this issue, for before- and after-school evaluation and improvement efforts, is that if indeed the two purposes are as different as they seem, then:

1. the purpose of any evaluation should be clearly specified to the participants, and
2. these differences should be acknowledged in the design process by organizations' evaluators and planners.

Section III: Common Characteristics of Model Processes

A number of after-school programs across the United States are actively engaged in evaluation and/or CI processes. In order to obtain a better understanding of the characteristics of processes currently considered to be “model” approaches, we systematically reviewed the written program descriptions and resource materials from 13 national or local organizations and conducted a content analysis of the responses of key players from these initiatives. Overall, we found that respondents are affiliated with, large, multi-site after-school programs, such as the Boys & Girls Club of America, LA’s Best, or the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Others received funding from the United Way of America.³

We found the model evaluation/CI processes to have a number of common characteristics:

A Reliance on Articulated Goals and Outcomes to Drive the Process

Before- and after-school programs that are not clear on their program’s “purpose” may experience difficulty in planning a meaningful evaluation. Several program representatives described varying goals for after-school programs; that is, is the purpose of after-school programs to raise academic test scores, to provide children a safe place to spend time after school, to keep children in school, or something else? Some respondents perceived a growing tension between different types of after-school programs and the outcomes they hope to achieve. Specifically, they identified two camps of after-school programs—those focused on academic achievement and those oriented toward enrichment and recreation. This lack of unity in the field was seen as one hindrance to engaging in successful evaluation and CI for some programs. Respondents felt that possessing well-articulated goals or outcomes helped drive their improvement efforts.

Involvement of Program Players

Buy-in. Well-developed models and approaches to evaluation and CI in after-school programs stress the importance of establishing buy-in from upper-level to front-line staff. As a result, stakeholders demonstrate their commitment to the effort and believe it is an endeavor worthy of their invested time. According to respondents, staff buy-in cannot be assumed, it must be established through clear communication about the relevance of the improvement and by actively soliciting the contribution of staff to the effort and providing training and support for them to do so.

Ownership and input. Program staff working within these model efforts feel that the after-school program, and its successes or failures, belong to them. They are involved to some extent in decision-making and directing the evaluation and/or CI effort. To generate a sense of ownership, the evaluation or CI plan is developed and implemented with stakeholders at each stage—it is not presented to them as a finished product to which they must conform. They feel accountable for the program’s improvement and, therefore, engage in the improvement process

³ In contrast, smaller, locally developed programs tend to either borrow all or part of a process from one of these larger organizations, develop an evaluation model that is unique to their program, or not have a formalized plan for evaluation/CI.

with gusto. Their sense of ownership includes a feeling of self-efficacy; that is, that their efforts can and will make a difference.

A User-Friendly Design

In order to be effective, evaluation and CI processes should be as user-friendly as possible, meaning that the processes used consider the current capacity of the program and staff. A process may look well-developed on paper, but if it is too unwieldy or the benefits do not outweigh the time consumed, processes will not yield the improvement desired. Of major importance to keeping processes feasible and user-friendly is capturing what really matters to the programs.

In addition to being feasible, processes must be also appropriate for the program, such as using tools that gather the information needed to reflect the degree to which agreed upon goals are being met. For example, several programs, especially fee-based programs, explained their search for appropriate evaluation measures and their reliance on someone outside the program to develop them.

A Reliance on Multiple Methods

The model processes we examined typically involved at least some annual evaluation plan that included the use of surveys, observation and/or peer reviews of staff and site performance. Some processes also included pre- and post-tests to examine changes in children's academic achievement (math, reading, and writing were the most common), attitudes (e.g., opinions of school), or behavior (e.g., school attendance). Some of the evaluation/CI processes also provided a standardized way to conduct frequent evaluation and improvement within a program. Examples of these include weekly tip sheets for staff, focus groups with children, and periodic checklists for quality at each of the program sites. These practices attempt to most effectively capture the big picture, not just a one-time "snapshot" of a program. Because multiple methods may produce a more accurate representation of a program's strengths and needs, this practice helps in making evaluation and CI processes effective. At the same time, some programs are turning to multiple methods and outcomes as a way to be prepared to address the mandates of various funders and partners.

A Balance Between Structure and Flexibility

Respondents stressed the need to strive for a critical balance between a structured process and one that allows for flexibility. Effective processes must be orderly and yet maintain enough "room" to accommodate the uniqueness of each site.

A Mix of Formal and Informal

The model processes described by many respondents are both formal and informal. By *formal*, we mean the use of structured, regular, periodic, and planned processes for evaluating and/or improving the program. *Informal* processes tend to refer to unstructured or less structured improvement processes that happen with greater frequency (often every day), and produce immediate and ongoing feedback for program.

A Blending of Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

A number of respondents described how they are blending evaluation and CI. These respondents saw evaluation as a one-time effort to address a question related to program improvement, while the use of CI was portrayed as the day-to-day “filler” to achieve a quality program. This intermingling of evaluation and CI, like that of the formal and informal processes, emerged as a way to cover “all bases;” that is, as a way to meet both internal and external mandates and to both assess their performance in terms of outcomes periodically and monitor their progress frequently.

Conclusions

Although existing model processes for evaluation and/or CI in after-school programs have a number of characteristics in common, they do illustrate there is more than one way to foster program quality and desired outcomes for children. These model processes draw from different evaluation approaches to achieve the end they desire. Several conditions were cited as contributing to making the processes work well: staff commitment to positive change in agreed upon goal areas and outcomes, a willingness of staff to work towards these goals and outcomes, and the design of user-friendly processes to get there.

The implications of these findings for the field of before- and after-school programs may involve a conscience focus on including program staff into the evaluation and CI effort. It also involves a commitment to using those processes that are the most feasible and appropriate, given the context in which the program operates. A commitment to using multiple data collection methods is not to be taken lightly, particularly given the required resources to do so. At the same time, the current model approaches that are available call for, and rely on, more than one approach to collecting information in order to effect positive growth, both at the program-level and for children. As we will see in the sections that follow, after-school programs in the United States vary tremendously in their capacity to engage in evaluation and CI processes.

Section IV: Self-Reported Factors Associated with Effective Processes

In addition to identifying the common characteristics of model evaluation and CI processes, we sought to identify the perceived factors that are associated with these approaches. The responses from after-school program staff and consultant evaluators can be grouped into three major categories: key activities, qualitative features of the processes, and factors most closely associated with process effectiveness.

Key Activities

Data collection. The most common data collection activities included surveys administered to parents and/or children about their satisfaction with the program, attitudes about school, and perceptions about academic achievement. Surveys administered to program staff and site directors usually ask for their perceptions of the program, as well as about their work behaviors. In fewer cases, principals and possibly teachers of the related school(s) are surveyed as well.

