

Practices To Keep In After-School and Youth Programs



Young People Advocate for, Plan, and
Provide Services to Their Communities



YDI

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE



Youth Development Institute

A Program of the Tides Center

1440 Broadway, Suite 1601

New York, NY 10018

(646) 943-8820

www.ydinstitute.org

Established in 1991 in New York City, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) is one of a growing number of intermediary organizations throughout the United States that seek to create a cohesive community infrastructure to support the positive development of youth. YDI approaches its work with an understanding of and a respect for the complexities of young people's lives and the critical role of youth-serving organizations in supporting young people's growth and development.

YDI's mission is to increase the capacity of communities to support the development of young people. YDI provides technical assistance, conducts research, and assists policy-makers in developing more effective approaches to support and offer opportunities to young people. At the core of YDI's work is a research-based approach to youth development. This work is asset-based in focusing on the strengths of young people, organizations and their staff. It seeks to bring together all of the resources in the lives of young people—school, community, and family—to build coherent and positive environments. The youth development framework identifies five principles that have been found to be present when youth, especially those with significant obstacles in their lives, achieve successful adulthood:

- Close relationships with adults
- High expectations
- Engaging activities
- Opportunities for contribution
- Continuity of adult supports over time

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) also strengthens non-profit organizations and public agencies and builds programs that address gaps in services, in New York City and nationally. It provides training and on-site technical assistance, conducts research, develops practice and policy innovations, and supports advocacy. This work enables organizations and agencies to apply the most promising lessons from research and practice so that they operate efficiently and the young people they serve grow and develop through powerful, sustained, and joyful experiences. YDI helps organizations to design their programs based on sound knowledge about what works and provides their leaders and staff with the information and skills to implement these strategies effectively. YDI addresses gaps in youth services by developing new programs and policies in areas and for populations that are addressed inadequately.

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Introduction

1. INTRODUCTION

Practices to Keep In After-School and Youth Programs is a series of documentation reports that highlight successful approaches in Beacons, which are community centers in school buildings that combine youth and community development to support young people, families, and neighborhoods. Developed for Beacons, these approaches are also widely used in the expanding world of After-School and Youth Programs.

The reports demonstrate how local ingenuity applied to key issues over time can leverage individual, neighborhood, and policy change. They contain ideas for practitioners to adapt to their own programs and for policymakers who seek practical responses to critical concerns—literacy and academic support for youth, preparation for work and participation in the labor force, strengthening families and preventing foster care placement, and creating opportunities to play important roles that strengthen the fabric of community social organization.

The Beacons Movement and After-School Programming

Beacons were first established in New York City in 1991 as part of the Safe Cities Safe Streets program. Located in schools and operated by community-based organizations with core funding provided by New York City, the Beacons represent an innovative collaboration between the public and non-profit sectors to turn the school building into a true public resource. Today, more than 100 Beacons in five cities offer education, recreation, adult education, arts, and family programming after school, before school, on weekends, and during vacations. In New York City, Beacons serve more than 150,000 children, youth, and adults annually. Nationally they reach more than 250,000 individuals in San Francisco, Minneapolis, Denver, and West Palm Beach, Florida.

The Beacons forge partnerships across public, non-profit, and private institutions to fortify neighborhoods. They create pathways for participation between age groups and a continuum of programming that promotes healthy development and strong families. They contribute to local economic development by providing jobs to young people and adults. They help to make neighborhoods safe and connect residents to each other and to local resources. At a time when social services are increasingly located outside of the communities that need them, the Beacons serve as a hub for an array of social and educational supports.

Funding for the Beacon programs described in *Practices to Keep* comes from a wide variety of sources. The range demonstrates a commitment by both the public and private sectors to the comprehensive work of Beacons, with support located in education, labor, child welfare, and human services. Sources include:

- Local tax levy
- Local, state, and federal foster care
- Private foundations
- Public-school dollars
- State after-school funding sources
- Summer Youth Employment Program (OTDA, US DOL)
- Supplemental Education Services, part of No Child Left Behind (US DOE)
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers (US DOE)

- Youth Development and Delinquency Prevention (NYSOYD)
- Workforce Investment Act: In-School Youth; Out-of-School Youth; Literacy (USDOL)

The need for the Beacons and other programs that build on similar principles is more urgent today than ever. The economic crisis that began in 2008 has affected every sector of society, but will inevitably hit hardest in poor communities where the Beacons are located. Too often, services are removed from the very neighborhoods where they are needed most. The Beacons place services in the center of poor communities. The gains that the Beacons help create must be protected, as the need for comprehensive and coordinated services, high quality education and work preparation, and community safety increases. The Beacons have earned the trust and respect of local residents and provide a tested infrastructure for attaching additional or consolidated programs.

