NATIONAL LEAGUE of CITIES

> BUILDING MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS TO COORDINATE CITYWIDE AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS A TOOLKIT FOR CITIES

SECTION 1: FOUR HIGH VALUE USES OF AFTERSCHOOL DATA

anagement information systems (MIS) should be at the center of citywide efforts to collect, store, link, analyze, report, learn from, and use information on the afterschool programs that cities and their local partners operate.

The diagram below illustrates how an MIS can support data-driven decision making as information flows back and forth across the site, agency, coordinating entity, local afterschool network, and funder levels. As the information collected in an MIS travels from a program to its funders – including the elected officials who allocate local revenues to city, school-based or nonprofit programs – it is used to evaluate youth outcomes and system impact, to demonstrate return on investment and allocate scarce afterschool resources, and to sustain and expand support for high-quality afterschool programs. In a high functioning afterschool network, a system's coordinating entity "closes the loop" by sending the results of these analyses back down to individual providers and sites, using them to facilitate peer benchmarking and empower afterschool providers with more complete information on the youth they serve. Each of these "high value" uses of afterschool data is described in more detail below.



ASSESS YOUTH OUTCOMES AND SYSTEM IMPACT

Among the most important uses of an MI system is to provide a city's coordinating entity with the kind of information on system usage and youth outcomes that can inform decisions about efforts to expand access, improve program quality, and link afterschool initiatives to broader citywide goals such as college and career readiness and public safety. Measuring impact begins with answering basic questions about the scope of afterschool services available in the community, counting the number of participants in different programs, assessing how many youth are eligible to participate, and evaluating what proportion of those youth are enrolled in high-quality programs. Ideally, it also involves either directly measuring developmental assets or integrating data with outside systems to evaluate how afterschool programs are influencing a broader set of outcomes related to academic achievement, employment or public

The audience of people that should have this information should be so much broader." safety. Mapping these results can also highlight areas of opportunity for further afterschool systems development.

According to city afterschool leaders who responded to NLC's 2011 survey, only 27 percent of cities believed that they had a "fairly exact" count of how many youth are eligible to attend afterschool programs. Cities esti-

mated that as many as 60 percent of those youth who do participate are attending programs that do not receive funding or professional development from the city.

Once obtained, the information on afterschool eligibility and participation may be surprising. One community discovered, upon implementing an MI system that gave each child a swipe card to check in to afterschool programs automatically, that actual attendance at several sites was sharply less than the figures those providers had been reporting by email.

City leaders are also interested in being able to tie their investments to specific youth outcomes and linking afterschool programs to broader citywide goals such as college and career readiness or public safety. Some cities use MI systems to measure youth development outcomes directly with pre- and post-tests such as the Search Institute's Developmental Asset Profile (DAP). Many others compare the academic and behavioral outcomes of afterschool participants in school against those of non-participants over time, and are able to make specific claims about how their programs improve student attendance and grade completion.

Just as it is a major missed opportunity for funders to collect afterschool program information without returning it to agencies as knowledge they can use to improve their programs, it is not enough for MI systems to facilitate peer learning without providing city leaders with the kind of aggregate information they can use to improve public policy. As one municipal director tartly observed of her city's management system:

I can't say that this process is, shall we say, the best that it can be. I think that it's great that we have providers hearing this and having an opportunity to visit with each other. But I am not pleased with the level of reporting out, so that policymakers and those that support these programs can see the data and use it....It needs to be written up in a way that's consumer-friendly, and the audience of people that should have this information should be so much broader.

PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENTS VERSUS YOUTH OUTCOME EVALUATIONS

Program quality assessments and youth outcome evaluations are complementary approaches to understanding and improving afterschool programs. But they are very different tools with distinct uses and audiences, as Charles Smith, the executive director of the Weikart Center describes:

There's almost a difference in ethic in terms of the way that the two very different purposes are viewed. One is evaluative – we want to come to some kind of summative judgment about the value of the services that the program is providing and we want to use that judgment in a higher-stakes way to allocate funds or assign professional development. And the other is this quality improvement side, where what we want to see is continuous improvement and to hold providers accountable to that process.

Program quality assessments (PQA) are most concerned with, and therefore relevant to working with, afterschool <u>providers</u>. They utilize performance standards and measures as professional development and can be an excellent way to initiate a conversation about quality improvement in programs that are skeptical of being benchmarked against youth outcomes that might be caused by many factors outside of the afterschool program.