Data analysis. The data used by programs include student grades, scores on standardized tests, writing samples, attendance records, and pre/post measures given by the program itself; the analysis of this type of data seemed to be directed at proving themselves to funders and improving the program. A few of the larger organizations spoke of using their data to comprehensively analyze age, ethnicity, English language learner status, neighborhood, and type of school; the analysis of this type of data seemed to be directed at future programming and impacting public policy.

Support for the process. A third, but less frequently cited, area focused on the use of training, workshops, and consultations to inform the evaluation and/or CI process. Program staff sometimes mentioned the opportunity to have professional development time as a CI activity, or they talked about their annual reviews and peer reviews as a means for overall program evaluation.

Qualitative Aspects of the Processes

Frequency of evaluation or other efforts. Programs stated that they conduct formal evaluations (typically defined as having some structured review of information gathered about the program) at least once a year. Program funders tend to require a “formal” evaluation on an annual cycle. If the evaluation involves pre/post data, this is collected at the beginning of the school year and again toward the end. Programs identifying evaluation closely with accreditation, most often the fee-based programs, said they completed their most formal evaluation every three years (for accreditation renewal). At least one large organization, which uses its own evaluation model, also said they must complete it every three years. A major theme that emerged in this area is that the formal evaluation required at the end of the year for a grant is important, but it is the informal evaluations throughout the year that are the driving force behind CI.

Programs also indicated that, although they perform more structured evaluations at certain intervals, they also conduct less structured, more informal evaluation and/or CI with greater frequency; for example, monthly meetings to discuss challenges, weekly staff meetings, and weekly TIP (Toward Improved Performance) sheets shared with staff. Programs' evaluation and/or efforts toward CI with the children tended to be frequent and less structured too.

Internal versus external. The majority of programs seemed to use a mix of internal and external evaluation, where the external was either a consultant or an accrediting or licensing agency. Most often, external evaluators look at program data and report on impact. Internal evaluation tended to be the job of a staff person or the shared job of site or program leaders, and tended to focus on staff performance, child progress, and programming decisions. One director of a large program said, "I always say internal evaluation is 75% professional development for us." For programs that indicated a preference for external or internal evaluators, more indicated the importance of an external evaluator. This response, though, was tempered with perceived disadvantages of relying on an external evaluator without having an internal process.

Sophistication of evaluation design. Evaluation and CI plans in the field of before- and after-school programming vary in terms of their sophistication and complexity. The most prominent difference was that large organizations (e.g., Boys & Girls Club; 21st Century Community Learning Center; Afterschool, Inc.; LA's Best) spoke rather directly to their overall evaluation design and models, while the smaller programs, usually in focus groups, spoke about specific evaluation activities. In other words, the large, multi-site programs we studied tended to articulate a formal evaluation design and model or system; that is, they often had a "name for the process." The smaller, single-site programs tended to focus their responses on what types of data they collected and the types of instruments being used.

Perceived Factors Associated with Process Effectiveness

Respondents found it difficult to reflect on key factors associated with the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of their evaluation/CI processes. Most respondents, when asked what was not working, moved directly to the lack of resources and/or staffing problems (discussed in more detail in Sections V and VI). Respondents focusing on the success or failure of the evaluation/CI process itself talked about the fit of the plan with the program and/or community, consideration of the program's place in its development, alignment of funder and program goals, and the condition of key relationships.

The appropriate fit of the evaluation plan. Evaluation or CI efforts were often cited as successful when the community's needs were considered, but as unsuccessful when rigid, "national" forms were used without being modified to reflect differences by region or community. Additionally, successful evaluation strategies considered the needs and perspectives of programs serving particular subpopulations of children.

Developmental level. The developmental level of the program was frequently described as a major factor in the effectiveness of evaluation/CI. When the age and related capacity of the program (i.e., the developmental level) was taken into consideration, programs' seemed to feel that their evaluation was more accurate and useful. Although some programs told us that they are motivated to engage in CI, they described their current reality: "We're still locked into trying to simply get programs going, and we're pretty tied to day-to-day activities."

Alignment of program and funder goals. Although funders may have clear expectations of goals/outcomes for grantees, programs may not have made the changes necessary to align their mission and activities with these goals/outcomes. The respondents who participated in our interviews and focus groups frequently stressed that effective evaluation/CI can only happen when there is some cohesion between what the program does and what the funder wants. The issue becomes even more complex because programs may have multiple funding sources at any given time or may be shifting from year-to-year to different sources of funds without shifting the program mission or activities (or only making shallow changes in order to meet funder requirements). Programs see this as evaluating for “their goals and evaluation requirements” versus the program taking ownership of the goals and evaluation.

Condition of key relationships. Relationships among key players or organizations were frequently cited as having a significant influence on the effectiveness of evaluation and CI efforts in after-school programs. These key relationships include:

- **Relationship with the host organization.** Whether or not the relationship with a program’s school or other shared facility is cooperative was described as being a factor of an effective process. Such relationships were described as supporting a program’s ability to focus on improving itself, rather than being held back by a poor relationship or not being seen as a vital part of the core mission of the school. If this were the case, then evaluation data tended to become a vehicle for “proving that the program is important” rather than improvement.
- **Relationship with an external consultant or agency.** The relationship with the outside evaluator has a considerable effect for some programs. Program respondents seem to be most concerned that the evaluator “partner” with them, whether it be in sharing information or making a sincere attempt to take the perspective of the program while evaluating.
- **Relationship among program personnel.** Finally, the leadership of the organization is widely recognized as having an effect on the success of an evaluation or CI effort. This theme emerged from a variety of respondents: program practitioners, program directors, and program evaluators. Program leaders send the clear message that evaluation and CI are important and assure that the necessary resources and time are devoted to it. Additionally, the competence and stability of the leadership was viewed as a condition that needed to be present before a program can hope to focus on sustained improvement.

Conclusions

The respondents who participated in these focus groups and interviews included program directors, practitioners, model developers, and evaluators, all of whom had a great deal to say about what they thought contributed to, or hindered, the effectiveness of their evaluation and CI processes. Their responses touched on each stage of their improvement process, from conceptualization to implementation issues. The message that came across the strongest is that the programs want the “most true” story of their experience to be reflected in an evaluation. This included considering the developmental phase of a program, having an evaluator who knows the program well, having the funder measure what the program really does, and considering their community’s needs and cultural identity. It seems that the characteristics of effective processes

described by the respondents in this study move away from a one-size-fits-all approach and more toward customized approaches.

