INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- In 2009–10, the Urban Institute and The Center for What Works developed and tested an outcome measurement framework with DC OST providers.

- Providers offered a wide range of activities, operated in different settings, and served youth age 5 to 24.

- The challenge ahead is to expand the pilot to all OST programs in the District.

D.C. Out-of-School Time Programs Tackle Outcome Measures

Mary K. Winkler, Carol J. De Vita, Saunji Fyffe, and Debra B. Natenshon

Funders and nonprofit leaders are increasingly looking for information that demonstrates the achievements of service programs. The questions "What services do you provide?" and "How many people do you serve?" are being replaced by "What have your services accomplished?" This results-oriented environment set the stage for a pilot study in the District of Columbia to measure outcomes of nonprofit out-of-school time (OST) programs.

Background

In summer 2009, the D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation (The Trust) was engaged in an ongoing effort to build the internal capacity of its OST grantees and help strengthen and improve the quality of services for the District's children and youth. At the same time, the Urban Institute (UI) and The Center for What Works (CWW) were looking for partners to develop and test an outcome measurement framework with local OST providers. This overlap of interests and goals led to a pilot project (January–June 2010) to train a sample of the Trust's OST grantees on collecting and reporting outcome data.

Recruitment of grantees for the pilot study began in fall 2009. A questionnaire was distributed to all 74 Trust OST grantees for fiscal year 2010 to measure their interest in and readiness for participating in the pilot study. UI and CWW also made presentations at the Trust's fall grantee meeting to explain the purpose of the pilot and answer questions about the pilot's procedures and requirements. A formal selection process that included the questionnaire results and feedback from the grantees and the Trust was established, and 27 grantees were selected for the pilot.

Who Participated

The organizations selected for the pilot represented a diverse cross-section of the Trust's OST grantees:

- **They offered a wide range of after-school activities.** Some provided academic tutoring and mentoring programs; others gave computer skills instruction; still others offered dance, arts, culinary, and recreational programs.
- **They operated in different settings** including public charter schools, community-based nonprofit groups, and faith-based organizations.
- **They focused on children and youth of various ages** between 5 and 24.
- **They operated programs of different sizes** serving as few as 25 and as many as 100 or more youth. Overall, more than 800 youth were tracked during the pilot.

Participants in the pilot study were eager to learn how to better manage their programs, keep young people engaged, and demonstrate their accomplishments.

- **They had mixed prior experience with program evaluations or performance measurement.** About 23 percent reported considerable experience, 50 percent reported moderate experience, and 27 percent reported very little experience.

Activities and Structure of the Pilot Study

UI and CWW conducted training events and offered technical assistance to give pilot participants the knowledge, direction, and tools they would need to collect and report outcome data. Activities included the following:

- **A half-day workshop** in January introduced participants to the concepts of outcome measurement, helped them identify suitable outcomes for their programs, and gave participants tools (such as survey instruments and Excel worksheets) as well as technical assistance for collecting and entering data. The UI/CWW team prepared a guidebook with instructional materials and gave each participant a copy to use as a reference and share with other members of his or her staff.
- **Two webinars** guided pilot participants throughout the process. The first webinar in February reviewed data collection and data-entry procedures; the second webinar in April/May focused on data analysis and reporting. The webinars provided opportunities for grantees to ask questions and learn from one another.
- **Individual technical assistance** was provided by the UI/CWW team throughout the pilot. Most queries were handled by e-mail and telephone.
- **Two rounds of data collection** were required of participating grantees. Initial baseline data were collected in February, and follow-up data were collected in May. Although the length of time between the first and second rounds of data collection was too short to measure reliable program outcomes, the grantees learned how to conduct pre- and post-program assessments that will help them better understand the progress youth are making.
- **A post-pilot survey** provided UI/CWW and the Trust with important feedback on what participants learned and what they found

helpful about the pilot. This information will be instrumental in strengthening future outcome measurement efforts for community-based OST providers.

Key Findings

At least five key findings emerged from this six-month pilot program.

1. **Participants in the pilot were eager to learn.** They typically were drawn to the pilot because they wanted to learn how to better manage their programs, keep young people engaged, and demonstrate their accomplishments to funders. At the initial workshop, several grantees eagerly expressed interest in collecting all 12 of the suggested indicators. The UI/CWW team counseled these enthusiastic participants to start slowly, learn the skills and data collection procedures, and expand into more areas later. Grantees typically selected between three and eight indicators to track. They tended to favor indicators measuring academic performance and school engagement.

2. **Providing ready-made tools facilitated grantees' learning curve.** Community-based service providers often have little time to locate or develop assessment tools. To address this problem, the UI/CWW team provided not only a menu of potential outcome indicators that grantees were invited to select and track, but also a detailed Excel spreadsheet to record the data collected during the pilot. Most grantees found the spreadsheet effective and easy to use. In fact, one of the more experienced grantees said that receiving the spreadsheet at the initial workshop saved her hours of time in setting up her own reporting template. A few of the more advanced grantees, however, requested other software options.

3. **Technical ability varied greatly among participants.** Grantees with more advanced technical skills had little problem collecting and recording data. Those with limited or no experience with Excel had a more difficult time. Targeting training materials to grantees with a wide range of skill levels was a challenge. It was difficult to determine grantee skill

levels before the training because organizations tended to over- or underestimate their actual skills and experience in collecting and reporting data.

