

# After-School Pursuits:

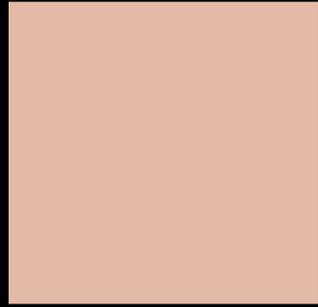
## An Examination of Outcomes in the San Francisco Beacon Initiative

*Executive Summary*



**Karen E. Walker**  
**Amy J.A. Arbreton**

with  
the Stanford University  
School of Education  
Research Team

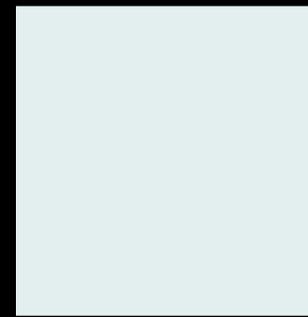




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## Executive Summary

Over the past 10 years, federal and local governments have dramatically expanded funding for school-based after-school programs. This expansion, particularly for free or low-cost programs in poor communities, has been driven by two major policy concerns—improving young people’s educational outcomes and reducing crime in the after-school hours.

Despite broad enthusiasm for these programs, evaluation findings have been mixed, and there is much discussion about why they are not more positive. The evaluation of the federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers indicates that positive impacts on grades and test scores are modest and are observed only for the academically neediest youth. Other evaluations show that positive academic outcomes are achievable primarily for young people who attend programs frequently and over several years.<sup>i</sup>

It has been difficult to interpret these mixed findings because there are serious gaps in our knowledge about after-school programs. Evaluations that focus on programs’ impacts on young people have little information on program content—information that might help to explain why impacts were (or were not) achieved. And evaluations that focus on program implementation have little information about outcomes. People who fund and implement after-school programs are thus left with important, and unanswered, questions. Are the programs showing lackluster impacts because they are of mixed quality? Or is the actual content of programs unlikely to produce desired outcomes (however high the program quality)?

The evaluation of one citywide effort to create a specific type of after-school program, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI), begins to address the gaps. SFBI founders began with very explicit ideas about why they thought the initiative could achieve desired outcomes, and they structured both initiative and evaluation activities to test those ideas. In an interim report we examined the initiative’s early progress in meeting its goals.<sup>ii</sup> This final report addresses the following questions:

- How did the Beacon centers foster high-quality activities and participation among young people?
- If young people participate in high-quality after-school programs, do they report positive developmental experiences such as a sense of belonging and positive peer and adult support?
- If young people report increases in these positive developmental experiences, do they also exhibit improved well-being and academic performance?

### The San Francisco Beacon Initiative

In 1994, a broad-based group of San Francisco leaders set out to transform public schools in low-income neighborhoods into youth and family centers; these centers were intended to become beacons of activity for their communities before, during and after school, and during school vacations. Inspired by the New York City Beacon centers, and concerned about low-income youth’s poor outcomes, the initiative’s founders wanted to offer young people a broad range of enrichment opportunities in five core

programming areas: education, career development, arts and recreation, leadership and health. In providing these opportunities, the leaders hoped to improve young people’s competencies, and their social well-being and academic achievement. Individuals from public and private institutions worked together to raise funds and coordinate planning for the centers. As a result of their efforts, eight Beacon centers are now located in public schools,\* providing a rich array of programs designed to help youth become responsible and productive adults.

### The Initiative’s Theory of Change

Aware that high-quality programs increase the chances of success—and equally aware that ensuring quality across several centers would be challenging—the initiative leaders decided to build quality-assurance mechanisms into the initiative’s early plans. Thus, two key decisions were made. First, private funders agreed to pay for an intermediary, the Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD), which would provide the centers with training in youth development, organizational support and other services. Second, the initiative leaders developed a “theory of change”—a set of assumptions about the resources and activities necessary to achieve the initiative’s long-term goals. The theory of change would be used to guide initiative activities and ensure quality.

