

## **Update on First Year of the Middle School Initiative within Beacon Community Centers**

The Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) is pleased to present the first year evaluation report for the Middle School Initiative of the Beacon Community Centers.

In September 2007, DYCD launched the Middle School Initiative in the 80 Beacon Community Centers located throughout New York City. The Beacon Centers, first established in the early 1990s, provide varied services to youth and families in New York City neighborhoods. Community-based nonprofit organizations operate the Centers in public school buildings during non-school hours. Beacon Centers are typically open during the school year from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays, and from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. during the summer. The Centers have a history of commitment to the safety and healthy social and emotional development of both youth and adults. The Beacon model integrates supports for youth and families through activities and services reflecting local community needs and interests.

**The Beacon Middle School Initiative** was developed in response to national research showing that school failure and high school dropout are predictable as early as the sixth grade. Beacons are required to provide sustained activity for middle school youth in the following six (6) core areas, widely recognized as critical for healthy youth development: academic enhancement, life skills, career awareness/school to work transition, civic engagement/community building, recreation/health and fitness, and culture/art. In addition to providing structured activities for middle school youth, the Beacons continue to operate as community centers serving people of all ages and provide a range of drop-in activities and community events.

The implementation of the Beacon Middle School Initiative coincides with efforts of the New York City Department of Education to improve educational services and outcomes for middle-grades students, especially those with the greatest needs, including low-income youth served by the Beacon Centers.

In conjunction with the launch of the Middle School Initiative, in 2007 DYCD introduced a management information system, DYCD Online, requiring Beacons to track youth-level data on program enrollment, attendance, and activity participation for all participants.

### **Evaluation Design**

DYCD engaged Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to conduct the evaluation of the Beacons Middle School Initiative over three years, with generous support from The Wallace Foundation. The first year report focuses on Beacons' implementation of the Middle School Initiative and how programs adapted to the new requirements. It includes analyses of program participation, activity approach and content, relationships with partners, and staff retention and professional development. The evaluation used the following data sources:

- An online survey of Beacon directors,
- enrollment and participation data from DYCD Online,
- telephone interviews with directors of ten Beacons in June and July 2008 ("in-depth sample"), and

- site visit interview and observation data in ten Beacon Centers in July and August 2008 (during the summer program; different from the “in-depth sample” programs).

In subsequent years, the evaluation will continue to document implementation successes and challenges. Analyses will examine participants’ social and academic outcomes and identify program features associated with these outcomes.

## **Program Participation**

### **Enrollment and Attendance**

Beacon Centers were each expected to serve 150 middle-grade youth in Year 1. Beacon Centers exceeded this goal, enrolling on average 182 middle-grades youth during the 2007-08 school year and 93 middle-grades youth during summer 2008. In total, 14,575 middle-grades youth and 31,252 other youth and adults were enrolled during the 2007-08 school year. Beacons also provided summer programming to 7,323 participants in grades 5-8 and to 9,233 other participants. The total unduplicated count of middle-grades participants who attended school-year or summer activities or both was 20,269. On average, middle-grades participants attended 208 hours of programming during the 2007-08 school year, just shy of the required 216 hours.

### **Recruitment**

Beacon directors recruited middle-grades youth through their existing participants (either participants themselves or their siblings), as well as youth who were recommended to the program by teachers or school counselors. Beacons located in schools that also hosted an OST program in the school year had **higher** average middle-grades enrollments than did Beacons in schools without an OST program, especially if the OST program also served middle-grade youth. At the same time, the large majority of directors (85%) said that competition for participation from other after-school programs was a challenge to recruitment.

Participant recruitment for summer programming was generally not a challenge, as demand for summer camps is high and there is a large pool of potential participants from the school-year program.

### **Demographic Characteristics**

Middle-grades participants generally reflected the overall demographics of the Beacon population. During the school year, 56% of middle-grades participants were male and nearly three-fourths were either Latino (39%) or African American (34%). English was the primary language of 84% of middle-grades participants, and 97% of participants were considered to be proficient in English.

## **Activity Approach and Content**

The evaluation found that, as expected, Beacon Centers have shifted focus to emphasize programming for middle-grades youth. Nonetheless, all Beacon Centers continued to provide programming for all interested community members, regardless of age.

There were several ways in which programs adapted operations for the new initiative, according to Beacon directors. Compared to prior years, all Beacons (100%) offered much more programming to middle-grades youth. Most Beacons did at least somewhat more to track youth program attendance (79%) and assign youth to specific activities (72%); six in ten Beacons increased enforcement of minimum attendance requirements (64%) and increased regular, structured programming offers (60%).

During the 2007-08 school year, 68% of Beacon Centers offered activities in every one of the six core areas of the Middle School Initiative (academic enhancement; life skills; career awareness and school-to-work transition services; civic engagement and community building; recreation, health, and fitness; culture and art). All Beacons offered academic and recreation activities, 99% offered arts and culture activities, 95% offered life skills activities, 83% offered civic engagement activities, and 76% of Beacons offered career awareness activities. Middle-grades participants, on average, spent the most hours in recreation activities, followed closely by academic-enhancement activities.