Section V: How Programs are Making Sense of Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

After-school programs, like other educational and social services, are feeling the growing press for empirical program and child outcome data to meet multiple needs. Over the past several years, researchers and evaluators across the country have developed expertise in conducting evaluations of school-age care programs and in assisting programs in using evaluation results for program improvement. During the same period, an accreditation process has been launched through NSACA, the leading national organization for school-age care providers.

Providers of after-school programs are trying to make sense of increased and, sometimes, competing requirements for information about their programs' outcomes. To understand how programs are making sense of evaluation and continuous improvement, it is important to understand the sources of pressure to use these processes, how they are using them day-to-day, and their perspectives regarding the utility of engaging them.

Sources of Pressure

The accountability environment for all education and human services agencies has changed. Funders, whether the government, foundations, the United Way or other community agencies, are, more than ever, asking programs to report on, and be accountable for, results. Our respondents, however, distinguish a number of sources of pressure for engaging in evaluation and CI on either an informal or more formal basis.

Providers of out-of-school services are self-motivated to examine what they do. Some experts and evaluators in the field think that, first and foremost, after-school practitioners seek feedback from children and parents because they want to have a good program. Through their work with programs, many evaluators find program staff self-motivated to improve their programs independent of what an external party would want to know.

Evaluation and continuous improvement as assessment of participant satisfaction. For many providers, evaluation with the children is conducted daily, focusing on the satisfaction of children. Most respondents, at this level, do not appear to link the degree of satisfaction with child outcomes other than continued participation. In particular, fee-based programs and programs that do not view changes in child performance as part of their mission, characterize themselves as focusing on "basic customer service evaluation." They use customer surveys—mostly parent and student surveys—because they find that children vote with their feet. If they do not like the program, they do not attend. For this reason, these respondents consider it crucial for middle and high school programs to obtain feedback from students.

Some respondents indicate that parents just want their children to be safe and in a setting where they are happy. Consequently, these practitioners do not feel the pressure to provide direct support for students' academic achievement. Consequently, they are less likely to value and engage in more formalized evaluation that focuses on assessing child outcomes.

We did hear some caveats to this basic theme. First, a majority of respondents look upon their programs as a service that matters to the entire community. Addressing the perceived needs of the community is a driver for evaluation and CI. Second, a few respondents noted that while

the after-school program during the school year is primarily less focused on student performance, the summer, where the program day runs for nine hours, should, at least from the perspective of some parents, result in outcomes for children.

External pressures push programs toward more formal evaluation and continuous improvement processes. Respondents identified four types of external pressure that seem to promote the use of evaluation and/or CI:

- **Funder requirements.** Many experts and evaluators in the after-school field feel that the greatest pressure for programs to do formalized evaluations and to plan for CI comes from funders. The pressure to show outcomes in after-school programs is external; people doing outcomes work are doing it in response to pressure, not an internal epiphany. Although a knowledgeable internal champion is needed to provide leadership, it is the external pressure that is currently driving many efforts. Increasingly, funders want to support programs, whether community or school-based, that are effective in accomplishing specific outcomes, especially outcomes that will help schools meet academic standards. Although practitioners also said “funders require it,” a few respondents indicate they now have a dual purpose in doing evaluation. Their funders may require evaluation, but they see the need for the data for program planning.
- **Marketplace forces.** Experts and evaluators commented that programs are motivated to survive in a competitive marketplace—participation in after-school programs is usually a voluntary decision and families do have choices. Programs that cannot rely on user fees, particularly those located in areas where families have less disposable income, must convince third-party funders that they are meeting the needs of their participants. Evaluation has become a tool for programs to say “this is how our programs work.” Programs can use their evaluations to market themselves, distinguishing, and setting, themselves apart from other programs. Additionally, if programs can demonstrate outcomes, there is a perception that their ability to fundraise will be enhanced.
- **A maturing of the field.** Organizational theorists (e.g., Schein, 2001) discuss the life-cycle of an organization, citing characteristics of an industry at birth, during adolescence, midlife, and maturity/decline. The field of before- and after-school care, now considered a recognized sector with its own culture, is moving into adolescence where the conformity pressures are maximum. At the same time, given pressures from funders, the field is evolving in new directions.
- **Requirements or priorities of a sponsor or host organization.** After-school programs operating under the auspices of a larger organization are increasingly being asked to conform to accepted standards of quality (that may have been developed by the organization or adopted from some other source). We see these requirements and priorities to be distinct from conducting and submitting an evaluation report to the funder(s).
 - Programs that are affiliated with ***organizations that sponsor a number of school-age care programs*** are more likely to have processes for maintaining quality. For example, Boys and Girls Club representatives all discussed the requirements for evaluation and CI by their parent organization. To be a Boys and Girls Club, the organization must work with the national organization’s *Standards of Operating Effectiveness and Commitment to Quality*.

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- Many *states and larger cities* have developed requirements that some or all providers of school-age care must meet. Their requirements may be based on the national accreditation standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or NSACA. Their requirements may be more or less specific about what processes providers must use to evaluate and what outcomes must be measured. School programs usually are not required to be licensed, but often do “follow all their guidelines.” Some states and cities are using accreditation to promote a level of program quality. Oklahoma, which has a tiered reimbursement system, uses accreditation (and their “Star” program) as their system of accountability for program quality. Madison, WI developed an accreditation process patterned after NAEYC standards when they began funding child-care and youth programs many years ago. They are currently developing standards for their middle school programs. The United States Defense Department has made accreditation an important requirement for external review of their after-school programs.
 - When programs have a relationship with a *public school district* and use school facilities, programs report they are more likely to be welcomed into the building if they can show benefits of their program for the school’s mission.
 - Noticeably absent from the conversations of our respondents, however, is the involvement of the after-school program leadership in school improvement teams that have grown up in response to state and federal accountability policies. Some programs that have been located in schools are citing real or potential competition from 21st Century Community Learning Centers who in many cases were “showing up in schools” where programs already exist. These programs appear to be responding to market pressures as they turn to accreditation “to show they are very high quality, to show the school district, to show the principals.” Programs that have relationships with *research universities* to evaluate their programs find researchers interested in additional or different questions than funders may be.

The relationship between accreditation, evaluation, and CI, under these systems appears tenuous. For example:

- Most evaluators who are currently engaged in evaluating after-school programs do not find that the programs they are evaluating feel pressured to pursue formal accreditation. For some programs, evaluators said, “Accreditation is not even on their radar.” Evaluators did not find funders asking programs to meet accreditation standards. Nevertheless, for the most part, programs were aware of the principles or the components that comprise a quality program.
- The source of funding seems to impact which programs will seek accreditation. One evaluator thought, “From my experience, it seems to be privately-funded programs that use accreditation to show that they are at a certain level, whereas I think that a lot of the public and publicly funded programs are more going towards the route of evaluation.”
- Where the state has strong licensing requirements, programs find it “hard to see the value of accreditation,” because it is costly in terms of time and money.

