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...An exploration of how evidence-based programs can be integrated into community interactions.

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PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN A COMMUNITY CONTEXT

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OVERVIEW¹

Participants in a recent Child Trends Roundtable explored how evidence-based programs might be integrated into community initiatives to strengthen outcomes for children. Participants discussed both practice and policy implications for this approach. Those attending agreed that it was important for programs and initiatives to be based on research, but noted that many gaps exist in available research and that no one simple formula exists for improving child outcomes. Participants also noted that communities and the initiatives that they implement differ in many ways. Consequently, evidence-based programs often need to be adapted to recognize these differences, while retaining core components and fidelity of implementation. Participants emphasized the need for programs to identify outcomes and to be data driven. While agreeing that integrating evidence-based programs into community initiatives is harder than it sounds, participants said that synergies were likely to result and that ways to integrate and align out-of-school time programs with community initiatives need greater attention. Insights from this Roundtable provide valuable guidance to policymakers and foundations considering investments in similar initiatives and to communities seeking to build or improve a system of services for disadvantaged children and youth.

BACKGROUND

Across the country, communities have sought to incorporate strong out-of-school time programs for children. Increasingly, these communities have recognized the need to provide a spectrum of programs in sequence and to align these programs with community initiatives. This recognition generally reflects an understanding that participating in a single program often fails to produce a large or permanent change in the life trajectory of a disadvantaged child. Related to this is an understanding that the positive effects of being in a program can be undermined by a negative community environment. To enhance children's development, then, participation in a sequence of programs and experiencing positive community supports are needed. This awareness is sometimes based on research and sometimes based on the life experience of community members. Work that distills lessons is only beginning from the experiences of leaders and researchers, to inform policy and program decision making. To help advance work in this area, in January 2009, Child Trends brought together representatives from ten community initiatives that incorporate evidence-based and evidence-informed programs. These organizations are shown in the box on page six.

THEMES

A number of themes emerged from the Roundtable and subsequent discussions.

- **Evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions both have a role to play.**
Child Trends' compilation of experimentally evaluated social interventions for children— LINKS, or Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully—includes information on more than 360 rigorous evaluation studies, with more being added every day. Roundtable participants generally understood and appreciated the value of “gold standard” evidence from random-assignment experiments for understanding what works under carefully controlled circumstances. They noted that syntheses of what works and what doesn't work can provide important insights into effective programs and can identify programs that organizations can select for their communities. At the same time, everyone at the meeting recognized that many important questions cannot be addressed through random assignment experiments, that many promising approaches have not yet been rigorously studied, and that the development of new and effective approaches to improve critical child and youth outcomes is an ongoing process. For example, experimental studies of community initiatives are not generally possible, because communities cannot easily be randomly assigned. Accordingly, the group resonated with the phrase “evidence-informed”; that is, interventions informed by provider experience, child development theory, qualitative studies, and basic research. This phrase implies that information from random assignment experiments will be used where available and relevant, but it also represents an acknowledgement that other kinds of evidence will be needed as well.

- **Community is broader than a geographic location.**
Participants recognized that legislation and funding are generally focused on a particular political or geographic area. “Place matters,” a participant commented, and poverty and danger in a community are important for the people who live there. However, participants noted that “connections” are as important, or sometimes more important, than geography. Working in small areas may mean that people move and are lost to the program or that community boundaries miss the groups that have bonds and common concerns.

Participants observed that an initiative can be community-wide but offered in a “higher concentration” in some areas or to high-risk children. For example, all children may benefit from prevention programs that support the development of social skills, whereas children exhibiting behavior problems may also benefit from receiving treatment or therapy to address their greater needs.

Participants also noted that the right size for a community-based initiative was not clear and might depend upon the community and the initiative. Too large and complex an initiative might crumble under its own weight. At the same time, working across an entire city or county might bring resources to the needs of the community at a level that was not available for smaller areas. For example, consistent eligibility requirements could be implemented and funding secured for the area as a whole.

- **Having good data is critical.**
All of the participants emphasized the importance of reliable data and research. In this context, they considered child outcomes data to be the bedrock. This need is common to programs and community initiatives, and the measurement of outcomes (that is, how children are faring) was distinguished from inputs (what supports or services they receive). In addition, participants noted that positive outcomes—not just negative outcomes—need to be measured.