Practices to Keep In After-School and Youth Programs illustrates how Beacons provide young people with pathways to increasingly responsible roles, involve youth and adults in improving their communities, and create environments of support to keep families together.

2

From the Ground Up:
Youth and Adults Improve Communities

2. FROM THE GROUND UP

If, as a nation, we are to join with all humankind in achieving a more democratic world, we must harness the energy of our youth and provide them the necessary positive support to be heard and to contribute in meaningful ways to their communities.

(Villarruel, F. A., Perkins, D.F., Borden, L.M. and Keith, J.G, 2003, p. 3)

PICTURE THIS...

- Young people, staff, parents, and teachers in a Beacon redesign their school yard and then obtain approval from the Department of Education to do the work themselves. The result is an intergenerational community space used by more than 3,000 Brooklyn residents annually.
- In another Beacon, young people and adults successfully advocate to prevent their neighborhood from becoming the site for a trash dump.
- Middle school students in a Beacon work with their group leader to establish a youth council. They develop a plan for what the youth council will do in the coming year; spanning the length of the chalkboard, to organize a clothing drive, press for summer jobs, and make community residents aware of environmental issues that affect their lives.

Recent calls for change from throughout the country have communities and individuals thinking about innovative solutions to national and local issues. The after-school movement has become a key force in this effort. The Beacons, a unique school-community partnership model, provide a structure and philosophy for communi-

ties to effect neighborhood improvements by bringing together youth and adults in collaborative projects. The term often used for this approach is “community youth development.” It “harnesses the power of youth to affect community development and similarly, engages communities to embrace their role in the development of youth” (Hughes 2000, p. 7). It involves the community members, adult and youth in addressing the problems and seeking solutions. The examples of community youth development described above illustrate ways in which young people assume active roles that benefit others. The examples can also be readily applied to communities that do not have Beacons, but have other responsive community agencies to act in their stead.

The programs highlighted in this section demonstrate three main concepts:

- 1) Community as a source of strength and as a focus of change
- 2) Active youth participation and decision-making about issues that impact their lives
- 3) Adult-youth partnerships to bring about change in individuals, programs, and communities

A Continuum of Youth Participation

Youth participation within a community youth development framework takes concerted effort and thoughtful work by adults and young people. Youth participation is defined as: involving youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with opportunities for planning and/or decision-making affecting others in an activity whose impact or consequence is extended to others (i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves [National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1975]). In the most participatory exam-

ples, youth and adults think and act together in intergenerational partnerships (Checkoway, 2003). Adults and young people jointly decide on the issue/problem/action they want to work towards, share responsibilities for the process, and collectively work towards change (see the section on transforming a schoolyard, p. 13). At the other end of the spectrum are programs where adult staff have unchallenged or complete authority or token participation of a few youth that do not have much power.

To move towards the more participatory end of the youth participation spectrum does not happen automatically and requires the creation of supportive conditions. In addition to principles such as high expectations and caring relationships that are always key to youth development work, a number of other principles guide productive youth-adult partnerships.

- **Reflective Practice:** Adults and youth reflect on their own experiences as well as the project in which they are engaged to deepen learning, fortify relationships, assess project progress, and build on the personal knowledge base of the group.
- **Power Sharing:** Adults are willing to enter a collaborative relationship with youth and scaffold youth participation in decision making over the life of a project.
- **Planning:** Adults and youth are intentional about planning program goals and activities.
- **Transparency:** Discussions related to power are open and honest. This could be related to how power is shared in the group, how much power the group has within the organization or community, or critically analyzing the way power intersects with race, class, gender, and sexuality in society as a whole.
- **Training:** Young people and adults are provided with the training and guidance necessary to promote meaningful participation in the group.

