



YOUTH VOICES ON LEARNING AFTER SCHOOL

A Qualitative Evaluation of the
San Francisco Beacon Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The San Francisco Beacon Initiative was designed to provide supports and opportunities for youth development in the non-school hours. More than just a tutoring program, the Beacons have firm roots in research that views learning in broad terms and stresses the importance of after school programs that keep young persons' diverse developmental needs in view. This program stance is consistent with research that demonstrates the frequent mismatch between school settings and youth's developmental needs, especially for middle and high school students. Community youth centers such as Beacons can provide a valuable "intermediary space" for urban youth, in which there are opportunities for initiative, relationships, voice, as well as more traditional academic skill-building.

For most youth, each of the Beacon Centers were places with a distinct social atmosphere, marked by such norms as listening, mutual respect, and safety.

The overall Beacon's strategy also finds compelling support in evaluations that show links between after school programs, educational success and other developmental goals.¹

Why youth voices?

Consistent and engaged participation is essential to realize the benefits of youth centers. Programs that do not appeal to young people will fail to attract and retain them or involve them to a meaningful extent. The Youth Voices study aimed to learn from young people participating in five San Francisco Beacon Centers how they felt about their involvement in

the program, because youth are often the best reporters and advisors on whether and how an environment feels welcoming, safe, supportive and fun.² Research was conducted over two years and included 44 focus groups, repeated case-study interviews with 21 youth, and interviews and observations from 5 teams of youth

¹ For an extensive review of research literature on after school programs, see Miller (2003). A copy of the report is available at: www.nmefdn.org/uimages/documents/Critical_Hours.pdf

² The Youth Voices study complements the Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) study, by focusing on youth's descriptions of their experiences.

ethnographers. Our findings are organized in terms of three general categories, each with overlapping sub-sections: 1) social atmosphere, 2) learning opportunities, and 3) physical space.

SOCIAL ATMOSPHERE

For most youth, each of the Beacon centers were places with a distinct social atmosphere, marked by such norms as listening, mutual respect, and safety. Although varying both in degree and kind, the Centers, in other words, were distinctive communities, rather than merely multiservice centers with discrete program offerings. One defining characteristic of these communities was the nature of the relationships that youth experienced there, and the corresponding sense of safety that these relationships helped engender.

To some, terms like “community” and “relationships” may seem distant from the bottom line associated with academic achievement. We foreground them here, however, first, because they were so central to youth’s own descriptions of their experiences, and second, in recognition that such relationships are central to healthy youth development.

Supportive relationships with adults

When asked to describe the Beacons and their experiences there, youth across all five sites talked about how important adults at the Beacons were to them. Adults developed relationships with youth that were generally described as respectful, fun and playful. Several youth described the Beacon as like “a second family” for them. Youth also described supportive adults as people who “don’t put you down” and who provided emotional support. This seems to be an important role for adults at the Beacon, as, according to youth ethnographers’ work, youth across sites do not get this kind of emotional support in other settings of their lives.

While youth appreciated the friendly, informal approach, they also looked to adults for guidance. For example, youth described how adults helped teach them how to manage stressful situations,

how to survive on the streets, and how to “deal with my problems in a better way.” For many youth this meant getting help dealing with conflicts with peers. This idea – that adults helped to “mediate” youth’s peer relationships – was a theme that cut across all five Beacon sites. Youth saw adults at the Beacon as fair, listening to both sides in a disagreement. They would help youth to work out problems, but not work them out for youth. In general, Beacon staff members were said to have different ways of dealing with peer conflicts than schoolteachers. Whereas schoolteachers tend to be either detached and indifferent or authoritarian and punitive, youth saw Beacon staff as being involved without being overly intrusive.

“...They can be more than just a friend and staff, but be more like family to you too.”

(High School Youth)

Many youth said that it is easier to learn at the Beacon than in school because of the friendly and relaxed atmosphere created by the adults. Numerous youth described adults as “nice” and “fun,” which they said made them enjoy their program activities and learn more. Youth at several sites talked of how helpful adults were with things like homework or academic work.

Not all relationships between adults and youth were viewed as supportive. We heard from youth who were critical of adults or who were disappointed in some feature of their relationship. In most cases youth complained about the absence of some of the positive features we described above. For example, youth noticed when adults were not good instructors, did not provide emotional support, or even played the role of bully or antagonist. Youth also criticized adults for not fulfilling their mediator role effectively when conflicts arose and for not being sufficiently attentive.

Staff turnover also complicated youth's relationships with adults. Youth voiced concern and confusion over adults leaving the center. Turnover seemed to unsettle the security and stability they valued at the Beacon. Staff leaving also conveyed lack of commitment on the part of adults. Youth described feeling "abandoned" and "sad," as if they were "losing something" when staff left.