Working with a consulting firm, The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), early leaders of the SFBI relied on research about the relationships between developmental experiences and young people’s social and academic outcomes to develop their theory. It incorporated practitioners’ knowledge about how to provide opportunities for young people so that they could have such experiences at the centers.

In essence, the theory stated that if Beacon centers provided safe and welcoming settings that had high-quality activities, young people would participate. In turn, youth who participated would have positive developmental experiences. These experiences would, in turn, contribute to their social well-being and productivity. The initiative’s leaders were

cautious in assuming that participation in the centers would lead to changes in academic outcomes such as grades, school attendance and test scores. However, they wanted to examine the relationships between young people’s participation and those academic outcomes.

### The Evaluation

In 1998, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) began to collect data for the evaluation, which focused on the first five Beacon centers that opened between Fall 1996 and Fall 1998 (three more opened in January 1999). Three of the five centers were located in middle schools, one was in an elementary school and one was in a high school.

We collected data from multiple sources. A Web-based *management information system (MIS)* implemented by the initiative permitted us to describe who used the centers, for how long and how often. The data were collected for the period September 1999 through June 2001. In-school surveys of 854 students in the three middle schools administered in Fall 1999 and Spring 2001 provided information about young people’s experiences and social well-being. We collected information on academic performance and student characteristics through school records. Together, the MIS, surveys and school records permitted us to assess whether or not improvements in young people’s experiences and outcomes could be linked to participation in the Beacon centers.

To gather data on the quality of Beacon center activities, trained researchers assessed a total of 112 activities in the five Beacon centers through *observations*. They also collected *feedback forms* from participating youth in 59 of the observed activities. *Staff surveys* were conducted with 134 staff members across the five centers to gather information about their background and education. We linked this information to information about activity quality, participation and youths’ experiences to examine what, if any, staff characteristics were linked to high-quality activities.

\* The eight schools involved in the initiative are Community Bridges Beacon Center at Everett Middle School; Chinatown Beacon Center at Jean Parker Elementary School; Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center at A.P. Gianinni Middle School; Richmond Village Beacon Center at George Washington High School; Visitacion Valley Community Beacon Center at Visitacion Valley Middle School; Bayview-Hunter’s Point Community Beacon Center at Gloria R. Davis Middle School; OMI/Excelsior Neighborhood Beacon Center at James Denman Middle School; and Western Addition Beacon Center at Benjamin Franklin Middle School.

Finally, *interviews* were conducted with a broad cross-section of staff to understand how the Beacon centers operated, and *focus groups* and *interviews* were conducted with participating Beacon youth to understand the role that Beacon participation played in their lives.

Below we summarize key findings from the full report.

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*The Beacon Centers were well supported, well staffed and well implemented.*

Each of the five Beacon centers involved in the evaluation was run by a community-based organization that hired key staff and provided fiscal and other administrative support. Each had a core annual operational budget of about \$300,000, which the center staff supplemented with additional funds and in-kind services. Each center also shared a common staff configuration, which included a full-time director and program coordinators who scheduled and planned activities in key program areas (such as educational activities or leadership development). Often, program coordinators worked directly with the young people, although they also hired many part-time staff members who ran specific activities. In addition, other community-based organizations ran activities at the centers.

The centers provided a broad range of enrichment opportunities in education, health, career development, arts/recreation and leadership, and implemented them well. About half of the observed activities provided high levels of developmental opportunities, such as warm and caring adults and peers, opportunities for youth to work together, leadership and decision-making. Another third provided average levels. In particular, observers rated activities strong in adult and peer warmth. Activities also tended to be well organized, material was presented clearly, and staff members were generally good at managing young people's behaviors and interactions.

Many young social programs face uneven implementation, and in a community-wide initiative one can expect to see considerable variation across institutions. The relatively small degree of variation across the San Francisco Beacon centers' broad array of activities was therefore impressive.

### Baseline Academic Performance Indicators for Youth

	Beacon participants	Non-participants
Initial average math score*	57.8	69.2
Initial average reading score*	50.5	59.3
Percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	50%	28%

\*Stanford 9 test scores based on 99 point scale.

It appeared to be due to the initiative's theory of change and the intermediary's efforts to help sites develop and implement high-quality activities.

