Practices To Keep In After-School and Youth Programs

Preventing Placement in Foster Care:
Strengthening Families and Community Ties

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE
Established in 1991 in New York City, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) is one of a growing number of intermediary organizations throughout the United States that seek to create a cohesive community infrastructure to support the positive development of youth. YDI approaches its work with an understanding of and a respect for the complexities of young people’s lives and the critical role of youth-serving organizations in supporting young people’s growth and development.

YDI’s mission is to increase the capacity of communities to support the development of young people. YDI provides technical assistance, conducts research, and assists policy-makers in developing more effective approaches to support and offer opportunities to young people. At the core of YDI’s work is a research-based approach to youth development. This work is asset-based in focusing on the strengths of young people, organizations and their staff. It seeks to bring together all of the resources in the lives of young people—school, community, and family—to build coherent and positive environments. The youth development framework identifies five principles that have been found to be present when youth, especially those with significant obstacles in their lives, achieve successful adulthood:

- Close relationships with adults
- High expectations
- Engaging activities
- Opportunities for contribution
- Continuity of adult supports over time

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) also strengthens non-profit organizations and public agencies and builds programs that address gaps in services, in New York City and nationally. It provides training and on-site technical assistance, conducts research, develops practice and policy innovations, and supports advocacy. This work enables organizations and agencies to apply the most promising lessons from research and practice so that they operate efficiently and the young people they serve grow and develop through powerful, sustained, and joyful experiences. YDI helps organizations to design their programs based on sound knowledge about what works and provides their leaders and staff with the information and skills to implement these strategies effectively. YDI addresses gaps in youth services by developing new programs and policies in areas and for populations that are addressed inadequately.
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Introduction
1. INTRODUCTION

Practices to Keep In After-School and Youth Programs is a series of documentation reports that highlight successful approaches in Beacons, which are community centers in school buildings that combine youth and community development to support young people, families, and neighborhoods. Developed for Beacons, these approaches are also widely used in the expanding world of After-School and Youth Programs.

The reports demonstrate how local ingenuity applied to key issues over time can leverage individual, neighborhood, and policy change. They contain ideas for practitioners to adapt to their own programs and for policymakers who seek practical responses to critical concerns—literacy and academic support for youth, preparation for work and participation in the labor force, strengthening families and preventing foster care placement, and creating opportunities to play important roles that strengthen the fabric of community social organization.

The Beacons Movement and After-School Programming

Beacons were first established in New York City in 1991 as part of the Safe Cities Safe Streets program. Located in schools and operated by community-based organizations with core funding provided by New York City, the Beacons represent an innovative collaboration between the public and non-profit sectors to turn the school building into a true public resource. Today, more than 100 Beacons in five cities offer education, recreation, adult education, arts, and family programming after school, before school, on weekends, and during vacations. In New York City, Beacons serve more than 150,000 children, youth, and adults annually. Nationally they reach more than 250,000 individuals in San Francisco, Minneapolis, Denver, and West Palm Beach, Florida.

The Beacons forge partnerships across public, non-profit, and private institutions to fortify neighborhoods. They create pathways for participation between age groups and a continuum of programming that promotes healthy development and strong families. They contribute to local economic development by providing jobs to young people and adults. They help to make neighborhoods safe and connect residents to each other and to local resources. At a time when social services are increasingly located outside of the communities that need them, the Beacons serve as a hub for an array of social and educational supports.

Funding for the Beacon programs described in Practices to Keep comes from a wide variety of sources. The range demonstrates a commitment by both the public and private sectors to the comprehensive work of Beacons, with support located in education, labor, child welfare, and human services. Sources include:

- Local tax levy
- Local, state, and federal foster care
- Private foundations
- Public-school dollars
- State after-school funding sources
- Summer Youth Employment Program (OTDA, US DOL)
- Supplemental Education Services, part of No Child Left Behind (US DOE)
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers (US DOE)
The need for the Beacons and other programs that build on similar principles is more urgent today than ever. The economic crisis that began in 2008 has affected every sector of society, but will inevitably hit hardest in poor communities where the Beacons are located. Too often, services are removed from the very neighborhoods where they are needed most. The Beacons place services in the center of poor communities. The gains that the Beacons help create must be protected, as the need for comprehensive and coordinated services, high quality education and work preparation, and community safety increases. The Beacons have earned the trust and respect of local residents and provide a tested infrastructure for attaching additional or consolidated programs.

