



DESIGNING FOR ENGAGEMENT

THE EXPERIENCES OF TWEENS IN THE
BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS' YOUTH ARTS INITIATIVE

COMMISSIONED BY THE WALLACE FOUNDATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Despite clear evidence that arts education can lead to benefits for youth, many young people from low-income urban areas grow up without exposure to the arts, and even fewer receive artistic training.ⁱ In response, Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), with funding from the Wallace Foundation, developed and implemented the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI), which offers high-quality art skill-development classes to tweens from high-poverty communities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite clear evidence that arts education can lead to benefits for youth, many young people from low-income urban areas grow up without exposure to the arts, and even fewer receive artistic training.ⁱ In response, Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), with funding from the Wallace Foundation, developed and implemented the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI), which offers high-quality art skill-development classes to tweens from high-poverty communities.

In February 2014, three Clubs launched a YAI pilot based on the Ten Principles (Table ES-1) lessons learned from art-focused out-of-school-time (OST) organizations, youth, and families, documented in *Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts programs from Urban Youth and other Experts*.ⁱⁱ YAI was a new, innovative, and complex endeavor—and it aimed to create high-quality art skill-development programs in a multi-program, drop-in setting accustomed to working with limited resources. The main goal of the pilot was to explore the fundamental question: Can high-quality afterschool art skill-development programs be incorporated into a multi-program youth-serving organization (YSO), and if so, how? Research on the pilot, documented in *Raising the Barre and Stretching the Canvas*,ⁱⁱⁱ shows that the Clubs did, in fact, successfully implement high-quality art skill-development programs as defined by the Ten Principles for Success.

While the previous report^{iv} established the presence—and importance—of the Ten Principles in YAI, this research shifted the focus to participation and engagement. We asked: **Were tweens interested in programs designed with the Ten Principles in mind? How did Clubs attract, engage, and retain participants in high-quality arts programs?**

Implementing YAI and the Ten Principles required Clubs to adapt their typical operations and culture—and doing so could be a costly endeavor. Clubs already provide safe spaces and offer multiple programs, including arts and crafts. Consequently, we needed to find out: **Does the implementation of high-quality arts programs aligned to the Ten Principles add value to the Clubs—and for participating tweens?**

II. CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE

YAI was implemented in a large, national organization—BGCA. The pilot, which started serving tweens in February 2014, involved BGCA's national office, three affiliate Clubs (the local umbrella organizations), and

ⁱ Denise Montgomery, Peter Rogovin, and Neromanie Persaud, *Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts* (The Wallace Foundation, 2013), 11.

ⁱⁱ The study was conducted by Next Level Strategic Marketing Group and included data from best practice arts organizations, tweens with moderate and high engagement in the arts, and field experts.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wendy S. McClanahan and Tracey A. Hartmann, *Raising the Barre and Stretching the Canvas: Implementing High-Quality Arts Programming in a National Youth Serving Organization* (Philadelphia: Research for Action, 2017).

^{iv} Ibid.

TEN PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

PRINCIPLE N° 1

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICING ARTISTS

Instructors are professional, practicing artists, and are valued with compensation for their expertise and investment in their professional development.

PRINCIPLE N° 2

EXECUTIVE COMMITMENT

Executive directors have a public commitment to high-quality arts programs that is supported by sustained action.

PRINCIPLE N° 3

DEDICATED SPACES

Arts programs take place in dedicated, inspiring, welcoming spaces and affirm the value of art and artists.

PRINCIPLE N° 4

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

There is a culture of high expectations, respect for creative expression and affirmation of youth participants as artists.

PRINCIPLE N° 5

CULMINATING EVENTS

Programs culminate in high-quality public events with real audiences.

PRINCIPLE N° 6

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Positive relationships with adult mentors and peers foster a sense of belonging and acceptance.

PRINCIPLE N° 7

YOUTH INPUT

Youth participants actively shape programs and assume meaningful leadership roles.

PRINCIPLE N° 8

HANDS-ON SKILL BUILDING

Programs focus on hands-on skill building using current equipment and technology.

PRINCIPLE N° 9

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Programs strategically engage key stakeholders to create a network of support for both youth participants and programs.

PRINCIPLE N° 10

PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Programs provide a physically and emotionally safe place for youth.

six units (Clubhouses where YAI programming was located). Three Clubs were awarded a grant to implement YAI; each club selected two units, and each of those units implemented two art forms.⁹

YAI offers two types of classes: skill-development and exposure classes. **Skill-development classes** were held several times a week for 1-2 hours with the explicit goal of building art-specific knowledge and competencies. In these classes, youth were expected to attend regularly, arrive on time, adhere to a strict code of conduct, and participate in a public culminating event at the conclusion of the program. For interested participants unable—or unwilling—to adhere to these requirements, or for skill-development participants wanting more time to practice, teaching artists offered commitment-free **exposure classes**. Examples included open studio classes, “try-it weeks,” and other opportunities.