Relationships with Peers

Peer relationships were a prominent theme in our focus group and case study discussions, among Beacon participants of all ages. Youth talked about the importance of the friendships they developed with youth who were the same age as well as with older peers. In addition, youth learned skills for working collaboratively and managing conflict.

Many youth appreciated the value of just "hanging out" with friends. In fact, with the exception of some high school students, youth reported that the opportunity to be with friends was a primary motivation for spending time at the Beacon. In most cases this meant being with friends made in school. However, we also heard that for some the Beacon was a place to make new friends, whether from different social groups within the school, different grade levels, or from different schools altogether.

Despite some constraints and some tensions, youth's relationships with peers at the Beacon played a significant and positive role in their experiences. In general they found the climate more positive and respectful than what they experienced at school.

Thus there appears to be a general trend in which youth perceived peer relationships at Beacons as better than at the schools—less cliquey, less anonymous, more respectful, safer, friendlier, more caring. Some programs also provided opportunities for meaningful cross-age relationships, such as in cases where older youth tutored or mentored younger youth. In these cases the older Beacon youth played important roles as "old-timers" who could shepherd "newcomers" through unfamiliar situations.

Safety

The theme of "safety" was a third dimension of the social atmosphere of the Beacons. Although closely linked to supportive adult and peer relations, it warrants its own analysis because of how commonly it came up in discussions with youth. Conversations about safety were multidimensional, involving both emotional and physical elements, which were sometimes invisible to adults.

"I feel safe there...You are around people you know constantly. It's real annoying sometimes, but you don't have to worry about getting hurt or something."

(Middle School Youth)

For the most part, youth spoke of the Beacon as an emotionally safe space. It was seen as a place where they could be themselves around both adults and peers that they trust. Youth across sites reported feeling comfortable working out their problems—personal and social—in the context of the Beacon because they were around people who listened to them and respected them.

While most youth reported feeling safer in the Beacon than in other settings, this theme did not always hold. Youth's discussions of emotional safety differed across sites, and particularly across age groups. One safety concern within Beacons that arose was that of older youth bullying younger youth—both of high school to middle school youth and middle school to elementary school youth.

Our discussions with youth allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of safety for young

people. For some youth, safety at the Beacon meant that they were away from the gangs, drugs, or violence that they experienced in their neighborhoods. For others, feelings of danger or discomfort involved being racially different from the majority of the youth or staff at a Beacon or in a neighborhood. And for still others, safety revolved around youth's feelings of comfort to talk about personal problems or to let down their guard and just relax.

OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN

Youth consistently expressed their wish to learn personally meaningful skills that they perceived as relevant to their future. While for some students these included academic skills reinforced through after school tutoring, for most they ranged from arts-oriented activities like drawing, poetry, and DJing to leadership activities such as Youth Council and peer mentoring.

Learning skills that are personally relevant

Across sites, students valued activities that gave them the opportunity to develop skills that mattered to them. These skills ranged from visual arts and poetry to leadership and civic engagement. Furthermore, it wasn't merely the opportunity to dabble in these activities: youth talked about the importance of opportunities where they actually learned something or improved in a domain of interest. Youth variously described feeling improved competence with respect to physical, personal and social, cognitive and creative, vocational, and citizenship skills—all elements important to youth development. Some young people said that they quit an activity when they felt it was failing to teach them something.

“You can learn stuff that you can't learn in school.”

(Middle School Youth)

Leadership development

Participation in different programs at the Beacons offered youth different kinds of leadership training. Youth who participated in social change programs such as ChangeMakers spoke about skills they were developing for communicating with the public, talking in front of large groups of people and mobilizing other youth to follow their cause. Youth who participated in governance programs such as Youth Council talked about the importance of facilitation skills, greater interest in student government, and group decision-making. Other opportunities included teen counseling and peer tutoring, which allowed youth to develop skills in conflict management as well as learning how to get other kids to listen to you. Through youth-led programs, students had opportunities to write grants, learn conflict negotiation skills, develop public service announcements, tutor younger youth and develop a presentation for one of their local high schools about the current student workload. Moreover, youth learned what it is like to work collaboratively with others, and to be open to learning from unfamiliar perspectives.

Choice in programming

When young people described the Beacon learning environments they valued most, autonomy and choice were salient characteristics. Young people exercised their discretion in diverse ways. Some youth chose to participate in programs that helped them with their homework so they could have more time to play in the evenings. Other youth chose to participate in programs that would expand their competencies in areas that were personally meaningful such as drawing, music, poetry or dance. At sites where certain youth were required to attend mandatory tutoring programs, students expressed the wish to have more choice and freedom in their selection of after school activities.

