

Promising Practices in Afterschool

NIOST is one of six national organizations across the country that has been funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to collect promising practices in afterschool. Each organization collects practices from different geographic areas and program auspices.

NIOST's focus is identifying system building and infrastructure practices from the 20 cities across the country participating in the Cross-Cities Network. Practices are collected on an ongoing basis and are submitted to the AED Center for Youth Development and Policy Research where a review team evaluates the practices to ensure they are valid. Once practices pass successfully through the review process, they are posted to the www.afterschool.org web site so that others may learn from them.

To learn more about the Promising Practices Initiative or to submit your own practice, please visit www.afterschool.org

Or

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Promising Practices In Citywide Afterschool Initiatives

Creating Infrastructure for Continuous Improvement

About Fort Worth After School

The history of Fort Worth After School (FWAS) is one of strategic planning and broad collaboration. Through several task forces dating back to 1995, joint meetings of the school and city council, the Our City Our Children initiative, and other efforts, the groundwork for the Fort Worth After School collaboration was laid. The city also had a history of providing after-school programs through the Weed and Seed program that offered safe havens at selected schools in high crime neighborhoods. Other organizations such as the YMCA, Clayton Child Care, Boys & Girls Club, and Camp Fire USA also provided afterschool opportunities.

In March 1997 the Fort Worth City Council and the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) passed a resolution to support and promote city/school cooperation. The purpose of the resolution was to stimulate collaborative planning, avoid duplication, pool collective resources, streamline administrative processes and facilitate on-going dialogue (King, 2002). By September 1999 the Assistant City Manager and the school district's Deputy Superintendent had convened the Task Force for After School Programs, and it met regularly through May 2000. The Task Force outlined four operational imperatives, the first "to establish program goals and objectives that are measurable and result in desired outcomes through a scientific evaluation process" (FWAS, Teresa C, King, Associate, Texas A&M University, pg.7)

FWISD and the City allocated \$2.2 million for the FWAS initiative. Along with creating a mission statement and outlining a recommended model for site selection, evaluation, and coordination, the Task Force recommended a governance structure consisting of a joint, nine member Coordinating Board, with membership from the organizations represented on the Task Force. The role of the Coordinating Board was to oversee the overall program and service provider selection processes, assess evaluation information, recommend future direction and standards, and monitor funding. A Director and two Program Coordinators, paid for by FWISD, were hired to administrate the day-to-day program operations. By the third year of operation over 2600 students are provided with after-school enrichment programs at 52 sites (47 elementary schools and 5 middle schools).

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Written by Joyce Shortt.

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Building an Evaluation process

Because of the number of different funders and stakeholders, the After School Task Force considered evaluation especially important. Funders like to know their funds are being used effectively. Thus, evaluation can be used to promote accountability. The evaluation tools can reinforce desired values and practices. Stakeholders can see what works and what needs improvement. A neutral third party can build trust with stakeholders and guide the initiative towards continuous improvement.

The Coordinating Board developed a request for proposals (RFP) to evaluate the programs, and funds were sought to fund the evaluation process. A local foundation allocated matching funds for the first year, and FWISD has contracted for services for years two and three.

The evaluation was based on the program framework developed by the Coordinating Board. Goals included increasing educational competence, and physical and social development.

The first objective of the evaluation was to create a systemic approach for measuring program outcomes and using the results to improve and enhance benefits to children and their communities. Other objectives included determining which program offerings were most effective in meeting the needs of the children and their communities in the short and long term, and to provide a basis upon which future funding decisions could be made.

The Board defined the nature and scope of services for the evaluation and asked the selected consultant to design an evaluation model including identification and means for measuring the desired outcomes. All stakeholder groups were to be involved in the data collection processes, and staff were to be trained in data collection and reporting.

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The consultant was also asked to work closely with the Coordinating Board, after school program staff, site-based planning teams and staff at each program site. The evaluator was also contracted to make a formal oral presentation to the Board and to a joint meeting of the elected officials from City and the FWISD.

The Board selected a researcher whose prior experience and proposed model was conducive to creating an atmosphere that supported the importance of evaluation as an enrichment and addition to the ongoing work of FWAS. (*Peter A. Witt is the Elda K. Bradberry Recreation and Youth Development Chair, Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism, Texas A&M University, pwitt@tamu.edu).

Dr. Peter Witt has extensive experience conducting evaluations of after-school programs and has a commitment to sharing his work publicly with others in the field on the Internet. He believes that, as a university employee, his work belongs to the community and is not proprietary. In most cases, Dr. Witt only works on projects that adhere to this philosophy of sharing information and lessons learned.

Utilizing evaluation results for continuous improvement

The first year evaluation conducted by Dr. Peter Witt and Research Associate, Teresa King, gathered information from various program stakeholders, including the program participants and their parents, the

service providers and the site coordinators and staff they employed, and the principals from the schools that hosted the programs. Information was also collected from members of the Coordinating Board and FWAS staff. Information was collected about program inputs (facilities, activities, staff, equipment, and snacks), outputs (# of activities, of participants, of program hours) and outcomes (social development, physical development, homework completion and school related outcomes). The outcome variables used were framed by concepts

from the Search Institute's Developmental Asset Model.

The evaluators summarized the findings in a "report card" format called "the bottom line". The report card lists and describes characteristics, and rates them on a scale of 0-4 relative to how much the program exhibits the characteristic. Evaluator's comments follow each item. The conclusion of the report includes recommendations that are specific and detailed and relate to the characteristics described and rated. Since the characteristics are not limited to program implementation, but also cover system functions, the report truly helps to point out the strategies for improvement of the initiative. The non-program elements include: site selection, provider selection, statement of need, and provision of safe and secure environments.

FWAS staff developed a strategy for the second year, which they named "basic training," that was based on evaluation results that had indicated that not all sites operated with a complete knowledge of the goals and mission of FWAS. This was especially true if a provider who also operated programs under other auspices also operated a FWAS site. These providers were not as likely to embrace the goals and mission of FWAS, and were more likely to run their FWAS program in a manner similar to the ones they were already conducting. The strategy was to reinforce the importance of the goals and mission of FWAS. This foundation could then be referenced to assist sites as they operated programs, and accountability could be required. One specific strategy suggested was to track attendance of children individually. This was not a small project and took substantial work and the help of one member of the evaluation team to develop an attendance tracking system. Another strategy was to have programs self-assess their compliance with the program operation standards.

The report card format puts all the stakeholders on the same footing and reinforces collective ownership, with all parties sharing responsibility for improvements. Shared responsibility leads to a strong mandate for improvement strategies and eventually results in building a highly effective system.

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The second year evaluation gave FWAS staff the opportunity to look at what was working and to reveal areas for further improvement. With more thoroughly tracked attendance,

FWAS staff could take a deeper look at the attendance figures. Were the youngsters who most needed the program attending at levels that could make a difference for that child? Attention was focused on seeing that enrolled children/youth increased their attendance and thereby could benefit more from the program.

Sustaining Improvements

The second annual evaluation of the initiative led the Coordinating Board to conclude that while the initiative as a whole was being evaluated, it was the right time to begin a process to look more in-depth at the individual sites. The Coordinating Board set up a committee of school personnel and service providers to develop comprehensive standards and guidelines. The committee developed a handbook, self-study and peer review process.

Overall, through comprehensive ongoing evaluation, FWAS has developed an infrastructure for monitoring program elements, created systems that support and encourage continuous improvement, and has identified a process that provides accountability to the stakeholders.

CityWorks

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Reference:

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