*Practices to Keep In After-School and Youth Programs* illustrates how Beacons provide young people with pathways to increasingly responsible roles, involve youth and adults in improving their communities, and create environments of support to keep families together.
Preventing Placement in Foster Care:
Strengthening Families and Community Ties
2. PREVENTING PLACEMENT IN FOSTER CARE

Separating children from their families is traumatic for all, and children who grow up in foster care have a greater likelihood of negative outcomes. It is a far better alternative to help avoid placement in foster care while supporting families to offer safe and nurturing homes. The Preventive Services program at the Good Shepherd Services Beacon in Brooklyn joins the best of youth development and social work and has succeeded in keeping nearly all its families intact since the program’s inception in 1996.

The Good Shepherd Services (GSS) Preventive Services program at the P.S. 15 Beacon in South Brooklyn averts the need for children and youth to enter the foster care system. An innovative partnership brings together youth development staff from the Beacon at P.S. 15 with social workers from Preventive Services. Staff collaborates on program development and community events and shares responsibility for ensuring the health and well-being of 90 families who are receiving preventive services. Children participate in engaging after-school programs, and their parents have access to a host of programs and services at the Beacon, while families get professional help in parenting and creating a safe and nurturing home for their children. The partnership has succeeded in preventing foster care placements; the success rate is close to 100% and has been since the program’s inception in 1996.

The Beacons/Preventive Services Program was originally established by New York City in 1992, shortly after the inception of the Beacons initiative, as an experimental approach to preventing placement in foster care. The low-income neighborhoods in which Beacons were located also had high rates of foster care placement. The NYC commissioners of child welfare and youth services who designed the program said that the accessibility and safety of the Beacons—their neighborhood location in public schools, their availability during the evenings and on weekends, their non-stigmatizing environment—would increase the likelihood that families would avail themselves of help and services and enable staff to intervene early with entire families. Further, the five-day-a-week, after-school component would offer preventive staff non-intrusive access to children and families throughout the week. At the same time, it would give children a normal, engaging, and fun environment in which to learn new skills, make friends, and interact with caring adults. The GSS Preventive Services Program at P.S. 15 is one of 16 preventive service programs at Beacons in NYC and is the realization of this vision.

Working Together, Day-to-Day

When families are identified as at risk of placement and sign up for Preventive Services, they are invited to join the Beacon. Not only are they immediately given a Beacon application, they are walked over to the Beacon by the social worker. “That act,” says Jill Gandel, director of Preventive Services, “is a crucial first step and helps them feel connected to a community.” The children are welcomed into the Beacon after-school programs.

Counseling for the families is provided on home visits, at the Preventive Services offices in South Brooklyn Community High School, and at the Beacon. Casework staff is able to observe children and families in settings where they are interacting with peers and adults in the Beacon after-school program, at pickup times, on family nights, and during community events.
Neither the children nor the families in the Preventive Services Program are publicly identified and confidentiality is protected at all times. Preventive Services staff attends Beacon activities and community events, conducts groups and workshops, and become familiar faces at the Beacon. Thus, their presence does not call attention to families and children who are in Preventive Services, but gives caseworkers another perspective on the families while strengthening the partnership with Beacon staff.

Five social workers, two caseworkers, a social work supervisor, and a program director provide individual and family counseling to a minimum of 90 families, the number mandated by the Administration for Children’s Services. The Beacon staff is a combination of youth development and social work professionals. Most of the Beacon group leaders, who are mostly 19 to 24 years old, were children and youth in the Beacon. They came up through participation as elementary and middle school students in Pathways to Leadership, the signature Beacon program of community service, internship, and work preparation that places youth in increasingly responsible roles in the after-school program.

The Preventive Services and Beacon staff jointly plan and carry out activities that build skills, resiliency, sustained relationships with children and their families, and connections to peers and community. They partner around two main efforts: group workshops and community celebrations/family events.