PHYSICAL SETTING

The physical setting of the Beacon sites was another important feature of youth's experience there. In talking about physical setting, youth referred to the organization of space within Beacon Centers as well as their location in specific schools and neighborhoods.

Spatial organization in Beacon Centers

The contents and arrangement of space at a site was important to youth who wanted the Beacon to be a comfortable, inviting place in which to spend time with friends and adults.

Youth across sites repeatedly cited the need to have space of their own, a space in which they could simply “hang out” and one that felt different from the space at school or elsewhere. Older youth in particular articulated specific ideas about what their Beacon should look and feel like, and some expressed a desire to participate in constructing their own spaces at the sites. Above all, youth's comments make clear that the use of space is a key part of creating an environment in which positive learning and personal interaction can take place at the Beacon.

School venue

It is also evident that the location of Beacon Centers made a difference to youth. Our initial findings suggest that the school-based location of San Francisco's Beacons had benefits and drawbacks. Young people appreciated the convenience of attending a Beacon located on or near the campus of their own school, especially if that site was also a part of the neighborhood in which they lived. Many liked the fact that they could access a Beacon and its activities without having to take a bus or arrange for other transportation. On the other hand, locating Beacon Centers on specific school campuses appears to influence both who comes to the program and how they experience it. While elementary school youth were generally content to attend programs at middle schools, high school students were somewhat reluctant to spend afternoons at a middle or elementary school;

likewise, certain middle school students felt awkward about attending a Beacon Center in an elementary school. Furthermore, the school-based location of the Beacon Centers presented a challenge for many youth who are bused to their schools from neighborhoods across the city.

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CONCLUSION

After school programs and community centers can learn a great deal from the youth perspectives shared in this report. Youth's responses suggest a number of lessons for after school practice:

- **Staff members need to simultaneously support autonomy while providing concrete guidance to youth.** Adults who are effective mentors and educators play different roles with youth than those typically played by teachers in school settings. These adults respect youth's wish to make choices and be a part of decisions that affect them while at the same time offering focused guidance and support. At the Beacons, youth valued the guidance as much as they did choice, especially when it helped youth solve personal problems or manage an interpersonal conflict. This was not an easy balance to manage, but something that many adults were able to pull off. Part of doing this means not just training adult staff members but also providing staff positions where this form of relationship-building can be a priority.
- **Young people value adult staff members who have a deep understanding of what it is like to grow up in the local neighborhood.** One way to think about this problem is youth-worker credentialing. How can the field recruit more young adults with community knowledge and expertise—a “PhD in the streets”? Some Beacons had success in this because of their efforts to bring in community-based organizations with links to the immediate neighborhood.
- **Relationships and community-building happen when there are common areas for people to hang out.** It is difficult to develop a sense of community if that community rarely gets to be together or interact with one another outside of “program time.” Young people appreciated having spaces set aside where they could hang out together, where they had some control over what they were doing and who with. While it was important that this space be youth-friendly, it did not mean that

adults should be absent. Generally youth felt safer when more adults were around.

- **Youth valued opportunities to talk to adult staff outside of specified “program time.”** One suggestion would be to build into job descriptions the time and responsibility for staff to develop relationships with youth. At a concrete level, for example, this means making sure adults have opportunities to hang out during unstructured time with youth, that there be down time outside of specific programs. At some Beacon sites, such as CBB, it was often the staff persons assigned to “safety and security” with whom young people developed close relationships, which suggests that these adults were in the position to get to know youth because of the time they spent interacting with youth during non-program time or relatively unstructured time, such as “open rec.”
- **High school age students are drawn to programs that are specifically geared towards their interests and needs.** Programs need to be intentional about age-appropriate activities for high school students: While students of all ages valued their opportunities to make choices and exercise leadership, this interest was especially strong for high school students. One way to attract high school youth is to offer roles as mentors and tutors for younger students, something that many Beacons did. At the same time, older youth also valued settings where they could work with same-age peers exclusively. For example, groups like Bamboozled were attractive to high school students because they got to work with same age peers on a collaborative, youth-directed project that helped them learn highly practical technology and writing skills. This program offered a high-degree of autonomy and initiative. Another relevant factor had to do with the kinds of skills and personal benefits offered: More than other ages, older youth valued instrumental, future oriented reasons for doing this: will this help me get to college? Will this help me in future professional arenas?