III. KEY FINDINGS

The findings are based on early, ground-level implementation in a small number of Clubs, and are derived from five sources of qualitative and quantitative data:

- Site visits, including interviews, observations, focus groups, and participant surveys;
- YAI staff surveys;
- Club-gathered YAI participation and participant background data;
- Club-wide attendance data; and
- BGCA’s National Youth Outcomes Survey, an annual survey of Boys & Girls Clubs members that assesses their experience in the Club and outcomes.

The full report examines youth recruitment and participation in a high-quality arts program and describes the reported value of this experience for participants. Specifically, the report addresses—and is organized according to—the following three sets of questions, presented here with key findings.

KEY QUESTIONS

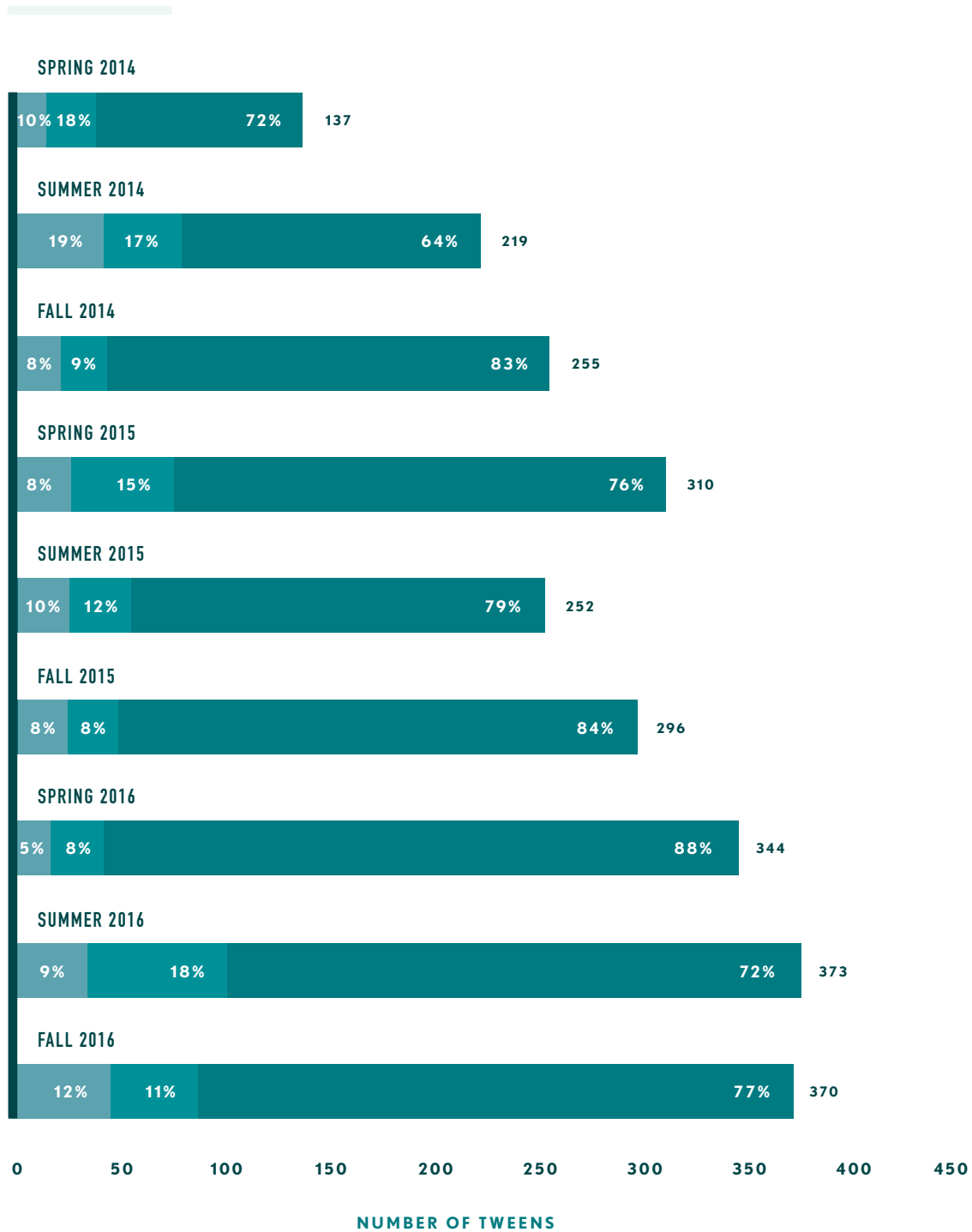
Were youth attracted to high-quality arts programs in a Club setting that offers many different types of programs? What strategies did Clubs use to recruit youth to the program?