Summer programming was somewhat different from school-year programming. One quarter (24%) of programs offered activities in all six core areas, and the emphasis was on recreation, health, and fitness activities. Though not the main focus, 85% of summer programs offered some academic activities. Beacon directors noted Centers' important role in bridging the summer learning gap. Summer programs offered activities that were intended both to keep youth engaged and also to prepare youth for the upcoming school year.

### **Relationships and Partnerships**

**Families.** The level of activity and percentage of programs engaged in regular communication with parents is noteworthy. Almost all directors said that they talk on the phone or meet in person with families at least once a month and about half of directors described participants' parents as engaged in the Beacon at least to some extent.

**Schools.** Some Beacons experienced challenges in interacting with their host school. About half of directors reported at least a minor challenge in the fact that the administration of their host school is not supportive of the Beacon.

**Other Youth Programs.** In those Beacon Centers where other youth programs are housed within the same school building, the vast majority of Beacons coordinate scheduling and space with those programs.

### **Staffing and Professional Development**

Beacons averaged 30 staff members in total, with an average of 14 staff members working as part of the Middle School Initiative.

**Professional Staff.** Sixty-one percent of Beacon directors said that their Beacon employs a master teacher or education specialist as a part- or full-time staff member. Many directors also said that they recruited staff who would be able to help youth learn new skills.

**Young Staff.** On average, Beacons employed ten college students and teens – a third of the average of 30 employees. Younger staff members are reportedly able to relate to participants and give youth near-peer role models, while providing the Beacon with affordable youth workers. At the same time, directors reported that young staff needs more guidance on how to conduct themselves in a professional way.

**Staffing Challenges.** Directors reported that finding and hiring high-quality staff and volunteers could be difficult. Challenges included lack of ability to offer competitive salaries and sufficient hours (on average, staff members work 16 hours per week) to prospective staff.

**Professional Development.** The vast majority of Beacon directors reported that they trained staff members on a variety of topics. Directors also reported that they structured staff members' work with youth by reviewing lesson plans or, less frequently, providing staff with externally developed curricula. Most directors sent their staff to trainings offered by the Partnership for After School Education (PASE) and their own provider organization. Staff most frequently received training on behavior and classroom management, using developmentally appropriate practices, and maintaining a healthy and safe environment. Many directors noted that staff often come back from training and share what they have learned with their colleagues. Most directors received training on program development and management, maintaining a safe and healthy environment, and delivering academics and enrichment.

In comparing Beacons operated by smaller and larger providers, nearly two-thirds of directors of Beacons that operate one Center reported that limited professional development opportunities presented a challenge. In contrast, only about a third of directors of providers with multiple Beacons reported that limited professional development opportunities presented a challenge. Overall, directors seek more from DYCD's professional development opportunities, including longer and more structured workshops, and technical support workshops on data entry, data analysis, and budgeting.

### **Challenges and Recommendations**

The evaluation identified challenges faced by the Beacons and provided recommendations for how DYCD might provide additional guidance. DYCD has begun to address these issues in the following ways.

#### **Challenges**

DYCD is responding to two significant challenges identified by Beacon directors related to staffing and professional development:

- Recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff, in part due to compensation constraints: Despite the current fiscal climate, in FY 2009, youth service providers received a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for direct service employees; this is a baselined increase over the next two years. In order to support agencies in their recruitment and retention efforts, DYCD has provided a range of professional development opportunities that build on staff's capacity.

- Providing a range of professional development opportunities, particularly for smaller providers: In FY 2009 DYCD contracted with Community Resource Exchange (CRE) to provide technical assistance and professional development to Beacon service providers. As a result, DYCD has been able to provide organizational and programmatic assistance to individual organizations, which can be particularly useful for smaller providers. In Year 3 DYCD is identifying specific training needs from sites and designating dedicated days for borough-wide training events.

## **Recommendations**

DYCD is taking action on the following PSA recommendations:

- Guidance on balancing increases in programming for middle-grades participants with reductions in other programming: DYCD is exploring options to ensure that Beacons are able to continue to serve all intended populations, including possible flexibility in the number of middle-grade participants to be served and the development of creative solutions to continue to meet the needs of all Beacon community participants.
- Removal of the assignment of “targeted” status to a subset of middle-grades participants: DYCD continues to examine data and solicit feedback regarding the process of targeting some participants for structured programming as compared to providing the same programming to all middle-grades participants. A focus group of selected Beacon Directors will be held over the summer in an effort to gather data that will inform DYCD on program design for the following program period.
- Improvement of data entry on DYCD Online: DYCD hired a training coordinator dedicated to providing ongoing technical support on online data entry and management.
- Review of the recruitment tension where Beacons and OST middle-grades programs are co-located: In Fiscal 2010 co-location will no longer be an issue, as middle-grades OST programs will be consolidated into Beacons at co-located sites.