Impact & Outcomes

The potential for impact when young people and adults work in partnership is significant, and there is an extensive literature about youth participation that documents these benefits: Checkoway, 1998; Checkoway, B., & Richards-Schuster, K. 2003; Fiscus, 2003; Klindera & Menderweld, 2001; Tolman & Pittman 2001; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000.

Through adult-youth partnerships for community youth development, young people gain:

- A sense of responsibility to contribute to society
- Practice in democratic participation
- Social-action skills (e.g., organizing, persuasion, policy)
- Skills in productive work habits
- Heightened sense of control over their own lives
- Increased knowledge about their communities
- Experience with new roles and identities
- Understanding about their rights

Through adult-youth partnerships for community youth development, adults gain:

- Better understanding of youth capabilities and desire to contribute
- Greater ability to understand and work with young people
- Renewed commitment to their organizations
- Excitement and energy from young people's fresh perspectives, enthusiasm, and their desire to attempt new things

Through adult-youth partnerships for community youth development, organizations gain:

- New perspectives on decision-making, including more relevant information about the needs and interests of youth
- Open and honest responses about their programs or services
- Additional human resources from the sharing of responsibilities between youth and adults
- Greater credibility of the program or organization to both youth and advocates

Through adult-youth partnerships for community youth development, communities gain:

- The ability to engage the people who live and work in the community
- Young people's extensive energy, imagination, and readiness to perform tasks that others may be unwilling or unable to pay for
- A renewed spirit of community

Conclusion

It is clear from this list of outcomes that there is great potential for improving individuals and neighborhoods as well as our democratic society if we support young people's active participation. This document offers ideas that are not meant to be prescriptive, but adaptable to various contexts in which there is a commitment to youth participation.

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3

Redesigning “El Parque”
Adults and Youth Partner for Community Improvement

3. “El Parque”

At the Center for Family Life’s P.S.503/506 Beacon, young people, Beacon staff, and teachers worked together to conduct research, plan, and redesign a schoolyard. The result was “El Parque,” a valuable community resource used by over 3,000 Sunset Park residents annually.

El Parque: A Community Need and a Response from Youth

The story of how a schoolyard was transformed into an outdoor neighborhood center and redesigned by its stakeholders to become this vibrant plaza of intergenerational activity exemplifies Center for Family Life’s (CFL) commitment to involving young people with adults in improving their community. At CFL, participants of all ages are engaged in group experiences that support their own growth, family life, and community-building processes within the Beacon program and the neighborhood at large. An outdoor community center—locally referred to as La Plaza or El Parque—was created in a local schoolyard through a participatory process in which the input of all community stakeholders was valued.

In 1999, the schoolyard was first converted to El Parque with resources from the Pinkerton Foundation and the work of committed CFL staff and a productive group of teens from the neighborhood. After the initial push to create safe and engaging activities for people of all ages, the outdoor community center enjoyed seven years of growing its membership of largely working-class, immigrant families to more than 2,500 members annually.¹ In 2006, it was redesigned again in partnership with

the CFL Beacon and the Trust for Public Land’s City Spaces program.

According to four young people who were involved in designing the outdoor neighborhood center, the impetus for redesigning the space came from youth participating in a ComNET survey. Developed by the Center on Municipal Government Performance (CMGP) at the Fund for the City of New York, ComNET involves teams of community members in identifying street-level conditions of concern that they then report to government and community leaders. With handheld computers, the ComNET team of young people from CFL began research on their community and focused in on El Parque. The teens quickly noted there were cracks in the cement of the yard behind their school large enough for a small child’s foot to fall into. They went to the custodian and principal to figure out how to get the holes fixed, but by the time the next summer rolled around, two principals and three custodians were gone and the cracks remained.

The young people, who were Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) participants, decided to take matters into their own hands. With the approval of the custodian, they got to work mixing cement and filling in the cracks. Their hard work and effort was rewarded. Inspired by the young people’s initiative, the Trust for Public Land committed funding and resources transform the schoolyard into a community center.

