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 "tweeners"- 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.[8]
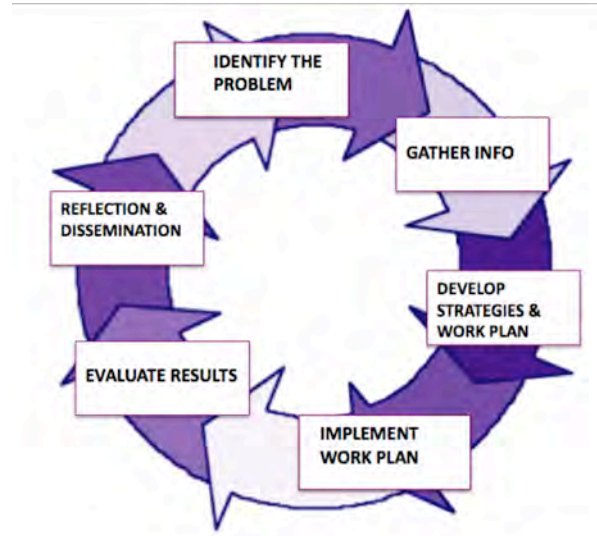
Beacon Young Adolescent Initiative

If older youth are to benefit from afterschool programs, program leaders must employ innovative strategies to attract and keep older youth engaged.[9] 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 SF 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.*"[10]

In keeping with these principles, Temescal Associates 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 BYA 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.*"[11] 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. SF BYA teams 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.
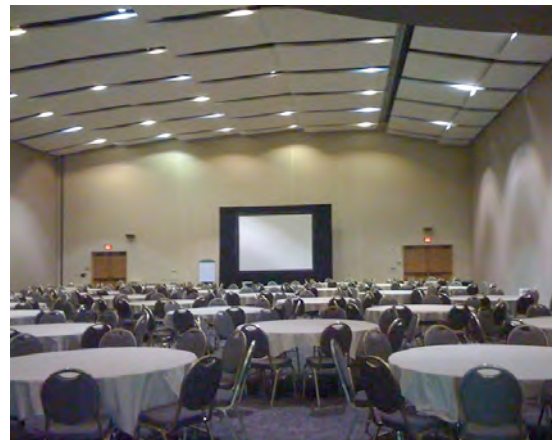
SF BYA teams visited other programs outside of San Francisco to examine how each addressed the three problems cited above. Program locations included New York City, San Jose, Redwood City, and Oakland.

All of the SF BYA teams wanted to expand the participation of older (high school age) youth. To ensure that new program offerings were developmentally appropriate, SF 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 Temescal Associates.

4. **Implement Work Plans:** The SF BYA teams 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 Temescal Associates.

5. **Evaluate Results:** SF 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 teams also conducted a one-day roundtable workshop to share their learnings with other SF BYA teams 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. (Note: Project learnings and implications for program improvement are discussed at the end of this article.)

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.

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.

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.

Additionally, 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."

Strategy #2: Inclusion of 7th Graders in the 8th Grade Teen Center. Beginning in the spring semester, the BYA team noticed that 7th graders 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.
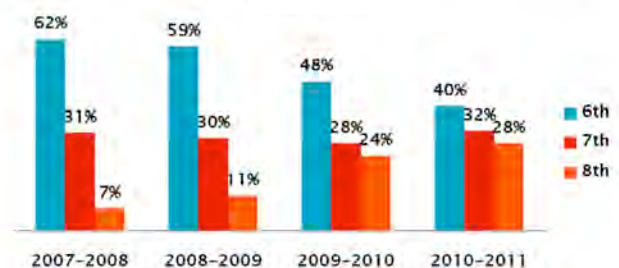
Strategy #3: Leadership Ladders. Leadership Ladders are escalating opportunities for youth to gain employment training, leadership skills, and life skills beginning in 6th grade and continuing throughout high school until graduation. The BYA team created Teaching Assistant positions and offered them 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: 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. Now 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. Additionally, the proportion of participants who are 12-14 years old has increased by 17 percentage points over the three school years.

