
Beacons *In Brief*

By Susan Blank and Chelsea Farley

The past decade has witnessed a dramatic expansion in public and philanthropic funding for after-school programs. In turn, funders and policymakers are asking hard questions about the content, quality, goals and expected outcomes of these programs. P/PV's recent report, *After-School Pursuits: An Examination of Outcomes in the San Francisco Beacon Initiative*, contributes valuable new information and lessons to the larger discussion, and highlights some of the current challenges in the after-school field.

The San Francisco Beacon Initiative

Founded in 1994 (and inspired by Beacon centers operating in New York City), the San Francisco Beacon Initiative established after-school programs in eight public schools in low-income San Francisco neighborhoods. Beacon centers are managed by community-based organizations and provide a broad range of enrichment activities (in the core areas of education, career development, arts and recreation, leadership and health). P/PV's 36-month evaluation examined the first five Beacon centers—three in middle schools, one in an elementary school and one in a high school.

The starting point for both the Beacon programs and the evaluation was a clearly articulated theory of change, which specified desired outcomes and the resources and approaches needed to produce them. Drawn from research, operational wisdom and intensive community discussions, the theory of change provided a structured way of predicting the initiative's early, intermediate and long-term outcomes.

As shown in Figure 1 on the next page, which presents a simplified version of the theory of change, Beacon leaders saw their first order of business as establishing

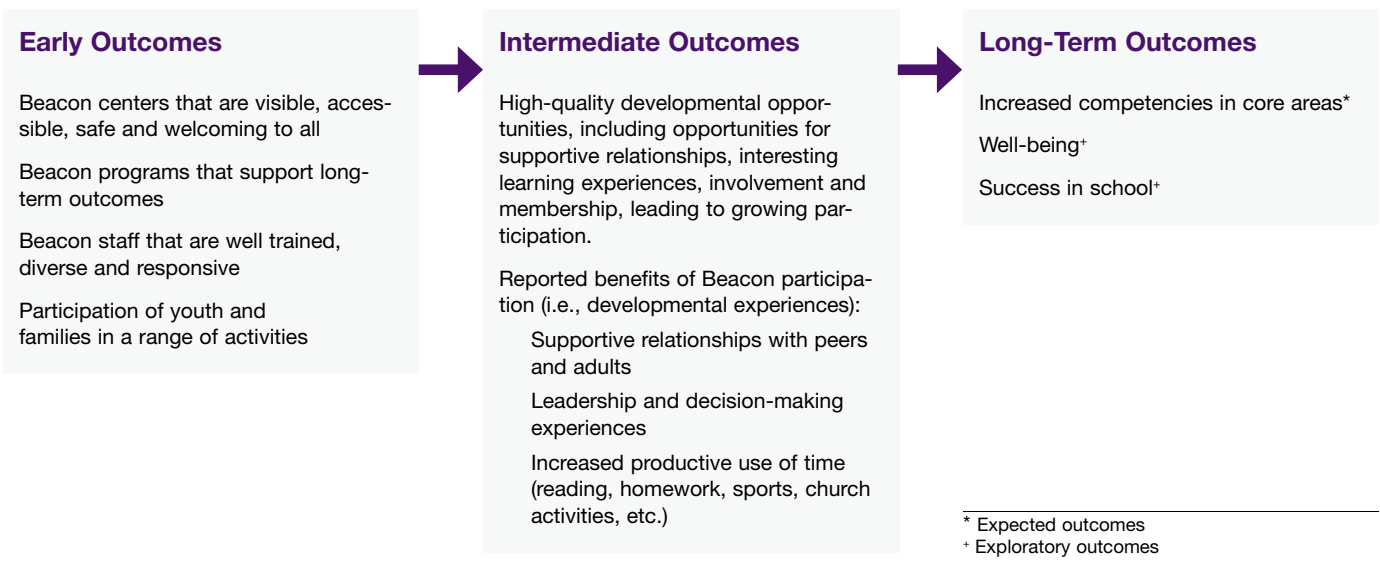
visible, accessible, safe and welcoming centers with strong staffing and active participation. They posited that youth who were exposed to this kind of after-school environment would be able to take advantage of important developmental opportunities (supportive relationships, for example, or interesting learning experiences). Over the long term, they predicted that the youth would become more competent in activities that were part of the five core areas of programming. Leaders were more cautious about predicting whether participation would improve young people's overall well-being or their broader academic performance, but they did want to know if such relationships existed. In an environment of growing national concern over academic achievement, they knew that information about academic outcomes would be important.

P/PV's evaluation was designed to "get inside" the workings of the initiative. Researchers used the theory of change to test the links among a variety of interdependent elements. The theory also provided Beacon stakeholders with a clear roadmap for their work: Program managers used it to keep their strategies on track, while researchers shaped their study to answer questions about the theory's basic assumptions.

Findings

In a field where questions have been raised about program quality and the extent to which after-school programs reach the youth who could benefit most,¹ the Beacon centers met two critical challenges: First, they were able to provide well-staffed and well-organized programming that engaged youth. Researchers found this to be true for all sites in the evaluation and across a wide range of after-school activities. The breadth and

Figure 1: Early, Intermediate and Long-Term Outcomes for San Francisco Beacon Sites²



Adapted from Figure 2.1, originally published in *After-School Pursuits: An Examination of Outcomes in the San Francisco Beacon Initiative*, 2004, p. 10.

diversity of activities (which were especially strong in the areas of arts and recreation, and education) were key to attracting participants and keeping them involved.

