



SAN FRANCISCO BEACON INITIATIVE

The Beacon Young Adolescent Initiative: Strategies to Increase Participation Within the San Francisco Beacons

Introduction to Early Adolescence

Early adolescence is a time of change and transition. Youth, ages 11-14, are experiencing profound physical, mental, emotional, and social changes, at the same time they are seeking a self-identity that incorporates these changes. They are becoming more independent of adult family members and are making more of their own decisions about friends, where they spend their time, and the behaviors they engage in. They are often called “tweens” - too “old” to be told what to do in their free time, and too “young” to be totally unsupervised.¹

During this time they are also moving or have moved from a small, familial school setting (elementary school) to much larger middle schools, where few teachers know their students and fewer youth feel known by their teachers, or even their fellow students. In short, it is a time of both opportunity and risk, which has been well documented in afterschool literature. “It can be a time to embrace increasing competencies, commitment to one’s future and responsibilities and begin the preparation for adulthood, or to start a pattern of risk-taking behaviors that result in lost opportunities during the high school years and beyond.”²

The Role of Participation in Afterschool Programs

Because large middle schools are not structured to address the developmental needs of early adolescents, this is a period when youth may be losing interest or feeling disengaged from school. As a result, afterschool programs have an important role in helping young people succeed in school and supporting their broader development.³

“Research by numerous...scholars (Eccles, et. al. and Gambone as reported in Pittman as well as others) has repeatedly affirmed that youth development



experiences, such as those provided in high quality after school programs, help young people to achieve higher outcomes, i.e. civic engagement, development of leadership skills, and communication skills.”⁴ However, studies that cite the benefits of after school programs preface their findings with terms like “adequate time spent” and “regular attendance.”⁵

Although older students still need mentoring, enrichment and guidance in a positive social environment, participation in afterschool programs declines when children transition from elementary school to middle school.⁶ The most consistent finding from studies [of after-school programs] is that many young people attend sporadically and for a short period of time.⁷ Sixty-five percent of afterschool nonparticipants say that they prefer to simply hang out afterschool rather than extend their learning day and many complain that afterschool programs are boring. In fact, twenty-five percent of older youth afterschool participants drop out of their programs within two months citing disinterest in the activities.

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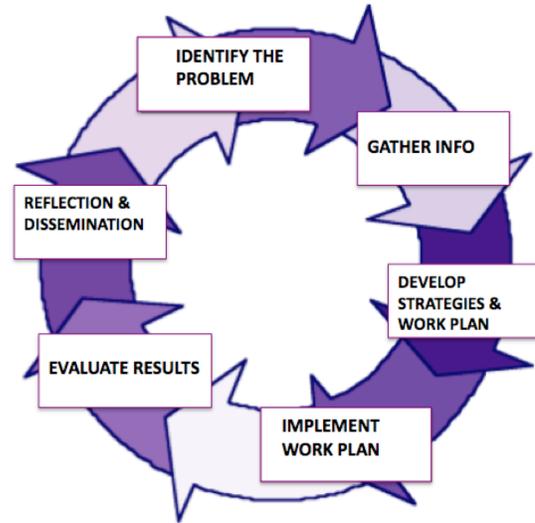
If older youth are to benefit from afterschool programs, program leaders must employ innovative strategies to attract and keep older youth engaged.⁸ (The Youth Development Institute (YDI) in New York City designed the Beacon Young Adolescent (BYA) initiative to advance our understanding of strategies that increase the participation, retention and engagement of young adolescents in stimulating afterschool experiences. YDI invited Beacon Centers in New York City and the San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI) to participate.