> "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

3 year trend in attendance

	6th	7th	8th
2007–2008	62%	31%	7%
2008–2009	59%	30%	11%
2009–2010	48%	28%	24%
2010–2011	40%	32%	28%

Results (cont'd): 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. 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).

Strategy #2: Culminating events. A second strategy the Richmond BYA team implemented to increase engagement and participation was hosting culminating events at the end of the 9-week Beacon classes. These events consisted of performances, slideshows, art walks, cooking demonstrations, fashion shows, and picture displays of the different classes. Youth in the breakdancing class now compete against other middle schools in the Bay Area at an annual Richmond Beacon event. Youth also performed at the Richmond District Family Funfest, an annual family carnival sponsored by the Richmond Beacon for youth to showcase their talents and skills learned in the Beacon classes. The Richmond BYA team also partnered with Spark, a program that offers workplace-based apprenticeships, to host a Discovery Night twice a year to allow students to showcase their learnings from their apprenticeships.

Results: Enrollment in the Richmond Beacon has increased by 57% over the three school years, a statistic that can partially be attributed to the creation of interest-based academies and culminating events.

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.

Strategy #2: Leadership Ladders. High school age youth also participate in leadership ladder opportunities. Ninth and 10th graders are eligble to be Youth Program Volunteers and 11th and 12th graders are eligible to be Youth Program Assistants (YPAs).

Results: Nearly all incoming freshmen attended the Freshmen Leadership Institute because they were allowed to pick up their schedule. Many parents were familiar with Beacons and were grateful for the continuity of service.

OMI/EXCELSIOR BEACON

Founded in 1999, the OMI/Excelsior (OMI/E) Beacon serves young people from James Denman Middle School (576 enrolled) and Leadership High School (245 enrolled). The OMI/E Beacon serves an average of 177 youth daily.

The OMI/E Beacon is located in San Francisco's District 11, a community of 76,000 residents, and includes the neighborhoods of Oceanview, Merced, Excelsior, and Ingleside. District 11 has the lowest per capital income level of all districts in San Francisco. The most consistent Beacon participants are the most at-risk and hard to reach youth at the middle school. As a result, the OMI/E Beacon takes great pride in the strong relationships shared between their staff and youth.

BYA Goals and Strategies

Before the OMI/E Beacon became part of the BYA initiative, the Center was experiencing considerable changes. In the 2007-2008 school year, San Francisco Unified School District closed the OMI/E Beacon's only satellite afterschool program, which served an average of 80 students per day. Beacon staff relationships with Denman Middle School's administration was at an all-time low, school construction resulted in disruptive relocations, and there was a decline in Beacon staff morale. OMI/E Beacon staff believed the timing was right for the development of a focused strategic plan. They worked with SFBI and Temescal Associates to identify four goals:

Goal #1: Increased capacity of the Beacon Center staff to achieve and sustain BYA outcomes.

Discussion: Given the recent closure of a major OMI/E Beacon satellite center and the difficult relationship with school administration, OMI/E Beacon staff were experiencing low morale and motivation. The BYA team decided to focus improvement efforts on building the capacity of staff through professional development trainings, reorganizing the current staffing structure, and building the connection between the school day staff and Beacon staff.

Strategy #1: Provide staff development and team building opportunities. The BYA team offered their staff full day retreats, which focused on youth development principles and application. They now use every other weekly staff meeting to conduct a training on a topic that staff asked for support in. A binder was created with information on program goals, staff expectations and responsibilities, and youth development principles. The BYA team also organized team-building activities and created an Afterschool Weekly Theme for staff and youth to promote team-building and close relationships among staff and youth.

Strategy #2: Improve staff reorganization. The OMI/E BYA team created the position of Director of High School and Community Programs and hired a new Director of Youth Development and Site Coordinator.