The Focus of Data Collection in Most Programs

There is general consensus in the field that programs do collect some kinds of data and have always done so. For example, for a very small program, the staff probably has enough interaction with the parents and students to understand their needs and interests. Larger programs use a variety of survey techniques to get feedback from a greater number of students and parents than they could from one-on-one conversations. Some programs have been using discussion (focus) groups with the students and parents as well as satisfaction and interest surveys.

Types of data collected internally by programs. The most common types of information that respondents think should be collected on an ongoing basis include:

- Child attendance;
- Satisfaction of children and parents;
- Assessments of program quality; and
- Needs in the community for education and recreation and the extent to which the program addresses critical needs.

Data collection when an external evaluator is involved. When programs become involved with an external evaluator, it tends to result in the collection of a broader range of data collection. Additionally, many evaluators and practitioners are interested in qualitative as well as quantitative sources of data. From the perspective of practitioners, anecdotal information offers better insights for program improvement. One evaluator described an approach that appears to be very customized to the local program context:

The evaluator gathers data from the school district; from individual schools (principals, classroom teachers); from program staff (site directors, program leaders); from parents in the program; and from children. These data include standardized test scores, descriptive implementation information (training and equipment), and program needs from the provider's point of view. Information collected from parents and children focuses more on their satisfaction with the program and whether they feel there is improvement at the child-level.

Making Sense of Evaluation and Continuous Improvement: Perspectives from the Field

The following is a summary of how the terms evaluation, CI, and accreditation are understood by practitioners when they are implemented.

Evaluation defined. Evaluation, when it is working well, is defined as a process that looks at program practices and outcomes. The process allows organizations or people to determine whether their practices help them to meet their goals. Evaluation provides products that can be fed back in a meaningful and timely way to the people who are being evaluated. It also emphasizes what it is going to take to make the program better.

Continuous improvement defined. CI is seen as a little further down the continuum from evaluation. Some respondents defined it as organizational development. A number of practitioners currently see CI as an informal, everyday way of doing business. CI, at its best, is part of the ongoing operating environment of a program: meetings, periodic retreats and reviews, reflection on best practices. Both evaluators and practitioners in the field often defined CI as going beyond organizational development to changing the practices or procedures of an organization to meet the needs of their customers, their constituents, or their funders. Some respondents linked evaluation and CI, others did not.

Accreditation defined. Many practitioners see accreditation as a way to obtain the credentials or acknowledgement that a program is performing to a certain set of standards. The site is judged by very specific criteria that have been developed by an external agency.

The NSACA system is described by practitioners as assessing how the program is operating. They see many of the standards (e.g., human interaction) as being related to positive outcomes for children. One respondent, close to the NSACA system, described it as being about CI and self-evaluation. Another respondent added: “Funders like Mott and 21st Century may not see accreditation as evaluation and continuous improvement.”

Reflections of practitioners. Our respondents made a number of points regarding the attributes of successful evaluation and CI processes:

- Evaluation and CI should be seamless;
- External evaluators must support CI in order for the two processes to come together;
- An evaluation report prepared for a third-party does not provide information sufficient to inform CI—a snapshot at a point in time is not sufficient to develop and sustain a quality program; and
- It may be useful to distinguish two types of evaluation: external evaluation, which is basically to provide evaluations that would inform funders, policy makers, or board members; and internal evaluation, where the main goal is self-reflection and would define the program philosophy, program goals, and monitor to see how the program is meeting these goals.

Conclusions

Within the field of before- and after-school programs, there is a growing awareness for the need for evaluation and CI. At this time, these concepts are, to varying degrees, understood and integrated into the day-to-day practices of programs. Many program staff describe the measurement of child and parent satisfaction and the use of accreditation as the methods of CI. Evaluation is something that is done by an outside expert to meet funder requirements. Of course there are exceptions, but this is closer to the norm for programs. For evaluation and CI to be effective in guiding program improvements that may be linked to child outcomes, what we know from the literature (Section II) and from model approaches (Section III) must become part of the organizational culture and operating principles of these programs. The current sources of pressure that programs feel to engage in these processes (e.g., funder requirements, marketplace forces, maturing of the field, requirements of sponsoring/host organizations) might be supported and

shaped to promote more widespread adoption and use of these strategies in promoting quality programming. The need to substantiate the impact of after-school programs may require data from a smaller number of well-controlled studies. This may be too great a burden to place on the average program. The voices of practitioners also point to a number of areas that may benefit from further development and attention:

- Given the high level of awareness regarding evaluation and CI as concepts, the field may be ready for more intensive assistance and training to adopt and institutionalize these processes.
- Accreditation is part of the mix of strategies for improving program quality, presenting both a threat and an opportunity related to the adoption and institutionalization of evaluation and CI processes. In terms of a threat, it may limit our vision of quality to one that is not driven by a set of outcomes for children. It may also serve as an opportunity, representing an established process that could be woven into a CI process if it was only slightly modified to be more outcome driven.
- Shifting program purposes, missions, or stated goals to focus more on child outcomes represents deep change in an organization. Funding requirements and the priorities of sponsor/host organizations may provide sufficient pressure, but programs need strategies and approaches to bring about this change in thinking at the program level. Program leadership, in particular, needs to understand the programmatic changes that also need to occur—changes in hiring practices, scheduling, activities, materials, and so forth.
- Children and youth in particular (and their parents) choose to enroll in an after-school program or not—this fact has a strong influence on providers as they set program goals and priorities, particularly if the program is fee-driven. The voices of children, youth, and parents, along with the broader community, must be considered along with that of funders.
- The current push nationally for public schools to be accountable for academic outcomes is causing some distress within the field of after-school programming. Some respondents see this press as a threat to the deep beliefs they have about child and youth development and the role of after-school programs. Other program leaders see evaluation as an opportunity to gather and present evidence to the school community that these programs do have an impact. Certainly the architects of many 21st Century Community Learning Centers are viewing positive evaluation data as a vehicle for promoting the continuation of this initiative by school districts. At a minimum, programs need the tools and support to clearly articulate the “logic” of their program and how their efforts link to immediate outcomes for children and youth that, in turn, link to longer-term outcomes. Another, parallel strategy to consider is the infiltration of district and state accountability efforts—how often is the director of an after-school program or a site coordinator asked to participate on a district or site school improvement team?