It is a weakness of program quality assessments that they are not directly linked to the system-level outcomes that are important to funders, elected officials, and other policymakers. Even those who find value in the PQA acknowledge that, as one city leader described it, "there's sort of this leap of logic that if your program is of high quality then you have good youth outcomes." But this proposition can be (and is) disputed, and PQA cannot, by itself, demonstrate to those that are skeptical of afterschool programs that they are receiving the desired return on their investment.

Youth outcome evaluations are most directly useful at the systems level to identify areas of high and low performance, inform further investments, and sustain support for afterschool programs by demonstrating their value in supporting broader policy objectives and community priorities. Outcome evaluations can provide a more direct measure of what cities "really" care about: engaged, resilient, college and career-ready youth.

Critics of youth outcome evaluations point out that this kind of measurement has a track record of disrupting the good work that it wishes to confirm. Management information systems may emphasize compliance rather than improvement, and data reported to agency and system leaders by sites may never trickle back down to inform site-level practice. In other cases, funders may impose outcome measures for results that providers do not believe they can reasonably be held accountable for achieving.

In practice, many cities use both tools – and the most adroit use each to inform the other. In Nashville, Laura Hansen of Metro Nashville Public Schools reported that standardized outcome measures and performance data helped the process of allocating funding be more transparent:

It can be scary, too. We've had some folks worried that this is going to be used as a stick to say 'hey, based on what we've seen, we don't want you back next year.' But our message to providers is that our goal is to use this as a continuous improvement

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mechanism and, just like with [their program quality assessments], they'll get their program's feedback and they'll know if there's an issue, such as a high participant turnover rate, they'll have the opportunity to improve that. In marrying that to the quality standards, we can link professional development to what's going on at each program. We can take the YPQA coaches and send them to the programs where it looks like the students are really struggling. I think it can almost be an early warning system, and give people an opportunity to improve their program. The improvement part is what we're really after.

2. PROMOTE ACCOUNTABILITY, DEMONSTRATE RETURN ON INVESTMENT, AND ALLOCATE SCARCE RESOURCES

Related to their value in gauging afterschool system- and program-level reach and impact, MI systems enable city leaders and private funders to hold programs accountable for achieving desired results and analyze at a policy level where their investment of afterschool dollars is most needed and is likely to bring the largest return. According to city responses to an NLC survey conducted in 2011-12, the top reasons city leaders want to implement MI systems are to improve accountability to funders, demonstrate the value of investing in afterschool and improve program quality (see chart below).



CHART 3. City Leaders Want MIS to Improve Accountability and Increase Program Quality

One lesson many cities have drawn from the evidence is that high-quality programs are much more effective at driving youth outcomes than so-called "gym and swim" activities. Investment in professional development to improve and refocus existing programs has followed.

By collecting broad and accurate participation data that includes demographic and registration information, MI systems can also help city decision-makers map the capacity of their afterschool systems against their actual use and highlight areas of growing demand. Funds can be reallocated to underserved neighborhoods and critical age ranges.

Source: 2011-2012 survey of city leaders by NLC

The mayor has asked questions like, 'How many kids are in afterschool programs and are we missing any neighborhoods?' Right now we can't answer those questions as a city department, never mind for the city as a whole. With the launch of this data system, we can now start to pull that information and look together at 'where are the gaps, where are the needs, where are we over- or under-serving?'"

~ Catherine Penkert, City of Saint Paul, Minn.

In addition, city leaders use hard data from MI systems to inform difficult and sometimes politically sensitive decisions to cut off funding to ineffective programs, thereby freeing up resources for programs that have a bigger impact. As one mayor's advisor told NLC, to begin this conversation, policymakers need to bring clear quality standards and solid performance measures to the table:

The mayor recognizes that most of these providers don't have a consistent approach to quality standards. And he's looking at my office to give him a sense of [what they realistically can be accountable for improving], and to get enough information to make a decision about which of these programs that we have been operating forever should or should not continue. **That's going to be a very hard conversation to have, and you can't do it anecdotally.**

As Priscilla Little, initiative manager at The Wallace Foundation, has said, "Given the new economic climate in which cities and states are operating, out-of-school time is an increasingly data-driven enterprise with results-based decision making. Evaluations are non-negotiable. You have to have that data to support your claims."

On the flip side, MI system data can help local leaders make the case for sustaining and expanding high-quality afterschool programs. "Accountability," in this sense, is not only a bureaucratic necessity – it provides a framework through which afterschool providers and their supporters in local government can make a powerful argument for increased investment in afterschool systems. As Kim Luce, the 21st Century Community Learning Center director for Buffalo Child and Adolescent Treatment Services, argues, accountability is about "getting people on board to see the benefit [of this work], and to bring in national funding which would improve access and opportunity for quality programming. Anytime you are writing for support, if you don't have good data, your case is weakened."