Focus on the Process: Facilitating Productive Adult-Youth Partnerships

For three months, once or twice a week, the Trust for Public Land convened small groups of youth, Beacon staff, parents, and teachers from the school to redesign the yard. As John Kixmiller, Di-

¹Kixmiller, J.; White, A.; Fischer, R. (2007). *A Schoolyard in Brooklyn: Strengthening Families and Communities Through the Innovative Use of Public Space*. Center for New York City Affairs; Milano the New School for Management and Urban Policy. The New School: New York.

rector of Programs at CFL's Neighborhood Center, noted:

The important thing to remember when renovating a school yard is that the process matters. You must have groups or forums that represent the larger community, not only the students in the school and their parents. Instituting a community-building process builds leadership over time and it is only with sustained participation that individuals, adults, and young people begin to have enough experience to be truly representative.

A young person involved in one of these representative groups described the process of collective design in this way:

There was at least one Counselor-in-Training (CIT), one pre-CIT, a Beacon staff, and a teacher in each group. We would sit down in the meeting and discuss certain ideas. They also sometimes gave us little projects... A triangle would represent a tree for example and they would have our team put things in different areas and talk about why [when the group] came back together and posted on the wall. That was our start up.

Another young person described the collaboration with adults and their peers as:

...a great experience because the teachers didn't act like they had seniority, and we express our own ideas. As Beacon participants and youth staff workers, we see certain things that sometimes they don't see. We got a

chance to teach them things that they didn't know, and they taught us things that we didn't know.

Carmen, a Beacon staff member and parent, also noted that typical power dynamics between adults and youth were lessened as they created a project together. In order to speak on behalf of the various stakeholders, work groups used surveys to gather input from other young people in the Beacon and in the school. They conducted separate surveys of young people in the school, teens, and adults. They analyzed the data and prioritized ways to use the space to draw more people to the program. They "joined ideas together," a process that managed competing priorities as it enhanced design features: "Our sprinkler area has a painting of the country on the ground...we balanced every area out [by] cooperation and taking everyone's ideas into consideration," said one young person.

The Result: Building Community Together

The redesigned neighborhood center was created through a thoughtful partnership between youth and adults. Building the relationship over time enabled the involvement of adolescents and adults in ways that utilized the special knowledge each brought to the effort. "In some ways the Beacon staff listened to us more because we were younger, and we knew more about what we wanted in a park and a playground," said one young participant. Another noted:

I think that this experience helped us bond more with the teachers in the school because we could have a relationship and be able to know that there is a possibility of working together without having to feel ashamed because you are younger and you might have different ideas.

One young person summed it up succinctly: “Kids should never be afraid to share ideas because we all have different perspectives and all are important.”

The proof is in the product. Currently at El Parque, more than 3,000 community residents participate annually and approximately 145 people attend daily for five or six days per week. Kixmiller describes the schoolyard as “a community focus:”

Using outdoor spaces creates visibility for the Beacon, like a fishbowl. The schoolyard is a great recruitment strategy for all ages due to its visibility and accessibility. Attendance in the Beacon program increases as young adolescents can ride by on a skateboard and bike to see if friends are hanging out. That’s especially important for middle-schoolers, who like to see what’s going on. They like to have neighborhood mobility and they can have that in outdoor spaces.

The initial contribution of \$600,000 from The Trust for Public Land redesigned and rebuilt the schoolyard. It costs \$125,000 per year to staff and manage the program. The investment pays off daily in the benefits that accrue to the young people, adults, and community:

- Parents in the community have a safe place for their children of various ages to have fun and learn while they interact with other parents from the community.
- Young people have access to high quality athletics, bookmobiles, gardens, arts and crafts, and youth internships that often include a stipend.
- The community has a public space in which social

networks for youth and parents are built and maintained. People of all ages and backgrounds learn together, play together, and find comfort, fun, and joy in their local neighborhood.

In El Parque, young people and adults acted in concert on a community improvement project that transformed far more than a single schoolyard. The project strengthened the social fabric of the neighborhood, created a process that obtained the input of the real stakeholders—the youth, parents, teachers, community organization staff, and community members—and built a valuable and durable resource that serves as a lasting symbol of success.

4

The Beacons Movement and
Youth Programming

The Beacons Movement and Youth Programming

Beacons forge partnerships across public, non-profit, and private institutions to fortify neighborhoods. They create pathways for participation across age groups and a continuum of programming that promotes healthy development and strong families. They provide jobs to young people and adults, which contribute to local economic development. They help to make neighborhoods safe and connect residents to each other and to local resources. At a time when social services are increasingly located outside of the communities that need them, they serve as a hub for an array of social and educational supports.

