

# **After-School Program Accountability Whitepaper**

## **Cooperation in Louisville**

### **Brings Accountability to After-School Programs**

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Parents, taxpayers, donors and politicians rightfully demand a solid return on education and youth program investments. An era of massive state education reform efforts, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), mayors taking control of large city school districts, as well as renewed political pressures create a reverberation in the ears of educators and youth programs alike: Accountability! Accountability! Accountability!

Accountability demands hit Kentucky schools head-on 15 years ago [1990] with the passage of Kentucky Education Reform. The reforms envisioned that school accountability would be determined by cognitive measures - student achievement as measured by test scores - as well as non-cognitive measures like attendance, dropout rates and post high school transitions. During the initial years of reform, getting schools to accept accountability standards and change took a significant effort. Educators also began to recognize improvements needed to meet student achievement goals required more than just classroom instruction.

One important and promising development several years ago was the push for greater extra-classroom opportunities for learning, increased student connectedness to schools, and cognitive development that became embodied in after-school programs. However, the models for these programs have varied considerably across, and even within, districts. Claims for success or lack of it, have sometimes been exaggerated or, conversely, minimized. Think tanks and funding sources have been concerned about how we can obtain information to determine if the hundreds, maybe thousands of programs they support are making a measurable difference in our youth.

Yet, how are communities to assess what works well and what needs improvement? Local United Way organizations, in particular, are grappling with the question of how to accurately determine the value of their education and youth development investments. Many are forming task forces to establish measurement standards that will help direct resources into channels that hold the most promise of strengthening the community. Educators in the Jefferson County Public School District, along with community providers of after-school programming in Louisville, Kentucky, recognized that better information was needed to guide the development and funding of activities in light of their effects on in-school student achievement.

Louisville's leaders shared a vision of the benefits of accountability measures for children, youth providers and educators. At the same time that these meetings were taking place, new technology was becoming available. The Academy for Educational Development (AED) approached a leadership local group and provided a mechanism to move the vision forward. Through funds from a Mott Foundation grant, AED was looking for communities to help develop accountability measures for community schools, before and after school programs, and school to career programs.

Coincidentally, for a number of years, community groups in Louisville have been exploring methods of developing a data warehouse to evaluate our success at being a good community to live in and raise a family. AED's focus matched the effort underway in Louisville. It helped us bring the right organizations to the table and develop agreements on outcomes that youth providers could support as valuable measures of youth program success.

Through this initial phase of planning, the community groups and Jefferson County Public Schools agreed that several outcomes would be mutually valuable measures of youth program success:

- Academic achievement (including improved test scores; basic skills test; reducing the gap between standards of different races and socio-economic groups; and readiness for next level).
- Behaviors (discipline, suspensions, juvenile crime).
- Dropouts and transitions (whether graduation occurs; one and five years following graduation).
- School attendance.

The Metro Louisville Boys and Girls Clubs, Louisville Urban League, Portland Community House, Greater Louisville Metro Parks Department, and the YMCA, to mention a few, were organizations initially on board. They shared in common investment in programs that aim to positively impact one or more of the above outcomes.

Evaluating these outcomes against program participation is a monumental task. How do we compare program participation to school outcomes? First, we needed a simple method to collect data on youth attendance in community-based programs - something other than a sign-in sheet. The method we were searching for would avoid the pitfalls of self-reporting and minimize the need for re-keying data information.

KidTrax<sup>®</sup>, a software application designed to track membership and attendance in youth programs for community-based organizations, proved to be the step down the avenue to successfully tracking participation. KidTrax uses scan-card technology to track youth activity in and out of programs using a very inexpensive, easy to replace bar-coded membership card. The second step is to take the participation data and append it to the student's regular academic records by importing it into the district's data warehouse. Using a web-enabled interface, the community-based organizations (CBOs) or JCPS could compare participation information against real school data to get an individualized picture of program effectiveness, as it affects student performance over time. This, in turn, provides a powerful research tool that is capable of providing community-based organizations and the district with a method of analyzing the effects of those after school activities, in light of scholastic achievement.

The Louisville group still needed, and has since developed, a “middleware” software application to allow the data collected at the remote sites through KidTrax to be integrated into the data being routinely collected by the school district. The partnership, through an agreement with the University of Louisville, developed the *Connectedness Analysis Reporting System (CARS)*. CARS allows the CBOs to develop, from the aggregate records on after-school program attendance and school cognitive and non-cognitive data, individualized reports. These reports help CBOs and district staff, review their strategy effectiveness and provide funders with hard data when reviewing their investments in the community.

Results from this collaborative and innovative use of technology are already becoming apparent. Using the data warehouse/KidTrax/CARS system, a researcher assessed the effectiveness of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century grant-funded after-school program regarding student attendance in school.

During the last (2004-05) school year,

- Out of a total of approximately 8,161 individual community school participants, about 76,400 student visits and 16,411 adult visits were recorded.

The following data was analyzed to reveal these correlations: Behaviors (discipline, suspensions, juvenile crime).

- Regular student attendees were compared to non-regular attendees to assess the impact of the community schools on attendance. A statistically significant difference favoring the regular attendees.
- Regular attendees were compared to non-regular attendees to assess the impact of the community schools on student achievement in reading. A correlation design employing the non-regular attendees as a control group was used to analyze the Classroom Assessment System data. A statistically significant relationship favoring the regular attendees was found with regard to reading achievement scores.
- In terms of two 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers, Okolona and Hazelwood, students in grades 3-5 were tested using Success Maker Pro<sup>®</sup> software in reading and math. Average student gains ranged from +0.75 to +1.13 (grade-equivalent gains) when comparing entry with after-treatment levels.

The evaluation noted:

“The results [...] indicated a relationship between the total number of visits and improvement in attendance at school. For those students with higher levels of participation in the after school program, the impact of the program is positive. A positive correlation trend was observed for those students with higher dosage in the area of academic performance. The higher the number of visits to the centers, the lower the number of suspensions and the higher the GPA. The association with academic performance measures is promising, since the district under examination is re-focusing and expanding the academic oriented aspect of the program.”

Leaders in the community and JCPS administrators who read this report acknowledged the significance of having valid program participation data connected to school outcomes. To implement a program similar to this assessment system, the following should be present in your community:

- Key leaders and organizations must support using youth data as a means of assessing program effectiveness.
- Collaborative partners must be willing to share data.
- The community must agree school outcomes are valid measures for a youth organization's success.
- Partners must have a confidentiality agreement that is non-bureaucratic.
- A data “warehouse” must be developed that can match data provided from multiple organizations with individual student outcomes.

Louisville is in the early stages of this assessment effort. The challenge now is to expand the program to more community-based programs. The vision of project participants is to increase the student successes of all youth-serving organizations by focusing on agreed outcomes. Ultimately, the project will make strides in improving student outcomes by allowing community providers to identify youth who are not succeeding and not participating in extra-hour programs. With stronger schools, and stronger after-hours community programs, we are confident of achieving the goals of accountability and that every child will succeed.