Strategy #3: Develop program curriculum planner. The OMI/E BYA team developed a program curriculum planner to ensure that all program activities contained the following components: project-based, incorporated youth voice and choice, and culminating events. The curriculum planner allowed program leaders to design consecutive classes that progressed in skill level, allowing youth to build skills in a particular topic.

Strategy #4: Build the connection between school day staff and afterschool staff. The capacity of the OMI/E staff in achieving BYA goals and Beacon program goals was in part dependent on the Beacon Center's connection with the school. To promote this connection, the BYA team did a number of things, including engaging in regular meetings with the principal, consistently communicating with counselors, and collaborating with other school clubs.

Results: The OMI/E staff trainings provided Beacon staff with a good understanding of adolescent and youth development principles, which staff now apply to program design and practice.

Results (cont'd): The trainings and team-building experiences became fundamental to building a sense of team among the OMI/E Beacon staff. Staff now feel like meetings are being used more effectively and that Beacon leadership are responsive to their needs. The Afterschool Weekly Theme helps to motivate, direct, and unify staff.

The reorganization of staff and the creation of new positions allowed staff to focus their talents on specific programs that attracted youth. Forty-eight percent of OMI/E Beacon participants were attending at the high or above capacity level (146 hours or more) in 2009-10, a statistic that can be partially attributed to the specialized role of adults providing more individualized programs and classes.

Creating a program curriculum planner allowed OMI/E Beacon staff to provide structured activities and thus better retain youth.

The improved partnership between school day staff and Beacon staff made a huge difference to the Beacon. Beacon staff now collaborate with lead teachers on subject content, have increased student referrals from school staff, the school and the Beacon share resources, time, and equipment for joint and non-joint events, and Beacon representatives attend the School Site Council meetings.
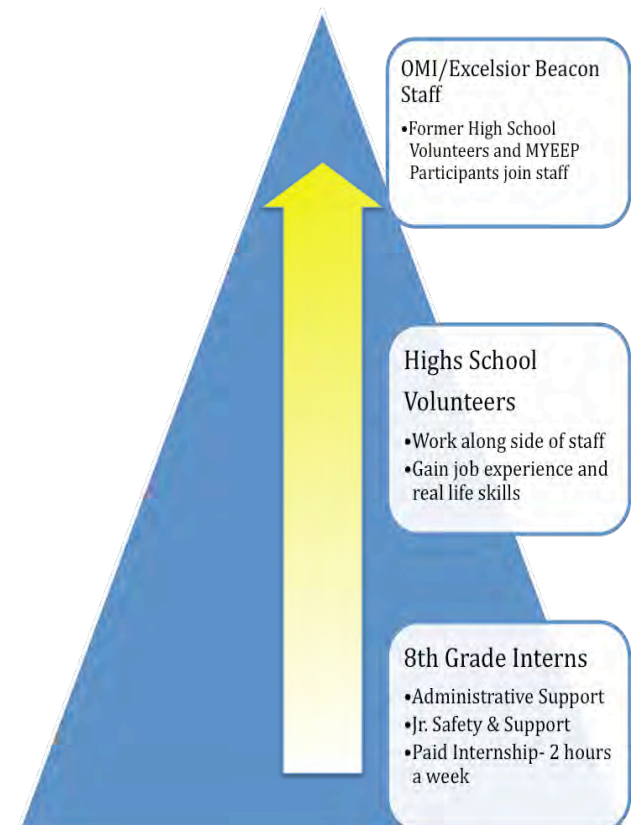
In regards to participation, enrollment, and attendance, the Beacon saw enrollment increase by 39% over the three school years (2007-08 to 2009-10). Attendance hours increased in 2009-10 to 121 hours, up from 66 hours in 2007-08.

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

Discussion: While the majority of OMI/E Beacon participants are middle school youth, the BYA team was interested in increasing the participation and retention of 7th and 8th graders. There was a tendency for enrollment to decrease as young people matured.

