

BY THE NUMB3RS

Using data to see the successes and shortcomings of afterschool programs.

| BY PAT WECHSLER

Mary Ellen Caron, CEO of Chicago's After School Matters, remembers the days when afterschool programs in her city were lucky if they could report how many children had registered. They couldn't tell you the number of students attending daily, which ones were showing up regularly, or whether participants were benefiting.

"All we had were anecdotes and hunches on how well things were working," says Caron, who was then head of the city's Department of Children and Youth Services, which supported programs provided by community-based organizations. "Sometimes we ended up with one basketball program here and another there, neither of which was full. Then we'd get a request for funding for a third. When funds are so limited, you have to be careful."

Change began in 2006 when Chicago, like a growing number of cities, began coordinating the afterschool activities of schools, community organizations, funders, and others to create citywide afterschool systems, a linkage identified by the RAND Corporation in its 2010 Hours of Opportunity study. Driving these efforts is the hope that increased coordination will translate into improvements in programming and youngsters' access to it. But none of that

can happen without accurate, timely data on which to make informed decisions.

"Information gives policymakers, funders, and those who work in afterschool programs an understanding of what effective programs look like," says Nancy Devine. "Without data, we don't have the information we need to raise program quality, and we risk poor use of limited resources." Devine oversees afterschool initiatives at The Wallace Foundation, which supports afterschool system-building efforts.

The foundation recently published a set of six data tip sheets offering guidance on how to incorporate data collection and analysis into afterschool efforts available at www.wallacefoundation.org.

Attendance, for instance, is a critical indicator of whether a program is working, says Elizabeth Devaney, the former deputy director of the Providence Afterschool Alliance (PASA).

"When you see it drop off, there is a problem," says Devaney, now a consultant to PASA.

Another crucial piece of information from program providers is their average daily attendance (ADA), which is the average number of participants per day of service at a site. Typically, funders look for an ADA that's at least 75 percent of projected enrollment. While asking for a program's ADA may not sound like a big request, many providers don't know how to calculate it.

Monitoring total hours of each student's participation is important as well, because the more a young person attends a high-quality program, the more he or she is likely to benefit. ADA alone can mask a drop-off problem if programs have rolling enrollment

policies, and the flow of new students is keeping the attendance numbers up.

Parents and the students themselves are other key sources of information. Before launching the initiative to serve middle school students, PASA surveyed parents and discovered many weren't sending their children to afterschool programs because older students were using the same facilities, and parents weren't sure if their kids would be safe. In Chicago, After School Matters learned from students their inability to use their bus pass on city buses after 6 p.m. interfered with attendance, says Caron, whose program, which Wallace supports, serves twenty thousand teenagers.

Data also helps programs match their offerings to the demand. "When we started, we thought we should be focusing on academic programs to help students improve their performance," Devaney says. "After surveying students we found out what they really wanted and...by offering what they wanted first, we were then able to make the same kids open to the idea of working on their math or reading after school."

But no program can suddenly adopt a data approach to its operations. "You have to teach all the participants how to collect data, how to use data," Caron says. "Data is as good as those who input it."

"Our next steps are to assess whether afterschool is adequately assessing career and college readiness," Caron says. "There's definitely a lot more we need to measure to get the whole picture on what these programs mean." •



CHICAGO'S AFTER SCHOOL MATTERS: www.afterschoolmatters.org / **RAND CORPORATION 2010 HOURS OF OPPORTUNITY STUDY:** www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/key-research/Pages/Hours-of-Opportunity-Volumes-I-III.aspx (or <http://bit.ly/qplp5B>) / **THE WALLACE FOUNDATION:** www.wallacefoundation.org / **PROVIDENCE AFTER SCHOOL ALLIANCE:** www.mypasa.org