Beacons were among the first citywide after-school initiatives. The massive expansion of after-school programs that began in 1992 was fueled in part by the early example of the Beacon movement. But while after-school programs use a service-delivery approach, Beacons use a comprehensive community development model with a focus on youth development. Activities in every area, from after-school to adult education, are embedded in the process of building community that:

- Supports and engages local youth.
- Feels a sense of ownership, with a desire to convert a school building into a community center.
- Recognizes and supports community resources, builds the capacity of youth and other community members to identify needs, address issues, and capitalize on different strengths.

The Beacons, while diverse and responsive to neighborhood interests and strengths, are shaped by a core set of youth development principles that

research has shown help people to achieve stronger outcomes: caring relationships, high expectations, opportunities to contribute, engaging activities, and continuity in relationships.

As a result of their experience in developing Beacons, many organizations that started as “mom and pop” associations in response to neighborhood needs now offer extensive family and youth-supporting services including foster care, drop out prevention, summer youth employment, and out-of-school time activities. In New York City and San Francisco, these organizations advance school reform efforts. Applying youth development principles and a commitment to the success of all students, they have helped to reshape high schools, making them more personalized, and sharply increasing graduation rates among youth who previously would have dropped out.

The Beacons provide multiple opportunities for young people to build the 21st-century skills that are essential to their development and success as workers, citizens, and environmental stewards. They help young people respond to the changing demands of the workplace and the increased need for post-secondary education. In Beacons, young people:

- Work in teams, solve problems, and master critical skills.
- Take on powerful roles that make a difference to their peers and their communities
- Get involved in planning projects, assessing their communities, analyzing results, and taking action to address local problems.
- Master core literacy skills in reading, writing, media, and technology.
- Teach, mentor, and serve as role models for younger children.
- Collaborate with adults around important issues.

All these opportunities build the skills and knowledge the next generation needs to succeed in the 21st century and to sustain the well-being of the nation and earth.

Each Beacon city also includes an intermediary organization that provides training and support to the Beacon and works with policy makers to sustain the vision. For example, in New York City, the Youth Development Initiative, is one such intermediary that offers training and coaching to sites, develops programs, and works with the city and advocacy groups to support best practices. In San Francisco, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, convenes a citywide group of leaders in philanthropy and public agencies to build support for the Beacons, raise funds, and provide training and related supports to sites.

Evidence of Success & Continuing Need

Evaluations in New York and San Francisco find that Beacons attract participants of all ages, many of whom attend on a regular basis. Participation by substantial numbers of adolescents, traditionally the hardest to recruit and retain in out-of-school programs, is the result of adherence to youth development principles. Among adolescents, the Beacons increase young people's self-efficacy and the level of effort they put into school, which are both critical factors in school success and persistence (Walker & Arbureton, 2004). They provide extensive homework help, enrichment activities that build skills and knowledge, and connections with schools and families on academic issues (Warren, 1999, pp 3-6). They help youth avoid negative behaviors such as drug use and fighting, and foster leadership and provide opportunities for volunteering and contributing to community (Ibid, p. 5). In neighborhoods like Red Hook in Brooklyn, where residents were once afraid to leave their apartments at night, the Beacon is not only a haven, but has, through its programs and networks, made the whole commu-

nity safer (see *Practices to Keep: Preventing Placement in Foster Care: Strengthening Family and Community Ties*. Youth Development Institute, 2009).

The need for Beacons and other programs that build on similar principles is more urgent today than ever. The economic crisis that began in 2008 has affected every sector of society, but will inevitably hit poor communities where Beacons are located the hardest. Too often, services are removed from the very neighborhoods where they are needed most. The Beacons place services in the center of poor communities. The gains that Beacons helped create must be protected, as need increases for comprehensive and coordinated services, high quality education, work preparation, and community safety. Beacons have earned the trust and respect of the local residents, and provide a tested infrastructure for attaching additional or consolidating programs.

Practices to Keep illustrates how Beacons provide young people with pathways to increasingly responsible roles, involve youth and adults in improving their communities, and create environments of support to keep families together. They all depend on partnerships and all recognize that their impact is inextricably tied to collective action. All told, these efforts add up to potent forces for local economic development and building cohesive communities.