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*The Beacon centers recruited many young people, including the academically needy.*

The Beacon centers were designed to serve approximately 500 people per year, including adults, and they exceeded these expectations. During the first six months of 2001, each of the five centers in the evaluation served between 350 and 720 young people, from 10 to 17 years old.

The after-school field has faced some criticism that it does not attract the neediest young people—neither the academically neediest, nor the poorest, nor those who are most in need of supervision during the after-school hours. The San Francisco Beacon centers, however, successfully reached a needy population. As the table indicates, the average standardized math and reading test scores for young people entering a Beacon center were significantly lower than for those who did not enroll. Also, almost twice as many youth who entered the Beacon centers were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch compared to youth who never went.

In addition, the centers had funds to hire case managers to serve youth referred by schools for poor behavior or by the juvenile justice system. Beacon centers reached at-risk youth by forming strong relationships with staff at the host schools and encouraging them to refer young people to the centers.

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*Young people attended the centers between one and three times a week.*

Youth people's attendance averaged about once a week in three centers and almost three days a week in two others. The highest participation rates were at an elementary school and in one of the middle schools. These participation rates are in line with those found in other evaluations of after-school programs.<sup>iii</sup>

Fifty-seven percent of the young people who attended the centers at least once attended for two "sessions" or longer (each session lasted between two and four months, depending on the time of year).

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*Youth had positive experiences at the Beacon centers; staff practices that contributed to positive experiences were identified.*

A majority of the young people at the Beacon centers reported that they benefited from participation. Specifically, 80 percent felt a strong sense of belonging; 90 percent felt a sense of peer and adult support within activities; and 70 percent thought the activities offered something new and interesting. Staff practices that contributed to young people's experiences in the centers included:

- Cooperative and positive peer interactions. When adults encouraged young people to work together, the youth felt more positively about the adults.
- The overall number of youth present. Young people in activities with fewer youth reported feeling higher levels of support from the staff than those in activities with more youth.
- Number of staff per youth. Having more staff per youth in activities was positively related to youths' experiences of positive peer and adult support. One center was able to offer high staff-to-youth ratios by relying heavily on teen leaders and other volunteers.

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*Youth who participated over time and in a variety of activities, including educational and other enrichment activities, showed increased levels of adult support and leadership experiences.*

Previous research has indicated that both how long young people participate in after-school activities and whether they participate in a variety of activities influence experiences.<sup>iv</sup> The current study provides further support for the importance of long-term participation and variety. Youth who attended the centers for two sessions or more, and who participated in educational development and other types of activities, showed increases in adult support and leadership experiences compared to their lower- or nonparticipating peers.

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*Participation in the Beacon centers appeared to play a protective role for young people, deterring a typical decline among middle-school youth in self-efficacy and the effort they put into school.*

Beacon participation was related both to young people's feelings of competence and self-efficacy (their ability to take on new challenges) and to the effort they exerted in school.

- Young people who participated in the Beacon centers for a year or more were 33 percent less likely to exhibit falling self-efficacy in the 18-month follow-up period compared with youth in their schools who either did not participate or who participated for less time.

Early adolescence is a vulnerable period academically—a time when many youth put less effort into school. They pay less attention in class, come to class unprepared and do not work on their homework. Ultimately, these behaviors can have a deleterious effect on grades.

- Compared to their peers, students who participated in one of the Beacon centers for a year or more were about 61 percent less likely to go from a high to a low level of effort.

The protective effect on school effort was particularly evident among the young people who participated in educational activities, where they often did homework. Especially during middle-school years, when the tendency is for youth to decline in self-efficacy and school effort, these findings are important.

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*Despite the centers being well planned, well supported, well staffed, and well implemented, and despite young people's positive experiences at the centers, Beacon participants did not fare better academically than their non-Beacon peers.*

Learning is a developmental process, and when young people begin to fall behind, the chances of catching up without a strong intervention are slim. Students become discouraged, and overcoming learning deficits may be an overwhelming task. By helping youth to maintain school effort and self-efficacy, we thought that Beacon participation might play an important role in supporting academic achievement.