Section VI: Current Capacity and Resource Needs of After-School Programs

Although the use of evaluation and CI models in after-school programs appears to be growing, little information is available regarding the capacity that programs have to effectively incorporate these strategies into their standard operating procedures. Further, if programs do not have the capacity to take advantage of these models, there is a need to understand what is needed in order for them to do so.

The Use of Evaluation / Continuous Improvement in Practice

Current use of evaluation and/or continuous improvement varies across programs.

Although selected after-school programs are making extensive use of outcome-driven evaluation and CI models, on average, programs across the United States vary significantly in the level of use of these strategies. Some programs use formal evaluation and/or CI processes, some programs use more informal processes, and still other programs use a combination of both formal and informal processes. The formal processes typically range from those that have been designed, either internally or by an external evaluator, to meet the specific needs of a program to those that have been designed for use as a part of an accreditation or licensing process. The informal processes include such things as informal conversations with parents, staff, students, and community members; suggestion boxes; staff or advisory board meetings; observations; and newsletters. Interestingly, the more informal processes do not, at their core, focus on outcomes for children—typically, they focus only on satisfaction with the program and/or the quality of program activities and functions.

Programs vary in the degree to which the use of evaluation/continuous improvement is ongoing and internalized. Regardless of whether programs are using formal or informal processes or putting outcomes for children at the center of their efforts, programs vary in terms of the degree to which evaluation and/or CI is embedded within the day-to-day program. While some programs internalize evaluation and CI and integrate it as a critical piece of the program, an equal number of programs seem to engage in it predominantly to fulfill external pressures (e.g., funder requirements). Other programs may have a strong desire to engage in CI and/or evaluation efforts but they struggle somewhat with the actual implementation or follow-through stage of the process, usually due to factors that we have termed capacity and resource needs.

Perceived Factors Associated with Capacity to Use Evaluation and CI Processes

Respondents (evaluators, program directors, and program staff) found it difficult to identify factors that promote the effective use of evaluation and CI by after-school programs. They tended to gravitate toward describing what they are able to do and what resources are needed to enable programs to engage in evaluation and CI. The following themes, therefore, reflect an analysis of perceived needs that, if addressed, might promote the effective use of evaluation and CI. Overall, respondents identified the following nine types of needs:

Leadership. Respondents cited leadership as a critical piece in the success of evaluation and/or CI efforts. First and foremost, there must be a leader within the program who is interested in evaluation and/or CI and who will make it a priority for the program. Second, it is important to

have a measure of stability among senior staff who provide this leadership. Finally, if the program focuses on student outcomes, it is critical for the leadership within the school district (not just the after-school program coordinator or director) to have a vision that includes *the* after-school program.

Peer-based learning and support. Respondents mentioned the need for peer-based learning and networking opportunities both within and across programs in a region. These facilitated meetings allow for program staff to discuss programmatic issues and to share ideas with others working in the after-school field. Respondents also mentioned that it would be helpful to visit other programs and/or to review the evaluation reports produced by other programs. Some respondents suggested that informational sharing among program staff should focus on evidence-based models and strategies rather than totally relying on program-by-program evaluation and CI.

Staffing. After-school programs struggle with multiple issues related to staffing—issues that either directly or indirectly affect evaluation and CI efforts:

- Staff roles needed to conduct evaluation- and/or CI-related activities,
- Staff having enough time to be involved in data collection and in using the findings, and
- The impact of staff turnover on evaluation/CI efforts and overall program quality.

Some respondents could describe activities they are implementing that allow for positive things to happen related to CI and/or evaluation:

- Explicitly reviewing the program mission and NSACA standards with job applicants to make sure they understand and “buy-in” to the program;
- Adding data management responsibilities to a clerical position;
- Adding management/oversight of the outcome data collection and analysis process to a central office administrative position;
- Adding responsibility for staff training in data collection and entry to a central office administrative position;
- Hiring consultants to handle specific functions: instrument design, data entry and analysis, report preparation, facilitation of meetings where data are reviewed;
- Adding a site manager position to work intensely with part-time staff and volunteers to strengthen programming and to promote more “mid-course” corrections (e.g., manager provides assistance and oversight in design of activities, observes and gives feedback to staff/volunteers regarding their instruction and interactions with children).

Procedures for staff to reflect on data. For evaluation and CI to have an impact on the program, results must come back to the program and be incorporated into planning and day-to-day decision-making. Evaluators and program directors mentioned using the following types of strategies:

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- Using staff meetings as a place to share and discuss both positive and more negative findings and their implications for improvement;
 - Focusing the content of staff training on areas identified for improvement;
 - Presenting and discussing evaluation data as part of meetings of site coordinators (particularly if the program has multiple sites) and incorporating this information into planning and goal setting; and
 - Presenting and discussing evaluation data as a regular part of the advisory or board meeting agenda.

At the same time, many respondents discussed how the lack of staff time is an issue in their capability to engage in evaluation and/or CI. For some programs, making time for the overall process is difficult, while for other programs time is a constraint because it is difficult for front-line staff members to incorporate evaluation and/or CI activities into their daily routines.

Many respondents indicated that without additional time and money, they did not see how they could incorporate evaluation and CI into the daily routine of staff. They cited the need for resources to free up staff to design data collection instruments; to collect the data; or even to examine the information gathered and reflect/act on it. Because many of these after-school programs are understaffed, there is an opportunity cost involved in engaging in evaluation and CI processes; that is, if staff engage in evaluation efforts, then they are not doing something else that is equally as important, such as spending time with the children. Others noted the need for time to reflect on what they learn from engaging in evaluation and CI processes. Many expressed frustration that the effort involved in evaluation does not include the time to reflect on the results—to think strategically. Where evaluation and CI is part of the program, staff energy tends to focus on collecting the data, not on using it.

Computer technology. Access to, and use of, computer technology contributes to the ability of program staff to engage in data collection related to evaluation and CI. Some respondents discussed computer technology they are using in order to collect data. Data being collected includes attendance information, scores related to outcome measures for children, and on-line survey results. Most respondents favor these computer programs because they require less paperwork, allow for the collection of some “real-time” results, and result in data that are “more pleasing to the eye” and less difficult to read due to handwriting illegibility.

Technical resources. Respondents cited a number of technical resources that would promote the use of evaluation and CI. The availability of technical resources may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for programs. Respondents envisioned the following types of resources:

- A website that includes information on evaluation and CI activities, such as how to obtain resources and materials related to conducting evaluation and CI, as well as samples of easy-to-use instruments, helpful hints, and lessons learned. The site could include computer-assisted evaluation resources that could be adapted for use in reporting to various funders;
- A framework to help practitioners see the link between evaluation, accreditation, and CI; and

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- Standardized forms for assessing “good programming” on an ongoing basis (that can be adapted to the local context of the program). The standard for good programming should be based on the research and not just on what parents want.