KEY FINDING: Tweens were interested in programs designed according to the Ten Principles, several of which (professional teaching artists, dedicated art-specific space, equipment and culminating events) attracted attention in the Club and made arts programming visible. Over the course of the study, 1,280 tweens participated in YAI, and 90% were existing Club members. Clubs started with the goal of at least 15 tweens per skill-development class and launched 12 skill-development classes by Fall 2014. Figure ES-1 shows that YAI enrollment trended upwards over time and neared its skill-development enrollment capacity of 240 youth in Fall 2016.

⁹ Please see full report for a complete list of YAI classes by type and location.

FIGURE ES-1

NUMBER OF TWEENS SERVED BY PROGRAM PERIOD IN SKILL-DEVELOPMENT AND OPEN STUDIO CLASSES



SKILL-DEVELOPMENT ONLY **OPEN STUDIO ONLY** **BOTH SKILL DEVELOPMENT & OPEN STUDIO**

Source: YAI participation data (2014-16)
Note: Students are double-counted in the figure if they attended YAI for more than one program.

The three primary art forms—digital, performing, and visual arts—recruited comparable numbers of youth. However, over time, it became apparent that art forms’ enrollment capacity varied based on room size, equipment needs, and the amount of individualized support required. The Ten Principles (particularly those that addressed the teaching artist, art-specific space, near-professional equipment, culminating events, and guidelines for youth input) bolstered recruitment efforts by attracting attention and making arts programming more visible in the Club. Because of this, informal word-of-mouth was the most effective recruitment strategy, and formal recruitment strategies, such as posters and flyers, were less effective. Teaching artists and staff reached out directly to Club tweens, and participants often recruited their friends. Attempts to recruit committed skill-development participants from exposure class rosters had limited success—only one quarter of tween participants tried an exposure class before enrolling. However, these classes provided important opportunities for youth to “dabble” in the art form. For example, boys were much more likely to participate in dance open studio classes rather than dance skill-development classes.

KEY QUESTIONS

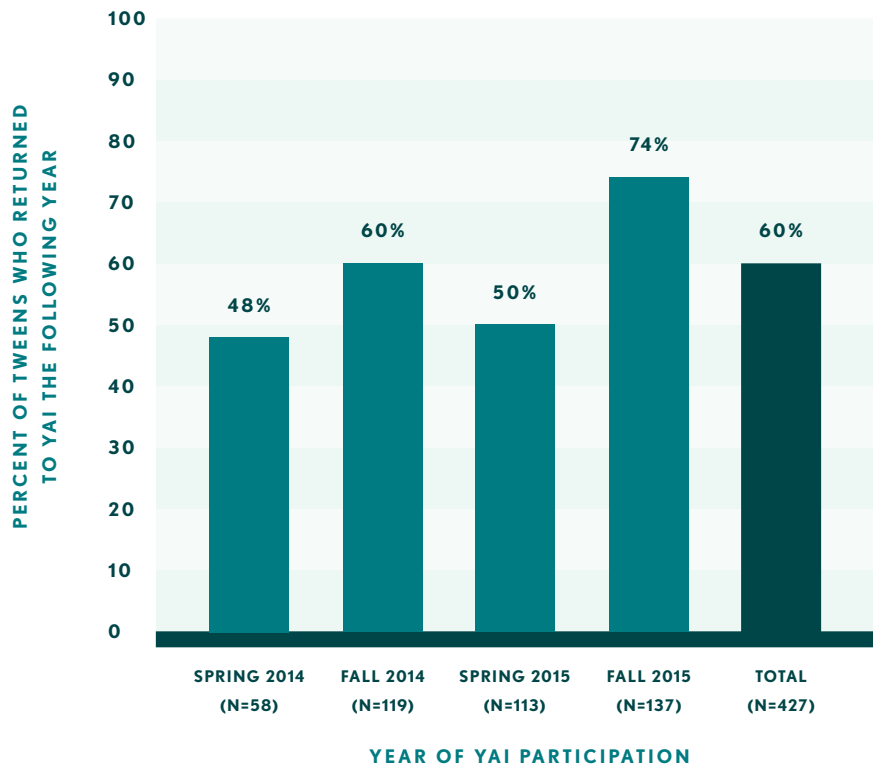
Were tweens engaged and participating regularly? What did it take to ensure engagement and regular participation in a rigorous skill-development program?

