"Promises and Paradoxes in Understanding Impacts of Out of School Programs for Youth”

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Themes:

Approach to evaluation
- Evaluation should improve programs as well as prove program impacts
- Evaluation partnerships should build the capacity of organizations to plan, implement and monitor/evaluate their programming
- When possible, evaluations should ask how and why a program is achieving impact, not just whether it did. This allows for continuous improvement of program delivery and sustainability of effective practices.

What’s special about OST?
- Out of school time (OST) programs uniquely address persistent gaps in academic achievement by filling after and summer school hours with enriching activities.
- Network of local support & delivery organizations working on similar goals.

Theme 1: Focus more on changing adults and organizations than on changing youth.
- Address the underlying conditions within OST sites that contribute to implementation of highly effective programs.
- Shift our focus from only looking at features of the activities being provided to implementation of the overall program.
- *Local example:* Dallas Afterschool’s Program Quality Initiative (training, coaching & tools) positively increased sites’ Programming and Activities

Theme 2: Use excellent data and rigorous methods to get a clearer picture of what really works (or doesn’t).
- Relying on aggregate data and simple comparisons over time and/or comparisons from one group of students to another can result in erroneous interpretations of impact.
- We can get false positives, believing that programs have impact when they do not, or that they have more impact than they really do.
• We can get false negatives, believing that programs do not have impact when they really do, or underestimating their impact.
• High-stakes standardized test scores can, at times, be a very good metric for research purposes, but overall for understanding OST impacts, valuing change for adults & organizations instead of over-emphasizing change for youth is warranted.
• local example: across Dallas Afterschool’s network, sites with higher quality OST helped improve K-2 literacy gains

Theme 3: Utilize the whole network.
• Share one another’s successes as well as failures.
• Linking students’ experiences during the school day to after school seems to be the most effective strategy for impacting academic gains; this implies strategic partnerships with ISDs and other agencies.
• We have “program deserts”: not all of our youth can access OST programs at all and there are variations in quality of programs.
• Support large-scale, city-wide partnerships and authentic collaboration across agencies.

References:


Durlak, J.A. What everyone should know about implementation. In, Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning, CASEL, Chicago, IL.