Roundtable members also emphasized the need to know what kinds of impacts can be expected when a program is implemented. What is realistic for their community? And what interim benchmarks can be assessed to know that progress is occurring?

Participants in a separate Practitioners Roundtable questioned whether every program needs to do a formal evaluation. Whether they do or not, participants in both Roundtables noted that organizations need to develop the internal capacity to evaluate themselves on an ongoing basis. Data from such evaluations can inform programs about critical questions, such as whether expected outputs and outcomes are being achieved, and they can highlight whether and where midcourse corrections might be needed to strengthen some services or eliminate others.

Data sharing and confidentiality represent real concerns. However, it was noted that the District of Columbia has developed common consent and waiver protocols that permit data collection (or aggregation) by those identified in the consent and waivers for the purposes of comprehensive assessment, treatment, and service integration. Practitioners emphasized that it was critical to ensure transparency in data collection and sharing.

Participants also pointed out that policy makers often expect evidence-based programs to yield outcomes right away. Given this expectation, participants emphasized the need for programs to convey a sense of what programs can realistically achieve, specifically: what outcomes can be achieved; what is the magnitude of the changes that might be expected, and when; and what are the intermediate markers that need to be monitored along the way?

- **An array of programs is needed.**

A common scenario is a funder wanting a quick, lasting, and low-cost answer to the challenges faced by disadvantaged children. However, child development is often likened to a *feeding* model, rather than an *inoculation* model. In other words, ongoing inputs over time are needed. However, participants noted that little information exists on how to sequence a series of programs. Indeed, we don't know which programs work in concert with one another or how.

Also, even with evidence-based programs, the question of “evidence-based for whom?” still arises, one participant pointed out. While adaptation is not always necessary, if a program was developed for and tested among residents of one community, adaptation may be needed for a different community. If so, it is necessary to identify the core components of the program that cannot be changed, as well as ways to carefully and cautiously adapt the program to make it acceptable and effective in a different community. Another participant noted that the field is a laboratory, and “We are always becoming.” Yet participants emphasized that adaptation should not undermine fidelity to the program's core components.

- **Synergies should be expected.**

Participants noted that implementing evidence-based programs, being rational and data driven, and empowering communities to collect data and evaluate themselves *should* lead to synergies—that is, to larger changes than would be expected for the individual components alone. However, *whether* such synergies actually occur is another issue. Participants acknowledged that much remains to be learned about when and how synergies occur and about ways to make them more likely.

- **Most programs are “homegrown” and, though they often lack evidence of effectiveness, they cannot be simply replaced wholesale with evidence-based programs.**

Most states and communities have numerous programs that have received funding for years, despite a lack of evidence that these programs produce positive outcomes for children. Although some homegrown programs may not work, others may be effective. Policy makers and agency heads urgently need to identify promising programs and distinguish them from ineffective programs. They also need to develop monitoring systems and to plan for rigorous evaluation of promising programs.²

Practitioners expressed a need for assistance with developing evaluation plans. However, because the existing array of programs cannot simply be eliminated and replaced, the homegrown programs also need interim assistance in improving program quality and impacts. While, in reality, some practitioners simply want to receive continued funding to do what they currently do, participants in the Practitioners Roundtable acknowledged that, especially in an environment of limited public resources, good intentions are not enough. In their view, programs need to monitor implementation and outcomes and strengthen program components to improve services and activities and to increase the achievement of good outcomes for children and youth. Because few programs or communities have research or evaluation specialists, on-the-ground assistance, or “mentoring,” may be a valuable way to help programs with implementation, quality improvement, and evaluation

When new programs are brought into a community, fidelity of implementation is rarely perfect, and may in fact be very imperfect. One participant noted, though, that imperfect implementation may actually reflect divergent needs in a new community. It was suggested that a toolbox is needed to help with implementation. As it is, participants noted, a great deal of “unconscious adaptation” is occurring, but it needs to be more conscious and data driven.