Outside experts and technical assistance. Often, programs reported that it was helpful and useful to have an external evaluator working with them. These experts can provide both the evaluation expertise that staff members do not possess and an independent view of the program. Some respondents felt that by hiring an external evaluator they would not burden their staff with evaluation activities.

Despite the positive response most programs had to using external evaluators, it does not come without problems, specifically if the evaluator has not taken the time to fully understand the program (i.e., the program mission, its clientele). Although many respondents felt they needed an external evaluator who would design the evaluation, conduct the data collection activities, and write a final report (i.e., the external evaluator would be responsible for the entire evaluation process), other respondents felt that access to technical assistance and resource people would be more beneficial to helping them engage in evaluation and CI activities within their specific programs. Here, respondents commented on the need for

- Funds to buy evaluation and technical assistance to use internally;
- A team of regional advisers who could assist them in conducting informal evaluations;
- Technical support in data collection and analysis.

The role of funders. Funders also have a role in fostering program capacity. Some respondents expressed frustration with the need to conduct evaluation and CI efforts simply to satisfy funder requirements, particularly when funding agencies do not specify the evaluation requirements ahead of time or when funding agencies change the evaluation reporting requirements during the grant period. This lack of clarity limits programs in developing and using workable procedures over time. Additionally, funders need to provide clear signals to grantees regarding the amount of funds that should be devoted to evaluation and CI. Similarly, if funders are going to expect a rigorous evaluation or accreditation, they should allow grant resources to be devoted to these activities or make the needed resources available to programs through other means.

Funding. Many respondents commented on the need for additional funding for a variety of purposes, the most basic focusing on the need for more stable funding. Respondents also noted that many community-based organizations have trouble getting sufficient funding just to keep basic program operations going. The idea of evaluation may be appealing, but even if it occurs, respondents lamented the lack of resources to make recommended changes to improve program quality.

Conclusions

Respondents offered a wide variety of examples of how they and their colleagues engage in CI on a daily basis. This is the good news: program improvement is on their minds. The bad news is that the more informal processes described by respondents do not, at their core, focus on agreed upon outcomes for children (e.g., outcomes in the areas of personal/social development,

adult/child relations, or academic achievement). It is this finding that represents the challenge for programs in the coming years.

The major needs outlined by respondents offer an informed beginning for thinking about what programs need in order to become more effective users of evaluation and CI: leadership development and support; opportunities for peer-based learning and support; creation of new staff roles; the identification of standard, recurring, procedures that could realistically be built into the work day to allow staff to reflect on data; the use of computer technology; access to technical resources, including outside experts and technical assistance; the expectations of funders; and access to additional funding. Players, at all levels, who have an interest in promoting the use of evaluation and CI might consider how their efforts could be adapted or augmented to focus on these needs.

Section VII: Suggestions from the Field

The many individuals who served as key informants for this study represent practitioners working in the field of after-school programming, individuals involved in developing resources to facilitate evaluation and CI, and evaluators currently working with programs. Thus, they understand what staff members are motivated to do and are capable of implementing around evaluation and CI processes at this time.

Respondents provided a rich variety of suggestions regarding areas of work that might strengthen the quality of after school programming and the ability of programs to engage in evaluation and continuous improvement. The suggestions tend to focus on what respondents would like to see in practice and do not necessarily offer specific strategies. The range of responses cluster into two overarching themes: (1) Building an “infrastructure” to promote the quality of after-school programming nationwide; (2) Supporting efforts that build the capacity of after-school programs to engage in evaluation and CI.

Infrastructure

Respondents focused on three areas that, if addressed, would enhance the overall quality of programming: (1) a need to professionalize the field and reduce high rates of staff turnover, which contributes to a basic lack of program stability; (2) a need to build public awareness and support for the role that after-school programming can play in the healthy development of children and youth; and (3) the need for public policies that provide an adequate and stable base of funding for programs.

Professionalize the field of before- and after-school programming. One of the issues that many before- and after-school programs face is a high rate of staff turnover. Many respondents view the professionalization of the field and a reduction in staff turnover as drivers of program quality. Additionally, many respondents commented that, in order to go through an accreditation process, conduct an evaluation, or engage in CI, there needs to be a stable core of staff. Several respondents noted how a lack of staff stability both contributes to lower quality programs and challenges any attempt to engage in evaluation or CI efforts.

Tangible suggestions for initiatives include:

- Supporting systemic quality efforts versus CI efforts, meaning compensation strategies, training systems and models (both preservice and professional development), training approval boards, professional registries for staff;
- Supporting the development of a universally endorsed training process that is required as a condition for entry into the field so that when staff move from one program to another they would not need to be retrained;
- Supporting the development of certificate programs for staff serving in leadership roles; and
- Supporting the development of an incentive system to promote staff retention (e.g., an award program, scholarship program).

Build public recognition and support for before- and after-school programming. Many respondents see the need for public engagement in a national discussion of, and greater consensus about, the key outcomes for which after-school programs should strive. Respondents noted that an increased awareness by the public about the importance of before- and after-school programming in achieving these outcomes may then lead to more sustained funding for these types of programs. Respondents also noted a need to nationally communicate the purpose of these programs, because ultimately they are sustained with public funds. Respondents also highlighted the need for greater awareness—among program designers, staff members, parents, members of the public school community, the public generally—of the characteristics of quality programming that supports outcomes for children and youth. Finally, some respondents see the need for vehicles to promote conversations among various groups who have the potential to shape programming for children and youth, such as members of the before- and after-school profession; educators including principals, teachers, and school superintendents; researchers, including people who understand youth development. These conversations need to go beyond individual programs to consider the child's entire day.

Inform public policy development. Respondents commented on four critical areas of public policy that affect the quality of after-school programming:

- Policies that would allow for sustained public funding of before- and after-school programs, including the infrastructure to build quality programs (e.g., raising wages, development of training systems, technical assistance systems);
- Policies that elevate the overall level of public investment in these types of programs;
- Policies that promote greater rates of reimbursement; and
- Policies related to licensing.

Many respondents commented that various foundations and non-profit organizations have played a critical role as program funders. In order for the system to grow, however, there must be more public investment.