**Group Workshops**

Children and youth in the Beacon after-school program are organized into developmental age groups of 25, integrating children in Preventive Services with those who are not. They participate in activities and travel as a group for the year. A group leader and program aide staff each group. A Preventive Services social worker is assigned to each group of after-school children and is the clinical point person for those children should the need arise. Together they observe the group and develop workshops to address such issues as career exploration, health, conflict resolution, literacy, family life, and sex education. Workshops begin in January and take place for an hour after school each week, providing skills for healthy development.

**Community Celebrations & Family Events**

With private funding and in-kind donations, Good Shepherd Services has hosted Halloween parties and Thanksgiving dinners at the Beacon for the past 18 years. These activities have played an important community development role in Red Hook. When they were initiated in 1990, Red Hook was an area overwhelmed with gun and drug violence, and these events at the Beacon provided one of the only opportunities for residents to come together in a safe environment with friends and family to celebrate. They have now become community traditions. Four to six hundred people typically attend. The events are jointly planned and conducted by Beacon and Preventive Services staff and allow for informal contacts and strengthening of ties to families. Young people from the after-school Pathways to Leadership program (the nine-to-eleven-year old “Challengers”) help plan and serve. Performances by youth and professionals and a great deal of audience participation and enthusiasm make these memorable events. In December, Preventive Services staff prepare and serve a meal to its 90 families, and the Beacon staff provide child care.

**Working to Develop a Tight Community Network & Strong Partnerships**

Getting families the help they need depends on both a structured process and a cadre of people who are watching for signs of trouble and can link the families to appropriate services. The schools,
especially P.S. 15, are the major source of referral. Both the Preventive caseworkers and the Beacon director sit on the Pupil Personnel Team at P.S. 15, and the current guidance counselor at P.S. 15 was formerly a social worker at GSS. Some referrals come through “walk-ins” from the school: a new family moves into the neighborhood, the school staff sees a potential issue, and walks them over to GSS. Still others come through the network of social service agencies in the Red Hook neighborhood, where GSS serves as an anchor and organizer. Given the strength of the neighborhood networks, referrals through ACS constitute a relatively small percentage of families.

Beacon directors are trained to react quickly when they see signs of trouble in family interactions, and these informal observations are immediately shared and addressed with Preventive Services staff. Yet, relatively few referrals come through the Beacon after-school program. The Beacon after-school staff have become almost too “good at what they do,” says Jennifer Zanger, GSS Division Director. “They so normalize kids” in their focus on assets and strengths that the issues aren’t obvious in the accepting setting of the Beacon program. Mindful of this dynamic, Preventive Services staff provide concrete support and advice around warning signs with regard to abuse, neglect, and maltreatment. Partnership directors are seeking ways to continue to strengthen the observation skills of the Beacon staff without sacrificing the youth development strength-based approach.

**What Makes It Work**

The GSS Preventive Services partnership requires vigilance and ongoing maintenance. Among the essential elements are:

- **A shared vision**, including a *family strengthening, youth development approach in the cause of common goals*. Preventive Services and youth development staff start with very different perspectives. Prevention, by its protective nature, focuses on identifying and alleviating problems that can endanger lives and futures. Youth development promotes a strength-based approach with adults taking responsibility for creating the conditions that make it possible for youth to grow up strong and healthy. At GSS, the two staffs are united in the cause of strengthening families and supporting vulnerable children. Nevertheless, to bring disparate approaches into alignment takes concentrated attention, regular meetings, constant exchange, co-leading of groups and activities, and seeing results.

**Mutual Interests.** Preventive Services has a mandate to serve at least 90 families—a sizeable number considering most families have several children as well as other relatives — and to keep children out of foster care. Beacons are responsible for the healthy development of children and youth. Preventive Services helps children with behavior management issues to function and remain in after-school programs. Then, the after-school programs themselves help children who have troubles in other parts of their lives to engage in positive activities that build their self-efficacy.