- **Funders and agency heads are confused by divergent “what works” systems.**
As the emphasis on evidence-based programs has increased, both practitioners and public and private funders have sought to identify programs that are effective. Their efforts are often stymied, however, by the plethora of rating systems and by program advocates who assert that their program “works” or is “evidence-based” despite a lack of rigorous research (and sometimes without any evidence at all). While random assignment experiments are the “gold standard” for identifying programs that have impacts, as noted above, gaps exist in this research in terms of the outcomes examined, the population groups that have been studied, and the approaches that can be evaluated in a random assignment study. In addition, practitioners are not sure how to identify effective programs that have not been experimentally evaluated and found to have positive impacts. When they seek further information in this area, they are confused by the varied rating systems that identify “effective” programs, which use very different criteria. [To assist practitioners and funders, Child Trends has produced a related brief that describes numerous “what works” websites and reports that can be used to identify programs that meet a particular community’s needs and criteria.³]
- **Partnering with schools is often a complex and difficult undertaking.**
An additional theme that emerged from the Roundtable centered on the role of schools as a partner and the implications of school reform. Practitioners noted that they need to be involved in discussions about year-round schooling. However, one participant commented, “The school system is set up in a flawed way for purposes of working with the community.” When practitioners in a subsequent Roundtable were asked what organization would be their ideal partner, they responded that (after the U.S. Treasury) the local education agency would be their preferred partner. They also noted that, for a partnership to work, organizational missions have to be well aligned. In addition, the partnership needs to be long-term, one that outlasts a particular superintendent or administration. One participant commented that we should not discuss systems in terms of short-term programs. Reinforcing this point, the participant noted that we don’t hesitate to talk long term when discussing roads and bridges, and we need to recognize that building human capital requires a long term investment as well.
- **A continuum of intervention strategies exists.**
Some community initiatives involve an array of programs directed at individuals, while other initiatives address change at the level of community institutions and economic opportunities, and some do both. The range of approaches includes:

- Single programs that serve individuals (or individual families) in that program;
- A series of aligned and sequenced programs that serve individuals (or families with children);
- Community-wide programs, such as education, that reach all or nearly all children (or families with children); and
- Communitywide programs that focus not just on children and families with children, but also on issues that affect the entire community, such as crime and employment.

Even among the organizations represented by participants in the Roundtable, models of program and community initiatives ranged widely.

- **Critical issues for a community, agency, or funder need to be resolved before moving forward.** Roundtable participants emphasized that, before embarking on building a community-wide initiative or integrating effective programs into a community initiative, funders and agency heads need to ask a number of questions:
 - What is the community?
 - What definition of evidence-based or evidence-informed will be used?
 - What are the vision and the plan?
 - Will that vision and plan fail? What causes a program to fail?
 - What do we know about when the approach succeeds or fails?
 - How do you build an organizational culture that fosters the use of data?
 - What is the likely take-up rate among staff?
 - Do staff have to be pulled out of the program for training?
 - What are the training and technical assistance needs?
 - How can the programs and initiatives be funded?
 - Is the funding sustainable?

CONCLUSION

Many factors drive program providers to work with community initiatives, organizations, and schools. In particular, practitioners believe that outcomes for children and youth will be better if quality program offerings are not offset by negative community influences and experiences. Rather, the expectation is that program assets can be positively reinforced by a supportive community, resulting in synergies that can make a real difference for children and youth. Participants in a Roundtable convened to discuss evidence-based programs within a community context noted, however, that this is an evolving topic. The definition of community varies widely, as does the continuum of intervention strategies. Moreover, as yet, the evidence base is so thin that using the phrase “evidence-informed” rather than “evidence-based” often seems appropriate. However, important advice emerged from the Roundtable, including recognizing the value of using data to guide and shape programs, taking both program implementation and sustainability seriously, planning carefully, and being sure that missions are well-aligned across programs, community initiatives and education systems.

ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED AT ROUNDTABLE

Academy for Educational Development Center for Youth Development
Center for the Study of Social Policy
Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County
City Year DC
Community Action Project of Tulsa County
Consumer Health Foundation
Harlem Children’s Zone
Pew Charitable Trusts
Skillman Foundation
Youth Policy Institute

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REFERENCES

¹ This brief is the product of a Policy Roundtable on “Programs for Children and Youth in a Community Context.” Child Trends hosted the Roundtable on January 26, 2009.

² The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has developed a three-tiered approach to evaluations. The categories are Proven Effective, Demonstrated Effective, and Apparent Effective.

³ Terzian, M., Moore, K.A., Williams-Taylor, L., and Nguyen, H. (2009). Online Resources for Identifying Evidence-Based Out-of-School Time Programs: A User’s Guide (*Research-to-Results* Brief). Washington, DC: Child Trends.

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