Build Program Capacity to Engage in Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Respondents highlighted a number of areas related to building program capacity: (1) a need for mechanisms to align funder-specific evaluation requirements; (2) a need for practitioners to develop the knowledge and skills to engage in evaluation and CI; (3) a need for sustained technical assistance and support; (4) a need for guidelines related to tailoring evaluation and CI efforts to the developmental status of the program; and (5) a need for user-friendly, but technically sound, strategies for measuring important non-academic outcomes of after-school programming for children and youth.

Promote the alignment of funder-specific evaluation requirements. After-school programs may receive financial support in the form of grants from multiple sources that change over time. Funders typically ask grantees to focus on a particular need or purpose, which may or may not be left to the program to determine. Additionally, funders are increasingly asking for evidence that the program is having a desired effect on enrolled children. This situation

contributes to three scenarios: (1) programs learn that in their grant application(s) they must dedicate themselves to a different mission or purpose or to multiple purposes at the same time, but do not embrace the deep organizational change that is necessary to operationalize this shift; (2) programs find themselves having to address multiple, sometimes conflicting, evaluation requirements; and (3) evaluation reporting is done to meet the funder's requirements rather than for program improvement.

While respondents saw a shift away from being so dependent on short-term grant funding as the ultimate solution, they did offer a number of ideas to address the issue in the short term. Interestingly, the ideas generally centered on getting the funding agencies to work more closely together to align their current evaluation requirements, perhaps by simplifying the evaluation and CI processes or by providing a framework for how they can fit together. Other respondents hoped there could be better coordination among funders regarding surveys and other data collection instruments, because they are frustrated by having to administer a different data collection instrument for each funder.

Provide skill-building opportunities for practitioners. Several respondents stressed the role of training and peer-based learning opportunities as vehicles for promoting quality programming. Additionally, respondents commented on the need for program leaders and staff members to develop skills related to evaluation and CI. Specific opportunities that respondents see being part of skill-building efforts include:

- Comprehensive models for staff training and development (rather than “spot” training);
- Being exposed to successful programs and evaluation/CI models, including site visits;
- Opportunities for learning together (e.g., visiting other sites, networking, and collaborating on best practices);
- Facilitated regional meetings where directors can meet and share their experiences and ideas;
- Training linked to, and resulting from, CI efforts;
- Vehicles for sharing data and training materials across programs; and
- Support for staff retreats to reflect on evaluation data.

Promote ongoing systems of technical assistance related to evaluation and continuous improvement. Many respondents believe that in order to help programs effectively engage in evaluation and CI processes, the evaluation process needs to be more accessible. As noted above, some suggested that one way to do this is to provide training for program staff in the areas of CI and evaluation. Others suggested the development of a technical assistance and support system for programs. Respondents indicated a need for outside experts when developing an evaluation design and interpreting findings.

Respondents both offered examples of workable technical assistance systems that are currently available to them and ideas for the development of other resources. In particular, respondents in the Upper Midwest cited the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

(NCREL) and the website they have developed to offer “tips” and evaluation resources. Respondents identified the following technical resource needs and ideas:

- Technical assistance to support a program through the evaluation process;
- Access to external teams who can assess the status of a program and help with re-design;
- Access to “very user-friendly” evaluation measures and analysis tools;
- Access to a web-based bank of assessment items that are organized by core outcome area;
- Assistance in interpreting evaluation findings; and
- Access to external evaluators who are familiar with after-school programs.

Promote the articulation of guidelines, benchmarks, and expectations for programs in different phases of implementation. Several respondents feel frustrated with the idea that all programs are being measured with the same yardstick, when they are at very different phases of program development and implementation. Participants want benchmarks that indicate what to focus their evaluation and CI efforts on given their developmental status. Others want to see examples of model evaluations and surveys that could be used at different points in a program’s existence.

Develop methods for measuring non-academic outcomes. After-school programming has a legacy in childcare with a focus on child development and recreation. Currently, this type of program is being looked to by funders as a vehicle for supporting academic outcomes of children and youth. Not unexpectedly then, the comments of respondents reflected the range of outcomes that after-school programs might see as their primary purpose. Many respondents see a need for rigorous, but user-friendly, measures of non-academic outcomes (e.g., citizenship, social skills, motivation, self-esteem, attitudes, resilience). The intent of using these measures for many respondents centers on demonstrating the impact of after-school programs in addressing these other aspects of a child's development. A few respondents, however, acknowledge that these non-academic outcomes should represent immediate effects that contribute to desired longer-term outcomes: school attendance, academic achievement, school grades, school drop-out prevention, and high school graduation. Respondents cited the following specific needs:

- The articulation of outcomes and development of measures related to “prevention”;
- The development of measures related to aspects of personal and social development (e.g., self-esteem; a feeling of family and belonging; feelings of self-worth, mastery); and
- The development of evaluation tools to address the full age-range of children participating in after-school programs, particularly children in the upper elementary and middle school grades.

In discussing these needs, respondents tended to focus on the need to specify outcomes and develop measures that reflect what they perceive “good” after-school programs to already be doing. Implicitly, then, we can conclude that the desired focus should not necessarily be on strategies to realign programs to address more academic outcomes for children and youth. Respondents stressed, however, that measures need to be user-friendly and cost-effective.

Conclusions

The after-school field, as represented by our respondents, sees two major areas of need: (1) strengthening the “infrastructure” of after-school programs in areas perceived as critical to enhancing program quality, and (2) building program capacity to engage in evaluation and CI by addressing a number of current needs. In their present form, these findings reflect what practitioners and evaluators would like to see in practice.

What has not been articulated are the specific strategies that might undertake to promote work in one or more of these areas. If any of the highlighted areas appear viable, a next step might involve further reflection on how, and with whom, these efforts might be undertaken.

Section VIII: Implications and Recommendations

The findings presented in the previous sections highlight a number of key contextual issues that must be factored into the design and use of evaluation and continuous improvement processes with before- and after-school programs:

First, there exists a fairly wide gap between what we learned in our review of the literature related to evaluation/continuous improvement strategies and what is happening in practice in after-school programs. This gap is attributable to many factors: a number of core issues (e.g., staff turnover, lack of an adequate and stable based of funding, lack of pre-service training/professional development opportunities) that both limit the quality of programs and the ability of key players to engage in evaluation and continuous improvement; the lack of consensus about the role that after-school programs should play in promoting specific child outcomes (both academic and non-academic); the organizational culture of many programs that centers on a belief that the focus should be on child development, recreation, and enrichment, rather than supporting a narrow definition of academic achievement.

Second, programs vary tremendously in the resources, knowledge base, and skills that may be brought to bear on the use of evaluation and continuous improvement. Some programs operate as part of a larger system and are given specific direction and resources; others are “on their own” with minimal support.