KEY FINDING: YAI engaged participants--A majority participated regularly and returned the following year. Youth engagement and participation were driven by high-quality, challenging programming that nurtured creative “sparks.”^{vi} Almost all focus group participants said they enjoyed YAI, and at least a third were highly engaged. Further, more than half of the tweens who opted to enroll in demanding skill-development classes participated regularly, and a majority returned to the program the following year.

^{vi}Peter C. Scales, Peter L. Denson, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, “Adolescent Thriving: The Role of Sparks, Relationships and Empowerment.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 40, no. 3 (March 2011): 263-277. The concept of a ‘spark’ was developed by the Search Institute and describes a passion or motivating interest. Research by the Search Institute has found that having a spark is a key developmental strength and indicator of thriving; youth who report having one or more sparks have more positive outcomes than those who do not.

FIGURE ES-2

ACROSS SESSION RETENTION: PERCENT OF SKILL-DEVELOPMENT TWEENS WHO CONTINUED THEIR PARTICIPATION IN YAI THE FOLLOWING ACADEMIC YEAR



Source: YAI participation data (2014-16)

Note: Each bar represents the percent of tweens who participated in YAI skill-development classes in the specified semester who returned to YAI at least once in the following school year.

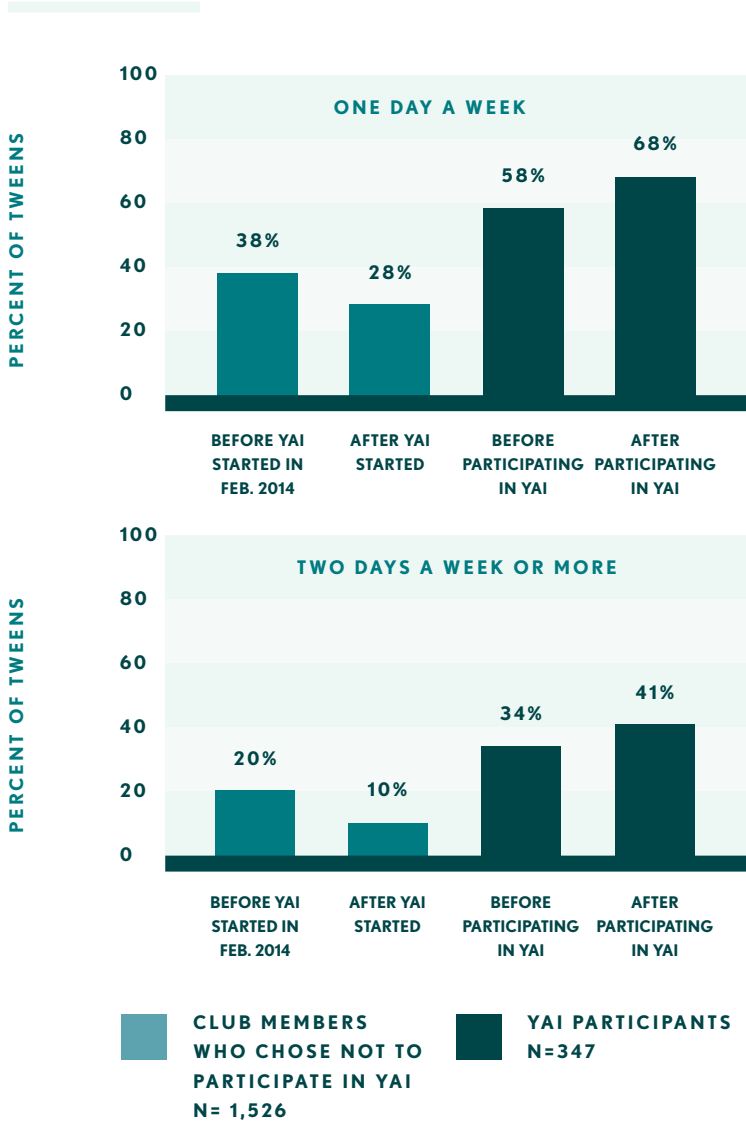
Some participants developed strong, motivating interests in their chosen art forms, and these “sparks” sustained their engagement despite the rigor of the classes themselves. Other factors that contributed to youth engagement and participation included strong youth development practices, as identified in the Ten Principles, and high expectations, including an attendance requirement, supported by parent engagement. There were some barriers to participation: Club leadership had to manage complicated schedules to reduce competition between programs, and teaching artists had to manage program growing pains.