4. **Providing technical assistance was critical to the success of the pilot.** Participants required assistance beyond the formal workshop and webinars. Pilot participants needed help, for example, with basic Excel functions, completing the reporting template, and collecting and coding data. Most of the one-on-one technical assistance was conducted by phone or e-mail correspondence. Personalized assistance kept grantees focused and on track.

5. **Prior experience with outcome measurement led to different needs and expectations about training materials.** For example, grantees with little to no experience measuring performance-related outcomes rated the webinars high. Grantees with more experience tended to rate the webinars lower. This variation in experience suggests that community-based organizations with prior experience in outcome measurement may need more advanced training. Several grantees suggested greater focus on the internal and external uses of the data and help with communicating their successes to staff, board members, and outside funders. Organizations with more limited exposure to outcome measurement require basic training on how to collect, record, analyze, and report information.

Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

Although the pilot was a limited, six-month effort to refine and test a coherent strategy to introduce outcome measures to community-based nonprofits and build their capacity to collect and report such data, it is clear that several steps need to be taken to enhance and support future efforts. Our initial thoughts are outlined below.

- **It takes at least a full academic year of data collection to obtain reliable measures of change.** The post-pilot survey revealed that the timing and length of the pilot was a major concern for participating grantees. The pilot began in the middle of the school year

(January) and ended before the last day of school (May). This relatively short time frame challenged grantees to fit new data collection, data entry, and reporting procedures into already-full schedules, and some measures, such as final grades, were not available by the end of the pilot. Several grantees suggested extending the pilot beyond six months to cover the full academic year.

- **Getting school records was a stumbling block for many grantees.** Although many grantees wanted to measure the academic performance of the young people they were working with, they encountered difficulty in obtaining these records. Student report cards and standardized test scores are not readily released to community-based OST providers, making it difficult for them to measure and assess the needs and academic progress of the young people in their program. Some pilot participants tried to obtain academic records through parents, but this strategy yielded mixed results. Supporting the current plan to share student data through after-school coordinators in public schools is a vital step in helping measure the outcomes of youth and youth-serving programs, but appropriate safeguards must be in place to protect student privacy.

- **Grantees expressed a need for age-appropriate assessment instruments.** Grantees serving young children found the assessment tools too advanced cognitively for some of their participants. Based on this feedback, the UI/CWW team recommends that further work be done to identify valid assessment tools that target children in elementary and middle schools.

- **In a few cases, literacy deficiencies made data collection difficult.** Some grantees reported that youth found the wording of the assessment questions confusing and difficult to understand. Some youth were not able to distinguish between categories of survey responses and therefore were unsure how to answer questions. The adults administering the assessments had to help these young people complete the questionnaires. Such assistance can skew results and is not desired to collect valid information. The situation illustrates one difficulty in conducting performance assessments among youth with varying levels of education and reading comprehension. Materials used in the pilot were drawn from previously validated assessment tools, but they proved inadequate for some youth. Further research is needed to develop tools that might be used for young people with low levels of literacy.

A Successful Effort

This pilot program conducted by UI and CWW for the Trust was designed to build the capacity of a small group of Trust OST grantees and enable them to collect and report program outcomes. By several measures, the pilot was highly successful.

- 25 of 27 organizations completed the pilot program, for a 93 percent retention rate. One organization withdrew because it had an opportunity to participate in a pilot focused on fundraising and it did not have the capacity to do both pilots; the other organization withdrew because of unanticipated organizational challenges.
- Participants were highly engaged in all core pilot activities; the overall participation rate was 84 percent.
- Over 95 percent of grantees said they would recommend the pilot to colleagues or other organizations.
- The majority of participating organizations (73 percent) planned to continue using the pilot's indicators and data collection techniques. The remaining 27 percent said they were unsure of future plans. No organizations had a negative response.

The results of this pilot reflect a great beginning. Community-based groups serving the District's children and youth are clearly receptive and eager to learn. The challenge ahead will be to expand this work to all OST programs in the District and beyond. What is needed is a carefully structured training and technical assistance program to ensure that these skills become infused into the culture of non-profit organizations so programs can measure their results, adjust their activities if needed, and achieve favorable outcomes for youth. •

URBAN INSTITUTE

URBAN INSTITUTE

2100 M Street, NW

Washington, DC 20037-1231

return service requested

For further information, contact

Mary K. Winkler
(mwinkler@urban.org) and
Carol J. De Vita
(cdevita@urban.org)
at the Urban Institute

Debra B. Natenshon
(debra@whatworks.org)
at The Center for What Works

Natasha A. Marshall
(nmarshall@cyitc.org)
at the D.C. Children and Youth
Investment Trust Corporation

About the Urban Institute and The Center for What Works

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research and educational organization located in Washington, D.C., that examines the social, economic, and governance challenges facing the nation. It provides information, analyses, and perspectives to public and private decision makers to help them address these problems and strives to deepen citizens' understanding of the issues and trade-offs that policymakers face. Since the 1970s, the Urban Institute has been a pioneer in developing outcome and performance measures for the nonprofit and public sectors.

The Center for What Works is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building performance measurement capacity and developing a common language for the social sector to benchmark results, learn and improve. Founded over 15 years ago with a vision of helping nonprofits benchmark their results, WhatWorks serves as a bridge between rigorous research and practical tools, resources and services for nonprofits and foundations to become more effective.

URBAN INSTITUTE
2100 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037-1231
(202) 833-7200
paffairs@urban.org   www.urban.org

THE CENTER FOR
WhatWorks®
www.whatworks.org