The San Francisco Approach

SFBI invited three San Francisco Beacon centers to join the BYA initiative. They engaged Temescal Associates to design supports for program improvement. Each Beacon Center formed a BYA team. These teams participated in an ongoing learning community and engaged in an action research effort. Both are described below:

BYA Learning Community: To support the San Francisco BYA initiative, SFBI and Temescal Associates hosted an ongoing learning community. This community, composed of the Beacon Center BYA teams, was convened each month for 3-6 hour sessions. A learning community is defined as a community that “*supports and inspires the intellectual and personal development of all members of the community... It fosters an environment that values diversity, differences, and the rights of all individuals. It supports and creates new knowledge through research and scholarly inquiry on the part of its members.*”⁹

In keeping with these principles, we utilized an “inside/outside” approach. Because the group members had a great deal of prior experience, we relied on the “inside” knowledge and wisdom of the group members by promoting reflection, discussion, and the sharing of program strategies across the sites. We introduced “outside” knowledge by presenting afterschool research and hosting meetings with noted researchers, inviting outside experts to conduct trainings, and leading site visits to exemplar programs. This is described in more detail below. The SF Beacon teams also had the benefit of meeting monthly with an action learning coach.



Action Research: The SF BYA teams utilized an action research approach. Action research is defined as “a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a ‘community of practice’ to improve the way they address issues and solve problems.”¹⁰ See the figure above. The approach we used has six phases:

- 1. Identify the Problem:** The problems included: lack of inclusion (unsuccessfully attracting those who are traditionally non-joiners); low levels of engagement of participants as learners; and low retention of participants as they mature.
- 2. Gather Information:** There were various information sources utilized. BYA Beacons examined their participation data (known as CPM) to determine its completeness and accuracy, and initiated efforts to complete and clean the data. They were aided in this work through meetings and trainings by the Department of Children, Youth and their Families (DCYF) staff and YDI evaluators from OMG Center for Collaborative Learning.

They also drew on the stated experiences and opinions of their staff members and youth participants. To support these efforts, they participated in a training by staff from the John Gardner Center (Stanford University) on how to run focus groups with youth.

BYA Beacons visited other programs outside of San Francisco to examine how each addressed the three problems cited above. Program locations included New York City, San Jose, Redwood City, and Oakland.

All of the SF BYA Beacons wanted to expand the participation of older (high school age) youth. To ensure that new program offerings were developmentally appropriate, BYA team members examined and discussed the writings of Robert Halpern that focused on the developmental tasks of older youth and the use of apprenticeship models. They also participated in a professional exchange with Robert Halpern via conference call. In response to looking at the developmental tasks of older youth, SF BYA teams also examined the role of community service and opportunities for youth to address issues of social injustice and improvement in their communities.

3. **Develop Work Plans:** Work plans detailed program improvement efforts in the areas of data, staff, and program offerings (see the figure below). Each site's work plan was based on an assessment of where they were strong and where they were weak in these areas. This assessment was supported by the monthly learning community sessions and site-based coaching by BYA consultants.



4. **Implement Work Plans:** The SF BYA Beacons conducted activities cited in the work plans throughout the life of the project. They were assisted by the sharing across Beacons of their successes and challenges in implementing their plans. They were also assisted through site-based coaching by BYA consultants.
5. **Evaluate Results:** BYA teams identified evaluation data sources they could use to gauge the results of their work plans. They utilized both quantitative and qualitative data, which was gathered by both Beacon staff and those from OMG.
6. **Reflections and Dissemination:** Sites reflected on their work plans and the results that followed, guided by site-based coaching and use of the monthly learning community sessions. In regards to dissemination, they shared their learnings and experiences with practitioners at state and national convenings. SF BYA Beacons also conducted a one-day roundtable workshop to share their learnings with other Beacon sites and other youth-serving organizations in San Francisco. Additionally, they submitted written reports capturing the results of their efforts and what they learned to support dissemination through the publishing of written articles.

RICHMOND VILLAGE BEACON



The Richmond Village Beacon, founded in 1998, is based at George Washington High School (2,400 enrolled) and has two

satellite middle schools, Presidio (1,200 enrolled) and Roosevelt (800 enrolled). In the Richmond District of San Francisco, the demographics include mostly Chinese and Russian immigrants in a population of 70,000 people.