Strategy #1: Increase breadth and depth of offerings to offer more engaging activities. The BYA team conducted youth surveys to find out what activities 7th and 8th graders were interested in. Based on the results, the OMI Beacon began offering the following activities: Skateboarding, fashion design, urban art, technology, and sports. They also offered field trips that focused on illuminating career options and educational paths to 7th and 8th graders. The Beacon also offered sequenced classes, which allowed young people to attain a greater sense of mastery and gain in-depth skills in one area of interest.

Strategy #2: Offer leadership experiences and the opportunity to practice work-based skills. The BYA team offered stipends, paid internships, and job opportunities for 7th and 8th graders with the opportunity to continue throughout high school. These opportunities gave 7th and 8th graders real responsibilities and the chance to practice work-based skills.

OMI/Excelsior Beacon Staff
- Former High School Volunteers and MYEEP Participants join staff

Highs School Volunteers
- Work along side of staff
- Gain job experience and real life skills

8th Grade Interns
- Administrative Support
- Jr. Safety & Support
- Paid Internship- 2 hours a week

Strategy #3: Improve marketing and outreach. The BYA team made the Beacon program more visible by designing and placing new posters around the school and presenting information on the Beacon to classrooms. The BYA team also used the school bulletin and PA system as outreach tools.

Results: The proportion of youth ages 12-14 enrolled in the OMI/E Beacon increased by 30 percentage points over the three school years (2007-08 to 2009-10). Fifty-percent of total enrolled participants were returning in 2009-10, and 91% of youth ages 12-14 enrolled in 2009-2010 were returning participants.

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

Discussion: At the beginning of the BYA project, the OMI/E BYA team noticed a lack of engagement of some of the participants. The team believed this was due in part to a lack of structure and low expectations among staff and youth. To increase young people's engagement and investment in the Beacon activities, the BYA team developed a number of strategies. (It should be noted that this goal was also served by the strategies discussed above, including the staff utilization of the program curriculum planner.)

Strategy #1: Increase the use of culminating events, project-based learning, and the opportunities for skill building. The OMI/E Beacon organized culminating events for young people to showcase products and talents acquired in various Beacon programs. The Beacon started having lunchtime skateboarding demonstrations, which were enjoyed not only by the youth performers, but also by the student and teacher observers. Youth in the OMG Beauty and Fashion Class put on a fashion show in partnership with the Paul Mitchell School of Hair and Makeup to showcase their skills. Youth in the OMI/E filmmaking class debuted their films at the Young Filmmakers Mockumentary, an event hosted by OMI/E Beacon, as well as at a community arts event with other youth organizations.

Strategy #2: Increase collaboration with community-based organizations to offer diverse activities. The Beacon partnered with the Presidio YMCA to offer Earth Service Corps to Beacon youth. Youth were given the opportunity to participate in overnight camping trips, sailing trips, and weekend hiking excursions while learning about environmental issues. The Beacon's partnership with Out of Site Youth Arts Center provided Beacon youth with a higher quality arts program, along with staff support from professional artists.

Results: The OMI/E Beacon overall enrollment increased by 39% over the three school years (2007-08 to 2009-10). Also significant was the high percentage of participants who were retained across their middle school years, as cited above.

Goal #4: Increase participation among high school age youth.

Discussion: During the 2007-2008 school year, the OMI/E Beacon high school program was not very developed and student enrollment was low. The BYA team focused its efforts on improving the high school program by providing opportunities that appeal to high school youth's interests and needs.

Strategy #1: Expand youth leadership opportunities. The OMI/E Beacon Volunteer Manager began to work with high school volunteers in 2008. Youth volunteers were given the opportunity to volunteer or work at the Beacon through the Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) Workability Program and the Mayor's Youth Employment and Education Program (MYEEP). Through these programs, youth learned hands-on vocational skills and participated in service-learning opportunities, both at the Beacon and off-site. In the summer, the BYA team created a Counselors-in-Training (CIT) program, where high school youth volunteered their time to Beacon staff as program assistants.