- **Youth valued the opportunity to learn things that weren't offered during the school day and that they found personally relevant or interesting.** Examples from the Beacons included: DJing, hip hop dance, poetry writing, web design, capoeira, and social change. After school programs can make particular contributions to childrens' academic achievement because after school settings can provide different kinds of learning opportunities—literacy through playwriting, problem solving through an arts project. The research is clear that ways of learning out of school are often different—and positively so—from in school learning, and that the complementarity is important. Non-school environments are powerful settings for teaching skills and knowledge distinct from those employed in school (Larson, 2000; Eccles & Gootman, 2002).
- **Leadership and youth voice can be integrated throughout youth centers.** Students who participated in official “leadership” activities, such as Youth Council or Changemakers, were enthusiastic about the skills they learned there and the importance of having a say in important decisions. Youth voice and input can exist across programs. Poetry classes can be organized so that students take turns facilitating the feedback sessions; tutoring can involve peer feedback and guidance. Practices such as these are not only useful for the development of “leadership skills,” but also support learning and engagement in academic-oriented tasks.

Remaining challenges for the field

Certain issues arose in our conversations with youth that we did not feel presented obvious or straightforward conclusions. At the same time, they were important enough that we felt it would be important to raise them as important challenges to after-school programming.

“It is hard to be mature about people leaving...I felt abandoned in a way.”

(High School Youth)

- **Homework help.** We found that youth at two sites were critical of the regimented quality of tutoring. For these youth, tutoring was perceived to merely duplicate the school day. On one hand this may not worry educators: after all, it would likely be more surprising to hear from youth that they actually loved attending homework help or study hall. At the same time, in after school settings that emphasize choice and discretion, it can be a problem if significant numbers of youth are selectively choosing not to take advantage of homework help. This appeared to be borne out at another center, where tutoring was mostly voluntary, it was typically the high achieving students who took advantage of it. When this happens, many of the academic gaps that develop during the school day get duplicated after school, which can limit its benefits for youth most in need of academic help. So what is the solution? Towards the end of our study staff members at the Beacons appeared to be engaging in flexible kinds of recruitment—such as leaning on some students with strong encouragement without “forcing” them to do it. This more personalized approach may prove to be effective at engaging youth to attend after school homework sessions who otherwise would not. Nevertheless, an important reality for after school staff and funders to consider is that the complex

reasons for achievement gaps during the school day do not simply go away when after school opportunities are made available. Tutors and staff members struggle to find ways to engage those youth who need the most help.

- **Staff turnover:** Staff turnover presented real challenges for youth participants. While individual centers can do some things to help retain staff, it is a problem that is larger than specific sites, relating to issues or professional credentialing, the youthfulness of many staff who are on their way to other things, the limited salary structure, etc. How can the field foster more stable and consistent professionals? While this report does not have answers, we raise it as an issue for the field to consider. Closely related is the problem of youth-worker credentialing: how can neighborhood adults be involved more significantly in running these community programs?
- **Location for after school centers: school-based or community-based?** Youth articulated pros and cons to Beacons being located in school. Pros had to do with the ease of access for students at the host school, as well as the available classrooms and library resources. At some sites youth could stop by during the school day or have access to adult staff. One drawback, however, was that most participants came from the host school, thus making some sites more like a school center than the more broad-ranging “community center” intended by Beacon’s designers. Also, youth told us that some youth didn’t attend the Beacon because they wanted to leave school grounds after school. While not a problem in and of itself, it may be that these are students who are most “disconnected” or alienated from school or other community institutions. Several questions remain. Are Beacons receiving input from and serving families and youth of all ages from the nearby neighborhoods? Are there further opportunities for the Beacons to incorporate the surrounding community (and community agencies) into its programming and curriculum?

Summary

Youth voices led us to identify and understand key features of Beacon Centers that were especially valuable to participants, such as supportive relationships with adults and peers, safety, opportunities to learn, and a dedicated space for unstructured time. Youth saw their relationships with caring staff members as distinct from their relationships with school personnel, because adults in the Beacon Centers interacted with youth in a familiar, informal manner, while also helping them navigate peer conflicts and adversity. Youth explained that their unique relationships with peers and adults contributed to the sense of safety created in the centers. Opportunities to learn at the centers allowed youth to engage in activities that were personally meaningful or relevant to their futures. While some youth appreciated traditional forms of academic support through tutoring, most youth talked about valuing their experiences in highly collaborative, youth-centered learning activities, such as poetry critiques, web-site marketing, grant-writing, youth-council, and group decision-making.

From the vantage point of research on adolescent development, the Beacons appear to be well-positioned to meet developmental needs that youth reported were not consistently met in their schools or in their neighborhoods. While most schools are not structured to foster students’ autonomy and sense of belonging, the strongest Beacon programs were able to draw out students’ intrinsic interest in learning because of the combination of caring and choice. When carried out successfully, this strategy has potential for traditional academic benefits as well, because it represents a model of teaching and learning that youth say respond best to—teachers who care, who explain, who give choice, who challenge, and who embed the lessons within a meaningful activity. Youth voices suggest future directions for after school programming, while also underlining the important function that such programs can play in adolescent development.

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