Third, the “problem” of infusing evaluation and continuous improvement into the daily practices of program staff is not a purely technical issue (i.e., centering on the need for technical resources). It will also involve a huge set of adaptive responses on the part of the system, focusing on issues related to whose goals will drive the process, changes in administrative and staff roles and behaviors, changes in how program decisions are made, changes in how resources are deployed in programs, etc.

Fourth, a number of related strategies are at play to promote program quality (i.e., accreditation) that conceptually do not fit at this time in an overall framework for evaluation and continuous improvement.

Given these factors, we offer the following recommendations for consideration by both the designers and users of evaluation and continuous improvement processes in before- and after-school programs.

1. Support efforts that lead to the development and dissemination of multiple evaluation and continuous improvement models that vary in terms of complexity.

There are two aspects to this recommendation. First, the fact cannot be ignored that programs are unique and developing entities and that evaluation purposes and capacity change over time. This stance, makes the “tier” evaluation model developed by Francine Jacobs particularly relevant (Jacobs, 1988). The five levels move from generating descriptive and process-oriented information at the earlier stages to determining the effects of programs later in their development. The tiers are structured to reflect the development of evaluation capacity and the goal of accountability for outcomes. These tiers are:

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- Tier 1: Needs assessment
 - Tier 2: Monitoring and accountability (who is served, what services are provided)
 - Tier 3: Quality review and program clarification
 - Tier 4: Achieving outcomes
 - Tier 5: Establishing impact

It is important to note that the tiers should not be viewed linearly; meeting the evaluation needs of a program and its stakeholders requires the flexibility to move back and forth from tier to tier and to combine different activities across tiers. The tiers, in a sense, also integrate the use of accreditation and the assessment of child/parent satisfaction (commonly pointed to by program directors as examples of continuous improvement processes).

Second, the leadership in many programs would be overwhelmed by seeing a complete handbook or manual of every step in an evaluation/CI process. One thought is to support the development of resources that break the information down into a series of discrete steps. The average program director never sees the whole process in print – that is a resource tool for the evaluation consultant. Some of the web-based materials that I have seen being developed for use by youth prevention programs are taking this approach.

- 2. If there is a need to demonstrate that after-school programs can have an impact on student performance, invest in a smaller number of studies that involve the examination of well-implemented program models.** Funders might support evaluation efforts in selected states. Right now, we see the need to (a) establish that this type of programming can have an impact, and (b) support programs in quality improvement efforts. We are not confident the average program can address both of these needs. It is beyond the capacity of most after school programs to engage Tier 5 level evaluation at this time. We see that only a subset of programs, with support, are engaging in Tier 4.
- 3. If child and youth outcomes are to be the core of any evaluation and continuous improvement process, the average program needs access to user-friendly resources for articulating them and re-shaping their program to promote their achievement.** By resources, we are referring to written materials (that could be web-based) that present various program logic models and the range of outcomes domains that might be expected (e.g., enrichment, personal & social skill development, academic achievement, etc.). Information needs to be made available to evaluators and program leaders regarding the immediate and longer term outcomes that might be expected from particular after-school models and examples of step-by-step consensus-building processes. At this point in time, efforts that the average director describes as continuous improvement are focused on child and parent satisfaction as the outcome. We therefore see a need for process tools for program planners and leaders to use with key stakeholders to reshape a program mission, target outcomes, and activities/staffing patterns that might be expected to result in these outcomes.

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- 4. Since funder requirements and the priorities and requirements of sponsoring/host organizations processes appear to influence after-school programs, a national coalition may want to directly support and shape these priorities and requirements.** A number of efforts appear to be in the development and early stages of implementation. The development of a model process and technical support materials is necessary, but not sufficient, for program-level implementation. Most of the model processes we examined have yet to be widely institutionalized at the program-level. Mere descriptions of these processes will not help others effectively adopt and institutionalize them. The identification or “what it takes” to achieve this institutionalization is key information that might help designers of these processes to (a) understand what capacity needs to be developed at the program level, and (b) how this capacity is best developed and sustained.
 - 5. Since accreditation is an accepted part of the strategies that programs view as continuous improvement, efforts should focus on exploring what it would take to modify the process so that it is more outcome driven and accessible to programs.** Modifications might occur at two levels: (a) refinement of the standards so they are linked to a set of agreed upon outcomes for children and youth, and (b) the modification of any standards related to evaluation to stress a need to be outcome driven, including evidence that an evaluation and continuous improvement process is in place to produce data for use in program improvement and reporting of results. Additionally, attention must be given to the resources (time and money) needed to undertake the accreditation process—what options are available to programs with limited resources?
 - 6. Promote the infusion of basic information about evaluation and continuous improvement into training and professional development efforts with after-school program leaders and staff.** At a minimum, efforts should focus on developing some “training modules” that could be made available to practitioners via the Web. The problem will be finding the training and professional development systems to infuse this information.
 - 7. Promote the participation of the after-school sector in national, state, and local educational accountability systems.** Public school superintendents and principals, in particular, are facing federal, state, and district-level accountability policies. These accountability processes are under development at the state level to meet Federal Title I requirements. Additionally, we are seeing many urban school districts instituting school-level accountability systems. We have yet to see, however, the involvement of representatives from after-school programs on district or school-level improvement teams. Waiting to approach the school superintendent or principal when outcome data are available may be too late for a program operating with short-term grants.
 - 8. At another level, there is a need to consider how children and youth spend their out of school time and the development of resources/options within a community that promote the productive use of out-of-school time.** The focus of this study ended up being on programs that enroll children and youth on a more formal basis. We see the need for approaches that members of a community might use to engage in evaluation and continuous improvement using the entire community as the unit of analysis.

9. Promote the development of low-cost model approaches to technical assistance and support for programs.

We are not referring to the more elaborate systems that the Federal government has established, but to strategies that provide peer support and effectively help program leaders figure out what they need and how to get it. Options might include peer study group processes, leadership circles,⁴ or web-based approaches. We are learning that to be effective, technical assistance and support needs to put the recipient more in the “driver’s seat.”

10. Continue efforts to address key infrastructure issues that appear to limit the effective use of evaluation and continuous improvement in after school programs.

Approaches might involve the initiation of strategies to address key issues that cannot be “worked around” such as the need for pre-service and professional development models. For those that are complex and tied to funding (e.g., the need to reduce staff turnover, the limited time that part-time staff have to engage in evaluation and continuous improvement activities, the lack of training and professional development systems), support the development of evaluation and continuous improvement models that explicitly take these issues into consideration.

⁴ A strategy developed by the Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits with support from the McKnight Foundation. See their World Wide Web site (<http://www.mapnp.org/library/circles/ldrscrcl.htm>) for more information.

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