> *"Beacon is more than a workplace, it's more like a second family."*
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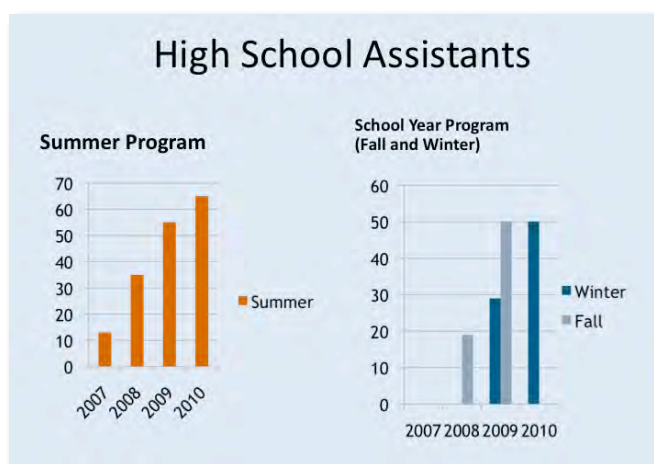> - Mabel Fang, 10th grade volunteer

Strategy #2: Expand enrichment programming. OMI/E BYA team expanded the enrichment activities offered to high school students to include football, recreation, urban arts, and photography.

Strategy #3: Expand opportunities for high school students with special needs. The OMI/E Beacon Volunteer Manager began collaborating with the JVS Workability program in 2008 to offer vocational training and paid internships to high school youth with special needs. These youth received hands-on job training from Beacon staff and were placed in positions at the Beacon.

Results: In part due to expanded leadership and enrichment opportunities, school year participation by high school age youth increased by 30 percentage points over the three years of the BYA project.

In the past two years, there was a significant increase in the number of high school youth who received job training, community service hours, and real life work experience in the Beacon as tutors, program assistants, office aides, safety and support assistants, and special event supporters. During the summer, the Counselor-in-Training program saw 35 youth per day.

In the past two years, 15 high school students with learning disabilities received job training and real work experience in the Beacon. On several occasions, JVS interns have returned to the Beacon to volunteer after their internship was over.

WESTERN ADDITION BEACON

The Western Addition Beacon Center (WA Beacon) serves youth at John Muir Elementary School (243 enrolled students), Raoul Wallenberg Traditional High School (637 enrolled students) and Hayes Valley Residential Complex. The Beacon has been an entity of the Buchanan YMCA since 1994. The Midlife program (housed at John Muir Elementary) provides programming for youth ages 10-14; the Wallenberg program (housed at Raoul Wallenberg High School) provides services for high school age youth.

The WA Beacon serves over 600 youth and families annually and an average of 150 youth daily. The San Francisco Mayor's Office 2000 Report on Juvenile Crime cited the Western Addition as a consistent "hot spot" of violent youth criminal activity. Twenty-seven percent of families in the Western Addition live below the federal poverty level and 44% youth live in single parent homes.

BYA Goals and Strategies

For a number of years the WA Beacon has gone through a series of changes. These have been due to leadership transitions and the closure of the Beacon's host middle school, the only middle school located in the neighborhood. The WA Beacon has demonstrated resiliency in the face of these changes and managed to build a solid reputation for community engagement through efforts to partner with community organizations. To better serve community youth, the Beacon expanded services to other neighborhood schools. The WA Beacon team worked with SFBI and Temescal Associates to identify four goals for program improvement.

Goal #1: Create a Midlife program that engages &and retains youth participants ages 10-14.

Discussion: After the closure of its host middle school, the WA Beacon had very low enrollment of middle school age youth. The Midlife program, designed to serve this population, utilized a drop-in format and was located at a neighborhood elementary school. The WA BYA team sought to increase the participation of middle school age youth by creating more engaging and meaningful program offerings.