KEY QUESTION

What was the perceived value to youth and Clubs from high-quality arts programs?

FIGURE ES-3

CLUB ATTENDANCE AMONG YAI PARTICIPANTS AND CLUB TWEENS WHO DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN YAI



Source: Club participation data (2012-16)

Note: We examined the change in attendance patterns after YAI participation by controlling for participants' attendance trends before YAI started in 2014. We found the change in attendance patterns remained the same regardless of participants' pre-existing attendance trend.

KEY FINDING: Youth, parents, and Club staff reported many benefits from regular YAI involvement, and YAI added value to the Clubs.

YAI provided tweens with developmentally rich programs that offered a more positive Club experience. Families, Club staff, and tweens themselves said that participants honed more than just their new artistic skills—they developed social and emotional learning competencies related to self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. YAI participants also increased their overall Club attendance after joining YAI, while non-YAI Club members' attendance declined over the same period. Further, YAI participants were much more likely than other Club members to come back to the Club year after year.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

BGCA's Youth Arts Initiative demonstrated that the Ten Principles for Success will attract and engage tweens. Importantly, while these high-quality arts programs are expensive and challenging to implement, they lead to positive youth outcomes and keep tweens connected to the implementing organization. This research suggests several lessons that may help OST providers and the field better understand how to attract and engage tweens in OST arts programming.

To increase tween recruitment to arts programming, make arts visible and valued.

Implementing the Ten Principles required well-equipped studio spaces, professional teaching artists, new equipment and technology, and public culminating events. These aspects of the program made YAI visible and conveyed the importance of the arts, which naturally attracted youth. Multi-component OST providers seeking to recruit youth to arts programs should assess the degree to which the arts are visible and valued in their organization.

Offer multiple engagement strategies. While many participants committed to the high-quality arts program, some preferred to dabble. While there were challenges associated with offering exposure classes, and only about a quarter went on to participate in skill-development classes, these classes did serve a purpose in some art forms and for some youth. OST programs seeking to recruit youth should offer both exposure and skill-development opportunities to meet different needs. In order to offer an appealing experience that could lead to deeper involvement, programs should carefully structure these classes based on the art form and participant age range.

Don't be afraid to challenge youth and hold high expectations—as long as these are balanced by adult support and mentorship. Initially, Clubs were unsure about YAI's attendance commitment requirement and concerned that it would deter participation. However, the program was able to institute an attendance commitment later recognized as a distinguishing characteristic. The attendance expectations allowed for some flexibility to account for tweens' other commitments, but still challenged youth and allowed them to develop artistic skills. High expectations and commitment do not deter tweens—in fact, they support deeper engagement, especially when reinforced by supportive adult mentors and strong youth development practices.

Engage families to support committed attendance. While tweens have more autonomy than younger youth, YAI staff found that they still needed to engage parents to ensure that youth could make an attendance commitment. OST programs for tweens often struggle to connect with parents, but successful communication can help boost attendance. YAI artists used emails, text messages, and social media to engage parents, and culminating events deepened parent support.

Pay attention to quality to sustain participation and foster youth development. YAI demonstrates that tweens, a difficult age group for OST programs to attract and retain, will be attracted to a high-quality OST program. Strong youth development practices identified in the Ten Principles were essential to retaining youth in a challenging program. When youth left the program, their reasons often reflected lapses in implementation. These included disruptions in relationships with teaching artists or peers, programs not responding to their interests or not being hands-on enough, or challenges with physical or emotional safety. For programs seeking to retain tweens, the first place to start is assessing program quality, particularly the strength of these core youth development practices.

Recognize youth's sparks in the arts and provide mentoring to help develop them. Youth need more opportunities to develop their artistic sparks in the presence of adult mentors. Other multicomponent OST programs should consider adding or expanding their arts program offerings in multiple traditional and non-traditional art forms to address this need. Providers should ensure the presence of professional teaching artists who can mentor participants in the art form, as well as other components of high-quality arts programming represented in the Ten Principles.

Policymakers and funders should provide adequate funding for tween OST programs to attract and retain this population. The importance of OST programming, particularly for older youth, is too often overlooked by funders and policymakers. As a result, many OST programs lack the funds they need to improve quality. Clubs received dedicated funding from The Wallace Foundation for YAI to implement the Ten Principles. This research shows that YAI successfully attracted and retained tweens, a difficult population for OST programs to engage. The research also provides more evidence to support the claim that when programs are high quality and interesting, tweens will attend and participate, allowing them to achieve important developmental outcomes. For this reason, OST funders and programs should focus on building up quality, even at the expense of capacity, when providing OST programming to middle and high school youth.



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