The average daily attendance at the Richmond Beacon is 150 youth at the high school and approximately 220 youth at each of the middle schools. Historically, the Richmond Beacon has attracted low-to-moderate income youth from Asian backgrounds, primarily Chinese, which reflects the population of the schools.

BYA Goals and Strategies

Knowing that afterschool can positively affect a student's life and wanting to expose all youth to the benefits of the Beacon program, the Richmond Beacon decided to "blow-up" the typical afterschool model and try some new things that will address the issues of inclusion, retention, and engagement. Based on their analysis of participant needs, interests, and opportunities for positive experiences, the BYA team identified four goals:

Goal #1: Increased enrollment of non-early joiners and high retention over the first two sessions.

Discussion: Many families in this community have concerns about the safety of their children, (particularly 6th graders), and about academic achievement. While it is important to address the concerns of the parents who view the afterschool program as a resource, there have been some negative effects. Too often, nearly all of the program slots are filled early on by the parents of 6th graders who make attendance mandatory for their children.

Secondly, there is strong pressure that the program be primarily focused on academic support. Many of the youth served in the Richmond Beacon come from families who have high academic expectations for their youth and many youth have little exposure to anything beyond academic subjects. Because of the dominant "academic" culture, youth who struggle in school or who have outside interests often feel as if they do not belong in the afterschool program with the "smart kids."

As kids mature, they convince their parents to let them drop out of the program, which they see as restrictive and "babysitting." Because of this reputation, it has made it difficult to re-engage youth in high school afterschool programs in the 9th grade. These conditions have made it difficult for the Richmond Beacon to enroll children whose families may be less involved in their decisions about their afterschool time, students who are at a higher risk for failure, and retaining students as they mature.

Strategy #1: New registration and sign up process. To make the program more accessible to all youth and to encourage participation in enrichment activities, the Richmond Beacon stopped requiring youth to get a parent's signature on a class sign up form. The BYA team mandated that several spaces were reserved for "non-early joiners"; youth who have a difficult time navigating the first-come-first-serve registration and sign up process.

Results: Over the past two years, more youth have signed up for enrichment activities than in past years when a parent signature was required. Youth are given more time to get a parent's signature on the registration form and several slots are reserved for non-early joiners.

Strategy #2: Marketing. The BYA team aimed marketing toward students and families who were less likely to join early on. New brochures and flyers were designed specifically to differentiate Beacon programs from those typically seen in childcare. [Additional text on marketing]

Results: In the fall of 2009, new marketing techniques were employed to differentiate Beacon programs from the typical childcare model....

Goal #2: Increased inclusion and retention of 7th and 8th graders across the year and returning to participate in subsequent years.

Discussion: The Richmond Beacon program has a disproportionately low number of 7th and 8th graders. BYA team members believed this was due to the offering of afterschool activities that were not developmentally geared to attract older middle school youth. We know that as early adolescents mature, they are developing their own interests and expect greater freedom in making their own decisions. They are also placing a greater value on opportunities to socialize with their peers.

The BYA team members found that 7th graders and particularly 8th graders identify with a future that includes increased responsibilities and incentives that do not include younger children. When given the opportunities for increased responsibility, most middle school youth step up to meet these higher expectations, including youth who were previously viewed as having problem behaviors and being “at-risk” for failure.

Strategy #1: Eighth Grade Teen Center. The BYA team recognized that many youth in 7th and 8th grade began to label the program as “babysitting” and become restless and unengaged in classes with younger youth. In response, the BYA team created the 8th Grade Teen Center, an age-based identity program exclusively for 8th graders. Located in the cafeteria, the space is large enough for a range of activities to occur at the same time, including homework, video games, cooking, or a place for 8th graders to just “hang out.”

Results: Over 50 8th graders attend 8th Grade Teen Center on an average day; compared to an average of 20 8th graders per day before the 8th Grade Teen Center was created.