Strategy #1: Create activity-specific clubs. Prior to the BYA project, the WA Beacon offered drop-in programming only. The team worked to create activity-specific clubs based on youth interests and needs. Clubs included art, martial arts, dance, yoga, and more. Club offerings were divided between the high school and elementary school sites based on various factors, such as the skills of the staff at the specific site and the program space and resources available.
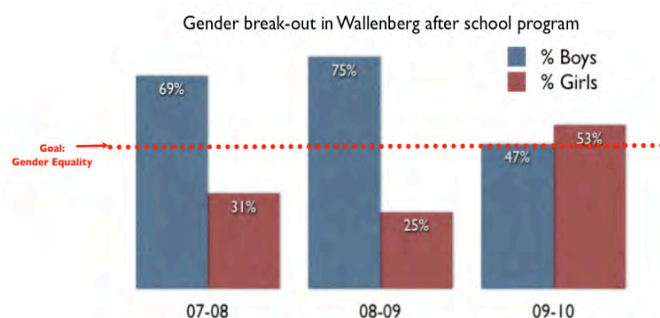

Strategy #2: Increase breadth of offerings. The WA BYA team sought to increase the breadth of offerings at the Midlife program based on youth needs and interests. Staff surveyed the youth to determine their interests and based on the results, added a variety of programs, including cooking, weight training, life skills/real talk, media production, flag football, basketball, Friday Night Fun, and financial literacy.

Strategy #3: Increase culminating events. The WA BYA team increased the number of culminating events offered at the end of their 4-6 week classes. For example, the Midlife Girls' Group step team performed both in house and out in the community. Participants in the Midlife science program, Fun With Science, presented their projects at a science fair.

Results: The proportion of older youth ages 12-14 attending the WA Beacon program grew by 52% from school year 2007-08 to 2009-10. This increase represents young people who are coming based on choice as a result of both the clubs, diversity of offerings, and special culminating events.

Goal #2: Use data to effectively restructure program.

Discussion: In order to improve programming, the WA BYA team worked to utilize their participation data to identify areas for improvement. The team found that their current programming was not attracting many female participants when compared to the number of males. In response, the WA BYA team conducted a focus group for female participants to find out what would encourage more girls to attend the Beacon. They found that girls were interested in seeing more female staff members at the Beacon as well as more programs that were "just for girls".

Gender break-out in Wallenberg after school program

Strategy #1: Create programs aimed specifically at females. The WA BYA team supported the development of programs that would appeal to young women. Programs included sewing workshop, a dance squad, and a Girl's Group specifically for female Beacon participants.

Strategy #2: Appoint more female program leaders. The WA Beacon hired two additional female staff members to attract more female participants to the Beacon. The WA BYA team also engaged sorority members from a local university (see below) to form a Girls' Sorority at the Beacon.

Results: The number of girls enrolled in the Midlife program increased by 20% from 2008-09 to 2009-10. Forty-percent of these girls were returning participants, which can be partially attributed to the female-specific programming and increase in female program leaders.

Goal #3: Develop new partnerships with community-based/social services organizations to engage neighborhood youth.

Discussion: Due to the closure of the neighborhood middle school, the WA Beacon has struggled to attract participants ages 11-14. To combat this disadvantage, the WA BYA team sought to increase their partnerships with local neighborhood organizations. In this way, they believed they could increase the number of local middle school age youth.

Strategy: Implement community outreach to enhance programming and increase the participation of neighborhood youth. The WA BYA team reached out to enlist community partners, including medical student volunteers from the University of California, San Francisco, and the San Francisco State University chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. With these collaborations, the Beacon expanded its offerings to include the following new programs: Beacon Big Sisters, Beacon Sensational Steppers, Graphic Design Academy, and Fun with Science.

Results: In part due to new programming offered by community partners, the WA Beacon total enrollment increased by 175% over the three school years (294 enrolled in 2009-10, up from 106 enrolled in 2007-08).