Second, the Beacon centers reached a particularly needy group of students. Compared to similar non-participating youth, Beacon youth scored significantly lower on standardized tests and were twice as likely to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Solid implementation allowed Beacon leaders to focus on achieving the outcomes they had specified in their theory of change. The centers were successful in several respects:

- **Youth had positive experiences at the centers.** Ninety percent of youth said they felt a sense of peer and adult support in Beacon activities, and eighty percent felt a strong sense of belonging. Seventy percent thought the centers offered something new and interesting.
- **The centers seemed to protect against declines in school effort and self-confidence typical of middle-school youth.** The study compared middle-schoolers who participated in the centers for a year or more to those who had never participated or who did so for less time. Over 18 months, students with longer exposure to

the centers were 61 percent less likely to go from a high to a low level of effort in school and 33 percent less likely to exhibit a decline in self-confidence.

Despite the Beacon centers' successes (strong implementation, positive experiences for youth, the apparent link to school effort and self-confidence), the program's developmental benefits did not translate into better grades, test scores or school attendance. It is possible that over a longer study period, the centers' positive effects on school effort could produce measurable academic gains. On the other hand, it is likely that the Beacon centers would need a more intense academic focus in order to be effective for youth with preexisting educational deficits.

While the Beacons' academic activities were generally well structured and managed, they typically consisted of homework help and tutoring, and were not designed to increase youth's knowledge or skills in a particular academic area. In addition, young people may not have attended the centers often enough to achieve academic gains; attendance averaged about once per week at three of the centers and three times per week in the other two. Past research suggests that a more focused approach and higher attendance are needed in order to have an impact on academic outcomes.

Lessons Learned

A number of important lessons can be drawn from the Beacon centers' experience. First, developing and adhering to a concrete theory of change proved to be extremely valuable. Articulating and tracking the initiative's goals and strategies helped everyone involved in the centers to "stay on the same page" and facilitated coherent programming. The theory of change ensured accountability among the stakeholders. Across this multisite initiative, with programs managed by different community-based organizations, researchers found a striking consistency of quality and ascribed it largely to effective use of the theory of change.

It is also clear that the Beacon centers were unusually well staffed, well managed and well funded; obviously, these factors contributed to the centers' success. Public and private funders collaborated to provide strong fiscal and administrative support. To serve between 600 and 1300 youth (in the final year), each center had a core annual budget of \$300,000, a full-time director and program coordinators.

Certain programmatic practices emerged as important. Smaller groups and higher staff-to-youth ratios contributed to youth's feeling supported by staff and by peers. But there were contradictions around these findings: Higher staff-to-youth ratios also tended to inhibit peer cooperation, which was in and of itself an important goal. When Beacon Center staff encouraged young people to work together, peer relationships improved and young people felt more attached to the adult staff member. Thus, to promote the kind of adult-youth relationships that have been shown to be protective, programs may need to complement high levels of support (facilitated by higher staff-to-youth ratios) with the strong encouragement of cooperative activities.

Finally, the Beacon evaluation confirmed that long-term participation in a diverse set of activities (not just academic or recreational) is crucial for improving developmental outcomes. Reinforcing evidence from previous studies, youth who took part in both educational and other activities for two or more multi-month sessions reported the largest increases in two key areas: leadership experiences and having support from non-family adults. Another finding shows how this support from non-family adults can matter: Youth were most likely to

continue coming to a center if they formed a strong relationship with an adult early on. Thus, in this study, as in other P/PV evaluations, we found that a supportive, caring adult can make an important difference in a young person's life.

Looking Ahead

The Beacon experience clearly shows that high-quality programs are possible. Well managed, staffed and funded initiatives can attract needy students and offer them high-quality programming. But confirming other studies, the evaluation also indicates that there are real trade-offs involved in planning and implementing after-school initiatives: Maximizing enrollment to benefit as many youth as possible may not be compatible with creating intimate settings that engender positive developmental experiences (like those the Beacons were able to offer). Providing a rich and diverse array of activities that attract and engage youth may not produce the academic results that more structured, focused programs can achieve.

The public funds currently available for after-school programs are provided with an expectation that these programs will give students effective academic support. But some practitioners ask whether helping students perform well on tests should be central to the missions of after-school initiatives, or if these programs—which can provide developmentally enriching experiences often unavailable during the school day—should view grades and test scores as more peripheral concerns.³ The No Child Left Behind Act has pushed schools to be more and more focused on testing, standards and accountability, and some may see after-school programs as the one remaining place where youth can experience a more creative, applied kind of learning.

As managers grapple with these questions, they may find it useful to create their own theories of change. Given the many and potentially competing purposes that can be set for after-school services, the field might benefit from broader use of theories of change or other similar strategies, sparking debate and dialogue about which outcomes matter and are realistic to expect.

It is possible that by protecting young people from typical declines in school effort and self-confidence, the Beacon centers may help move youth in the right direction for improved academic performance. But our

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findings suggest that even high-quality after-school programs may find it difficult to achieve quantifiable academic outcomes (especially in the short term and for young people who start with serious educational deficits). To realize that goal, programs will have to intensify their educational services and encourage higher levels of attendance. Whether this can be done without sacrificing the richness of non-academic activities or the inclusion of very needy youth is still an open question.

Endnotes

- 1 Robert Halpern, *Making Play Work: The Promise of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).
- 2 Figure 1 delineates the outcomes that were the focus of the *After-School Pursuits* report. In addition to site-level outcomes, the theory of change also specified intermediary-level and initiative-level outcomes.
- 3 Halpern suggests that after-school programs may face “heightened, and largely inappropriate, expectations.” 111.

To view the *After-School Pursuits* report in its entirety, please visit our website: www.ppv.org.

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