Strategy #2: Inclusion of 7th Graders in the 8th Grade Teen Center. Beginning in the spring semester, the BYA team noticed that 7th graders

“We have seen exciting results across several efforts. Youth who dropped out in 7th grade have rejoined to participate in the 8th Grade Teen Center. The Center has created a buzz among 7th graders who look forward to participating in it as 8th graders.”

- Michelle Cusano, Director, Richmond Beacon

shifted from identifying with 6th graders to wanting to associate with 8th graders, showed increased behavioral issues, and decreased attendance. The BYA team wanted to find a way to engage the 7th graders throughout the entire year so they were experiencing a continuum from 7th to 8th grade. The BYA team decided to give 7th graders who consistently attended any of the other Beacon programs the opportunity to attend the 8th Grade Teen Center on Fridays. The team theorized that youth in the 6th and 7th grade would see that if they continued attending Beacon programs, they could advance to the 8th Grade Teen Center and enjoy more freedom of choice and responsibility.



Results: Seventh graders look forward to being allowed in 8th grade teen center. The BYA team believes this has helped with 7th grade participation in other Richmond Beacon programs. BYA team members hope that the 8th Grade Teen Center will increase the inclusion of 9th graders in the Teen Center at George Washington High School.

Strategy #3: Leadership Ladders. Leadership Ladders are escalating opportunities for youth to gain employment training, leadership skills, and life skills beginning in 6th grade and continuing throughout high school until graduation. The BYA team created Teaching Assistant positions and offered them to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders who were non-joiners or unengaged in the activities in the afterschool program. Teaching Assistants receive training from Beacon staff and may eventually be offered a paid position as an official Youth Program Assistant (YPA) in the 11th and 12th grades. They then have the opportunity to work as paid Beacon staff after they graduate from high school.

Results: In just two and half years of implementing this program, several YPA's and former Beacon participants have graduated high school and are working as official staff members while attending college.

Goal #3: Youth are more fully engaged and find participation meaningful.

Discussion: We know that young people are developing interests and passions during adolescent years. They want to be listened to and acknowledged, and are looking for opportunities to grow their skills over time. They are interested in mastery and having the ability to showcase their new skills by producing a product or demonstrating what they can do.

Strategy #1: Academies. In order to increase the engagement and inclusion of youth in their afterschool programs, the Richmond BYA team created Art, Hip Hop, and Sports Academies. Academies are interest-based groups where youth can devote focused time on a particular interest, build relationships with peers who have similar interests, and master specialized skills by learning from an expert in that field. The academies are scheduled everyday from school dismissal until 6:00pm (unlike other classes offered in the Beacon).

Results:

Strategy #2: Culminating events. [Shawn's text]

Results:

Goal #4: A high percentage of 8th graders transition into afterschool supports at George Washington High School.

Discussion: The literature detailing the reasons that young people drop out of school speaks clearly to the importance of a smooth transition from middle school to high school. The Richmond BYA team implemented a transition program for rising 9th graders and program continuity between middle school and high school.

Strategy #1: Freshman Leadership Institute (FLI). In the summer of 2009, the Richmond BYA team worked closely with school administrators to plan a joint Freshman Orientation that included an orientation to the high school and the Beacon. All incoming 9th grade students were sent an invitation to a daylong orientation by Richmond Beacon staff. Staff from the middle school afterschool programs led teambuilding activities with the 9th graders so that all former middle school Beacon participants would see a continuation of service through the familiar faces of staff. The Beacon also held workshop for families to receive information on Beacon programs.

Results: Since all youth were required to pick up their schedules that day, nearly all incoming freshmen attended the event. Many parents were familiar with Beacons and were grateful for the continuity of service.



Strategy #2: Leadership Ladders. See above.

Results:

**WESTERN ADDITION
BEACON**

Etc.

About The San Francisco Beacon Initiative

About the Youth Development Institute

About Temescal Associates

CITATIONS

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- ¹⁰ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Action_research).