Goal #4: Increase retention of 5th graders after they graduate from elementary school.

Discussion: The WA BYA team knew that to have robust attendance in the Midlife program, they would need to engage youth before they graduated from elementary school and left to attend an out-of-neighborhood middle school. The team focused their efforts on providing 4th and 5th graders with experiences similar to that of the Midlife program, so that they would continue attending Beacon programs after they transitioned to middle school.

> *I am proud of the work that [The WA Beacon] does to support the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of our students. It is wonderful that "outside eyes" have acknowledged your tremendous efforts as well."*
>
> - Principal at Wallenberg High School, March 2010

Strategy #1: Create experiences for 5th graders to familiarize them with the Midlife program. The WA BYA team created leadership ladders so that youth transitioning into the Midlife program would be familiar with the programming as 6th graders and would want to continue. The BYA team located 5th grade programs in the Midlife space. Fifth grade participants were given specific roles, responsibilities, and incentives that were similar to those in the Midlife program.

Strategy #2: Enroll graduating 5th graders in summer day camp program. In the summer of 2009, the WA Beacon held a summer camp for all grade levels, including 5th graders. The camp offered a variety of clubs, project-based activities, and special projects led by community partners.

Results: Ten 6th graders (entered 6th grade in Fall 2009) attended the summer camp and 50% of them were retained that fall. About 15-20 5th graders (entered 5th grade in Fall 2009) attended the summer camp, and 90% of them returned in the fall.

Goal #5: Increase Wallenberg Site Administrators' understanding of the potential of high school afterschool programming and support of the Beacon program.

Discussion: It is during times of transition when afterschool programs see the most dramatic drop-offs in attendance. The WA BYA team wanted to increase Wallenberg school administrations' awareness of the importance of continuing afterschool programming for 9th graders as they transitioned from the middle school.

Strategy #1: Meet with Wallenberg administrators on an ongoing basis. The WA BYA team met with Wallenberg site administrators to increase their understanding of how the Midlife program operates for middle school youth and how lessons from this model might be successfully applied to operating a high school program. The WA BYA team emphasized the importance of having a space on campus dedicated to the Beacon. The team also stressed the importance of serving local high school age youth that are not enrolled in the host school. This is particularly important in light of the fact that San Francisco students are not required to attend their neighborhood schools.

The Freshman Academy was created during the 2009-10 school year with the expectation that Wallenberg High School would take over its operation in the 2010-2011 school year.

Strategy #2: Create a Freshman Academy. The WA BYA team worked with the site administrators at Wallenberg to increase their understanding of the relationship between a successful transition in the first year of high school and lowering the dropout rate. To this end, the WA BYA team created the Freshman Academy, a program designed to provide strategies and support to students to promote the successful transition from middle school to high school. The Freshman Academy featured an interdisciplinary curriculum, field trips, a four-year high school plan, a career education plan, and community engagement through service learning.

Results: The Wallenberg site administrators and teachers have an increased understanding of the WA Beacon Center. The principal of Wallenberg publicly stated that she is knowledgeable about and supportive of the services the WA Beacon provides. A total of 57 high school students participated in the Freshman Academy this year. Next year, Wallenberg high school will be taking over the Freshman Academy.

Implications for Program Improvement

Below are project learnings that may be useful to others seeking to support program improvement. These are drawn from the experiences of those who led the BYA project and an evaluation by project participants.

Program improvement is challenging
Afterschool programs addressing the needs of underserved youth in already challenged communities are often under great pressure and are under-financed and under-supported. They are also responsible to answer to a number of stakeholder groups, especially those housed in public school settings. The demands on program staff make improvements very difficult.

Program improvement requires change which is often met with resistance by staff, youth participants, and other stakeholders. In the words of one program leader, "Challenging the way things have always been done in the past with staff can be challenging. Staff can be resistant and scared of change. Sometimes staff take the quality of a program personally – if they are being asked to go through an improvement process their program must not be working."