However, the benefits of Beacon participation did not translate into better grades, test scores or fewer absences from school over the course of the 18-month evaluation. Our investigation into why there were no relationships between Beacon participation and grades, test scores or school absences suggests two possible explanations. First, the academic content of the educational activities was not sufficiently rigorous to enhance young people's knowledge. Although the academic support activities were generally well structured and managed, they tended to consist of homework help or tutoring. Second, even though young people attended regularly over time, the average number of days youth attended each week was low. Our research, and that of others, indicates that in order to see positive academic effects among young people who face serious academic deficits, the content of after-school programs needs to be more focused and young people's attendance needs to be higher. In a recent investigation, Robert Halpern finds that promising literacy activities in after-school programs are material-rich, with sufficient books and careful attention paid to how books are displayed and organized. They also focus on strengthening young people's motivation to read and write through several means, including linking reading and writing with explorations of identity and self; integrating literacy activities with other activities, such as cooking and field trips to the theater; and by fostering a sense of playfulness about reading and writing.<sup>v</sup>

There is some possibility, not tested in this study, that the SFBI's overall positive effect on young people's level of school effort could slow academic declines in the long run. Many young people fall behind as they progress through middle and high school. Because learning is a developmental process, effort put into school at one point in time may support academic achievement much later on.

## Summary

The San Francisco Beacon Initiative is an impressive example of a citywide after-school effort that has accomplished many of the tasks it set for itself. Taken together, the findings from the evaluation suggest that after-school programs can attract and serve large numbers of ethnically diverse and academically needy youth, with a broad range of high-quality activities. Starting with a common vision and well-thought-out plan, initiative staff from funding agencies, the intermediary and the organizations that operated the centers worked together to create Beacon centers with a solid funding base, highly skilled staff, a wide range of opportunities available to youth and high-quality developmental activities. These, in turn, led to positive experiences among the participating youth.

Although strong implementation of a range of enrichment activities and positive experiences did not lead to improvements in grades and standardized test scores, the Beacon centers played a positive role in young people's lives. The findings indicate that if those who plan and fund after-school programs have a primary interest in improving academic achievement, they need a sharper focus on academic study than was typically seen in the SFBI. However, the SFBI provides rich information about how to implement strong programs providing opportunities that contribute to positive social development, which may be especially important to youth who cannot otherwise access such opportunities.

## Notes

- i See Denise Huang, Barry Gribbons, Kyung Sun Kim, Charlotte Lee and Eva L Baker. *A Decade of Results: The Impacts of the LA's BEST After School Enrichment Program on Subsequent Student Achievement and Performance*. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation, 1999; and Elizabeth R. Reisner, Christina A. Russell, Megan E. Welsh, Jennifer Birmingham and Richard N. White. *Supporting Quality and Scale in After-School Services to Urban Youth: Evaluation of Program Implementation and Student Engagement in the TASC After-School Program's Third Year*. Washington: Policy Studies Associates, Inc., 2002.
- ii See Karen E. Walker and Amy J.A. Arbreton. *Working Together to Build Beacon Centers in San Francisco: Evaluation Findings from 1998–2000*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2002. The report examines the centers' early progress in creating safe, welcoming, visible and accessible centers, the collaborations that were necessary to do so and how the initiative successfully managed a complex set of partnerships to achieve its early goals. It also presents information on young people's participation and experiences during the early years of the initiative.
- iii In the Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund's Extended Service Schools, for example, elementary-school students participated about 2 times/week, and middle school students about 1.5 times/week. In the first-year evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the evaluation also found similar participation rates. The After School Corporation's New York programs, however, showed higher rates of attendance.
- iv See Michelle A. Gambone and Amy J.A. Arbreton *Safe Havens: The Contributions of Youth Organizations to Healthy Adolescent Success*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1997; and Huang et al., *A Decade of Results: The Impacts of the LA's BEST After School Enrichment Program on Subsequent Student Achievement and Performance*.
- v Robert Halpern. *Afterschool Matters: Supporting the Literacy Development of Low-Income Children in Afterschool Programs: Challenges and Exemplary Practices*. New York: The Robert Browne Foundation, 2003.









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