Irrespective of federal mandates, programs are often very highly motivated to demonstrate to elected officials and parents that their children and their dollars are being carefully managed. As Amy Phuong, the City of Atlanta's Chief Service Officer, explained:

Residents not only want us to make essential programs and services available, they want us to be accountable for making good investments toward high-quality programs. Mayor Reed understands this implicitly, and it's my job to get him the data to demonstrate that this investment in Atlanta's Centers of Hope is money well spent.

3. EMPOWER AFTERSCHOOL PROVIDERS AND REDUCE PAPERWORK

Afterschool data collected in MI systems allow city and non-city program providers to make better decisions and work more efficiently in several ways:

Informing Agencies and Managers

Individual afterschool programs generate management information on enrollment, attendance, participant demographics, and often parent or student satisfaction. Rapid shifts in any of these factors can be a signal to managers to step in and provide more direct program oversight, find additional resources, or arrange professional development. Getting agencies this kind of "business intelligence" is crucial to maintaining high-quality programs. Providing instructors with information that is continuous and immediate, rather than semi-annually reporting the outcomes of students no longer enrolled in their programs, is crucial to achieving better outcomes for youth.

Rob Clark, the afterschool director for the Family League of Baltimore City, sees an opportunity to combine information on student academics and program participation to identify students who would benefit from additional assistance:

On the pro-active side – even starting in the spring and using data from the year just finishing – it would be great to take a look at those kids, to sit down with the principal and recruit for our summer learning program based on some of the data that we're seeing on which students need the extra help.

These tools provide afterschool managers with the type of client information that is taken for granted by other professionals. They also transform the kind of engagement that is possible between agencies and programs, and between programs and parents, from a yearly "report card" to an ongoing, substantive conversation about improving results.

Empowering Program Sites and Instructors

One of the more obvious – but difficult to implement – advantages of an MI system is the potential for afterschool programs to view participating youths' school records in (near) real time and to target and tailor their instruction accordingly. Changes in a student's school attendance, behavior, and academic ranks are all important signals to afterschool program providers.

Currently, many afterschool instructors receive this information only if they are school-based or fortunate to have a very close relationship with their students' teachers and principal. Often, instructors receive a report with aggregate results for children six or 12 months after the end of the class. As Edwin Hernandez, who co-leads the pilot of Grand Rapids' new "Believe 2 Become" initiative, points out, "It's of no use to know the attendance rates of your children six months after you've had them in your system. We want this data to be made available to providers on the ground as they are serving kids." For a description of the Believe 2 Become MIS, see page 52.

Reducing Paperwork

MI systems automate the creation of routine reports for instructors and site managers. The Providence After School Alliance (PASA), for example, uses an MI system to create the roster that matches students leaving school with their assigned program and bus. Something as simple as this report can be the "killer app" that wins over skeptical providers, says PASA's quality consultant, Elizabeth Devaney.

MI systems can also reduce or eliminate the demands on individual sites to gather student academic data and fill out compliance reports. In Philadelphia, Thomas Sheaffer, director of policy and evaluation within the Deputy Mayor's Office for Health and Opportunity, is planning to link his department's MIS with the school district's academic records in the city's data warehouse. Instead of each of his individual programs tracking its own student outcomes and filing compliance reports with multiple state and local funders, the city may be able to batch and send these reports in a fraction of the time. Philadelphia is already using a shared external evaluator to coordinate all of the school district and Archdiocesan student data required by the 21st Century Community Learning Center data system, PPICS.

FIVE DIFFERENT FLAVORS OF AFTERSCHOOL INFORMATION

MI systems can help afterschool leaders and providers collect and interpret information from multiple sources, including surveys of program quality and parent satisfaction, assessments of youth behavior and development, program participation information, and school transcripts. Each source has its own set of uses and limitations:

Program participation (attendance) is the most fundamental element tracked by an afterschool MIS. In many cities, program attendance is linked directly to the fee paid to afterschool providers by city agencies and private funders. Attendance is also a useful, though inexact, proxy for program quality and client satisfaction: high-quality programs prioritize regular attendance by the youth they enroll while programs with poor reputations struggle to enroll and retain students. <u>Use in MIS</u>: MI systems employ a number of strategies to track youth participation, including online rosters, handheld mobile devices, and swipe cards. Cross-tabulating and aggregating this information for site managers, agency staff and city policymakers are among the most important features of an afterschool MIS.

