

# KNOWLEDGE IN BRIEF

## Findings You Can Use from New Wallace Research

## USING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TO BOOST CITY AFTER-SCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES

To make good decisions, people need good information. But those seeking to improve the quality and availability of after-school, summer and other out-of-school time programs (OST) in cities have long had to operate in the dark, lacking reliable information even on such basics as how many children are enrolled in programs and how often they attend.

Now that may be changing. In recent years, a number of cities have launched efforts to bring together the different players in OST – from program operators like parks or the Y, to schools and municipal family services departments – with the idea that coordinating their work could lead to better, more accessible programs. One important feature of these OST system-building efforts, documented in a recent Wallace-commissioned report by the RAND Corporation, is an emphasis on gathering the data needed for sound decision-making. And key to this task is web-based technology that automates collection of information on – at a minimum – enrollment, attendance, student demographics and program activities.

The report, *Hours of Opportunity: The Power of Data to Improve After-School Programs*, examines use of such technology to inform citywide out-of-school time efforts in Denver, Louisville and San Francisco as well as five cities in a Wallace-supported OST initiative: Boston, Chicago, New York City, Providence and Washington, D.C.

The big finding from the report (which is based on 168 interviews as well as surveys completed by 358 program “providers,” as they are known in the OST field) is that using data from the information systems “can lead to improved access and services.” The report stresses, however, that using the technology requires careful planning, beginning with a firm grasp of what data to collect, and why and how this helps the OST effort.

### EIGHT CITIES, EIGHT DATA SYSTEMS

The cities had a variety of reasons for setting up their data systems, from managing contracts with OST programs to forging links, albeit virtual, among the

### ABOUT THE STUDY

*Hours of Opportunity*, by Susan J. Bodilly, Jennifer Sloan McCombs and others, is a three-volume RAND Corporation report exploring efforts to build citywide systems to improve the quality and accessibility of after-school, summer and other out-of-school time (OST) programs. *Lessons From Five Cities* analyzes the work in cities that undertook OST system-building with support from The Wallace Foundation, while *Profiles of Five Cities* looks at each effort in detail. *The Power of Data* examines how the five cities and three others set up and used information technology. All volumes of the report, which was commissioned by Wallace, are downloadable free of charge from [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org) or [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). The Wallace website also offers video commentary on the findings from RAND and Wallace.

disparate OST players. The technology assisted cities and OST program providers in a number of ways including:

- **Improving OST programming and participation.** Before building the data systems, cities often lacked fundamental facts about OST programs, and what information they did have was usually inaccurate. In fact, after introducing the technology, some cities learned they had been overestimating the number of children served by as much as one-third. Organizers in all eight cities considered the new, harder data essential to understanding the OST landscape and what needed to be improved.

Both funders and providers used the data in part to get more kids involved in OST and to improve

program quality. Looking at the numbers, Denver funders realized, for instance, that middle school students were particularly likely to drop out of programs; the result was the design of activities more engaging to younger teens. In Providence, the nonprofit overseeing OST services regarded low attendance as a possible sign of poor program quality. Therefore, the organization examined attendance figures daily to pinpoint programs with flagging numbers so they could quickly be helped.

- **Funding.** For some cities, the data informed financing decisions. New York City, for example, reduced funding for providers that failed to meet attendance targets. With citywide enrollment and attendance data in hand, OST organizers also had the evidence to press for more support, gaining a competitive advantage over agencies that lacked firm data to back their requests. New York City's main municipal agency for OST, for example, saw its OST budget more than double over three years, from \$46.6 million in 2006 to \$118.2 million in 2009.

Providers, too, used data to support successful bids for continued and additional funding.

- **Informing evaluations.** A number of cities commissioned evaluations to see if there were links between OST and things like school attendance. In Denver, researchers found that participation in OST programs was correlated with better achievement on state tests, giving city leaders evidence to promote OST among principals, funders and others.

### OBSTACLES TO DATA-SYSTEM USE

The new data systems were not headache free. Some program providers had trouble finding the time and labor to collect, then enter data. And some employees lacked needed computer skills; training helped, but it had to be ongoing owing to high turnover in OST workplaces. Also, limited resources kept some cities from doing certain data analyses.

Then there was the burden of re-entering information into the different technology set-ups of various funders. Fully half of Washington, D.C., providers contended with

### KEY POINTS FOR THOSE CONSIDERING SETTING UP DATA SYSTEMS

- **Tailor the technology to those using it.** When asked, those who set up data systems were able to add features important to individual users. The Chicago technology, for example, allows for everything from keeping track of invoices to conducting student surveys.
- **Lighten the program providers' data-entry load.** If organizers cannot agree to use a common data system, one option is configuring the technology to allow providers to enter information particular to the different groups they report to. Another is to allow for easy exchange of information among the various data systems.
- **Set up web-based data entry.** This allows providers to make timely submissions because they can use any computer with an Internet connection.
- **Provide regular training for providers on how to enter and analyze data.** All eight cities invested in teaching OST providers, city staff and others how to use the technology. To mitigate the effects of staff turnover, larger cities provided quarterly or even monthly training in skills such as online data entry. Providers reported substantial demand as well for training in how to analyze, interpret and share information. San Francisco and New York created intermediate and advanced training for OST agency directors and program managers.

at least three different data systems. Other cities solved this by agreeing to a single set-up.

Finally, although OST providers as a whole found the technology useful, those who saw it as a device to monitor them – not help them improve services – had a more jaundiced view.

### SPURS TO DATA-SYSTEM USE

Researchers identified several factors that encouraged data use, including mayoral demand for current, reliable information, and independent evaluation of OST efforts. In addition, when key OST agencies and non-profits worked in sync on establishing the technology, their collaboration led to inter-agency data sharing and consistency in the data gathered. For providers, strong spurs included system user-friendliness, high-quality training, and getting used to the technology.

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