One program leader advised, "Be brave and think outside of the box – don't be afraid of the reaction of principals and teachers when it comes to using space in a creative way."

Program improvement requires tangible supports
SF BYA participants cited the following forms of support needed for program improvement:
- Structured time that is dedicated to doing the work of program improvement.
- Additional funding to cover added costs needed for program improvement.
- The benefit of site-specific work plans and coaching.
- Participating and having an opportunity for a shared experience with other program leaders.

When asked, all of the SF BYA participants agreed or strongly agreed that the learning community format provided a safe and productive environment to explore practice with their colleagues.

It is important that sites utilize a clear and explicit program improvement process.
The SF BYA project was guided by a program improvement process. Over the course of the project, program improvement sites were kept aware of this process and what phase they were engaged in. When asked, all of the SF BYA participants agreed or strongly agreed that the development of program improvement work plans within an improvement process supported the achievement of their improvement goals.

Program improvement sites benefit when they have access to diverse experiences to expand their knowledge and understanding
In addition to promoting the sharing of knowledge and experience among SF BYA participants, participants were also presented with relevant field research and the opportunity to visit exemplar programs outside of their area. When asked to identify experiences that were especially meaningful, several respondents cited site-visits in New York, Oakland, and San Jose and the learning community session that included a conversation with the researcher Robert Halpern about the developmental tasks of older youth. All participants agreed or strongly agreed that their participation in the BYA project expanded their knowledge of youth needs and program quality.

Program improvement can be driven and evaluated by data
Data is often considered a dreaded word by program staff. Many afterschool programs find it difficult to collect participation data on an ongoing basis, let alone use data to guide and evaluate their program improvement efforts. The SF BYA participants were asked to refine their capacity to collect accurate data and use this data to guide and evaluate their progress. All of the SF BYA participants agreed or strongly agreed that utilizing data to substantiate the results of their efforts was a valuable exercise.

It is important that program improvement sites reflect on the results and learnings and have an opportunity to share and discuss with others
The SF BYA participants were asked to reflect on their results and to develop presentations and workshops, which they conducted locally and outside of San Francisco. This brought both a validity and a sense of rigor to the work. Every SF BYA participant agreed or strongly agreed that organizing these presentations was a valuable exercise. Some shared that it served to build and strengthen their professional self-confidence. According to presentation evaluations, program practitioners in the audience reported that they learned both useful and inspiring information.

ABOUT

About Temescal Associates

This article was authored by Sam Piha and Laura Karosic of Temescal Associates. Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. Temescal Associates clients include leaders of youth serving institutions and organizations, school and youth program practitioners, public and private funders, intermediary organizations, and policy makers. Temescal's work ranges from helping clients build large-scale youth and community initiatives to supporting those who provide services to young people on a day-to-day basis. To accomplish this, Temescal Associates draws on a pool of gifted and highly experienced consultants who excel at eliciting the internal knowledge and wisdom of those we work with while introducing new knowledge and strategies that can transform the day-to-day practices that lead to improved youth outcomes.

About the San Francisco Beacon Initiative

The San Francisco Beacon Initiative is a public-private partnership that includes the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and their Families, the San Francisco Unified School District, community organizations, and local foundations, led by the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. Oversight for the Beacon Initiative is provided by the Beacon Steering Committee, which includes representatives of each Stakeholder group. Eight neighborhoods across San Francisco transform public school buildings into Beacon Centers. Each one offers free programs and activities for youth and adults after school, during the evening, some weekends, and most of the summer.

About the Youth Development Institute

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) supports the growth and development of young people by strengthening the quality and increasing the availability of experiences offered by the organizations that serve them. YDI partners with community organizations, schools, colleges, policy makers, funders, and others to help them apply the most promising research and practices so that young people can grow and develop through powerful, sustained, and joyful experiences. YDI provides technical assistance, disseminates information, develops policy, and conducts research to strengthen the quality and increase the availability of these positive opportunities throughout the United States.

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