Program quality is usually measured by trained evaluators using tools such as the David P. Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA). Using these tools, evaluators may observe factors such as site safety, standards of behavior for youth and adults, youth engagement, and adherence to other best practices. <u>Use in MIS</u>: Although these program quality assessments do not directly measure youth outcomes, many MI systems can store the evaluation results of each program and compare these scores to the achievements of that program's youth participants (measured separately).

Parent, student, and teacher satisfaction is often measured by survey, and sites funded by federal programs such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers are required to gather this information. <u>Use in MIS:</u> Many MI systems can generate online (Continued) (Continued from previous page)

surveys of students and distribute these surveys by email to parents and teachers. Responses are automatically recorded and associated with the individual student and program.

Outcomes of youth who attend afterschool programs are often measured against the outcomes of youth who do not receive this same support. Different programs will be interested in different youth outcomes, but outcome measures tend to be of two main types:

- Academic outcomes, including ranks, report cards, grade completion, achievement on standardized tests, behavior and more generally college and career readiness. <u>Use in MIS:</u> MI systems record afterschool attendance, participation and services received by individual students. By linking this "dosage" information against school and other information systems, programs can assess their impact on youth outcomes outside of their direct control or measurement.
- Youth development outcomes, such as social and emotional well-being, community engagement, and healthy behaviors as assessed by tools such the Search Institute's Developmental Asset Profile (DAP). <u>Use in MIS</u>: Many of these assessments can be administered using an MI system's web interface, and automatically scored, stored, and compared across programs and over time.

As Meridith Polin, program director for Public/Private Ventures, notes, it is important to realize that these kinds of outcomes must be measured carefully and may take years to materialize. There is often a "stepped" process of implementation, says Polin, where agencies begin by tracking attendance, use this information to inform and improve their practice, reflect on the underlying factors that influence the success of youth in their programs, and – bearing all of this in mind – begin measuring and comparing

4. FACILITATE PEER BENCHMARKING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

"You can only manage what you measure" is an adage that succinctly describes the importance of information to complex undertakings like building citywide afterschool systems. In many cities, that information flows only one way: from providers upward, through mandatory reports to funders with competing requirements and little or no cross-communication. In this environment, even programs that are data rich are likely to be knowledge poor – unaware of how their progress compares with peers, unable to share promising practices, and unsure of how their work aligns with the community's larger goal of ensuring that youth who participate in their programs enter adulthood college and career-ready.

More recently, cities have begun to use the implementation of afterschool MI systems as an opportunity to begin providing sites with meaningful feedback on their success, often as part of broader professional development initiatives. The Children's Commission of Jacksonville, Fla., for example, publishes an annual report that lists the results of every program they fund – by category – according to several established benchmarks, including promotion

rate, school attendance, and Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores. Not only does this provide a very public level of accountability, but the commission uses this information to evaluate whether their professional development efforts are successful. In several cases, failure to meet specified benchmarks has led to repeated visits to providers from the commission and, eventually, to better performance from these lagging providers.

Many city leaders find that, in order to establish baseline measures and negotiate the conditions of program success with their providers, more elemental assumptions need to be defined, such as "what counts as attendance?" The benefits of regular afterschool attendance have been well documented. In practice, however, different programs may count youth differently – counting a drop-in and mentoring session equally, for example, or failing to distinguish between recreational and enrichment activities. By developing common measures for how sites track their work and gauge their impact and by serving as a clearinghouse for this summary information across many agencies and funding sources, city leaders can transform these streams of data into knowledge that program managers can use to identify – and learn from – high performers.



CITY EXAMPLE:

SPROCKETS BRINGS KNOWLEDGE TO SAINT PAUL NEIGHBORHOODS

As Harvard University's public management guru Dr. Robert Behn wrote, "Despite the universal appeal of the seductive cliché, the data never speak for themselves...The data acquire meaning only when they are connected to some version of reality." That

reality, recognized Catherine Penkert, project lead for the Sprockets database and a youth development specialist with the Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Department, can vary an awful lot between neighborhoods.

In 2011, the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation created a MI system to serve both St. Paul's Promise Neighborhood and Sprockets. 11 agencies are part of the afterschool pilot, with more being added in 2012. As the city moves toward better access to common afterschool measures, Penkert sees a need to provide more specific assistance to program sites participating in the data system and to the afterschool community overall.

Now, equipped with afterschool and academic performance data, Sprockets and Wilder staff will work directly with local program managers to interpret and use the information. In addition to discussing data at an organizational level, Sprockets will use their "Neighborhood Network Teams" to engage a broader afterschool community in using this new resource. In each case, says Penkert, the question is "'OK, Wilder gave us this information; what does it mean? And what might you do differently, knowing it?' We really hope that Sprockets can play this role, helping to connect the research data that we're generating to actual practice."