**An Organizational Structure that Supports Collaboration, Including a Staffing Pattern and Leadership Team with Regular Meetings.** The Beacon Leadership Team (BLT) oversees the operation of the partnership and includes the Beacon Division Director, Program Director, two Assistant Program Directors, the Preventive Division Director, Program Director, and Social Work Supervisor. The BLT meets monthly and is charged with organizing and planning meetings between the two sets of staff, following up with social work/group leader partnerships, planning special events, and solving issues with participants, registration, and the host school. A senior staff person is in charge of the partnership; when that leadership is missing, the partnership falters.
Shared Roles and Ease of Movement. Preventive Services staff spend a good deal of time at the Beacon, sharing roles, and paired with group leaders in each of the after-school groups, and getting familiar with the children and the activities in which their Preventive Services families are involved. For the casework staff, the opportunity to see children in a normal group setting, interacting with peers, gives them a much fuller view of the child and what he or she needs. There is explicit acknowledgment by senior staff that neither partner can be successful without the other. The Beacon staff provides a normalized and powerful youth development experience, while Preventive Services attends to the clinical needs of families struggling with multi-dimensional issues.

Allocation of Time and Resources. GSS has made a commitment to the practice of Preventive Services for the Beacon. Providing appropriate space is critical so social workers can be on site at the Beacon and meet with them in normalized settings. GSS has raised additional private funds when there was not adequate public money to support the program. The partnership takes time and a fairly high degree of maintenance to thrive, and the leadership of GSS invests the time and resources necessary to keep the partnership functioning effectively.

A Willingness to Address and Acknowledge the Tough Issues. Effective implementation means confronting difficult challenges. For the Preventive Services Beacon Partnership, that meant race and class issues, confidentiality rules, and balancing prevention concerns with safety. The Beacon staff is predominantly African American and come primarily from the poor, surrounding neighborhood of Red Hook. They are mostly graduates of the Beacon program. Some have high school diplomas, some have bachelor degrees, and a few are on their way to higher degrees. Preventive Services staff is primarily Caucasian, not from the neighborhood, and likely to have MSWs. Furthermore, there is a status differential between the social work profession and the youth development profession. Building respect, challenging perceptions, and facilitating transparency about race and class issues is an ongoing struggle at the Beacon.

A second concern is that of confidentiality. Preventive Services must keep records and information confidential by law, limiting the flow of information to Beacon staff. However, Beacon staff is asked for information about their participants for Preventive Services. This inequity in the relationship is problematic and one that the Beacon is attempting to address. Senior staff have discussed that it would be useful to have a case review or a case presentation of what’s happening in the group, but recognize it is probably only possible if it is fictionalized.

The final concern is the most serious: having the shared judgment to determine when a family situation is no longer safe for a child. “It is a tightrope,” says Jennifer Zanger. “Children staying with their families is what we’re aiming for. The Beacon is one of the major supports, but if the supports aren’t enough, you have to call it.” Jill Gandel says that her staff’s close relationship with ACS enables them to check in to determine whether the situation is safe. In the end, supporting the child in the best possible circumstance is what the Partnership is all about.

Powerful Effects – Preservation of Family & Community

The Preventive Services Program and the partnership between the staffs have made a “tremendous difference” to the families and children, says Jennifer Zanger. In the short term, children and young people are able to participate fully in enriching after-school activities with their peers as
they get the socio-emotional support they need to function in their families and in the other settings of their lives. Families get counseling and help in parenting skills, family management, various other social services, legal, and financial matters to help them build strong bonds and create a positive family environment.

Conclusion

The Good Shepherd Services Preventive Services Program has demonstrated effectiveness in preventing foster care placements. It rests on a partnership that sounds easy to do, but in fact takes significant effort. Attention to the collaboration is a hallmark and may explain why GSS has been so successful while other efforts to join formerly separate parties may not have been quite as fruitful. At the agency level, organizational structures with staffing patterns and resources that support joint work are essential to achieving outcomes. That commitment must be accompanied by constant attention to the quality of the relationship and a willingness to dedicate time and thought to making it work.
Beacons Movement and Youth Programming
The Beacons Movement and Youth Programming

Beacons forge partnerships across public, non-profit, and private institutions to fortify neighborhoods. They create pathways for participation across age groups and a continuum of programming that promotes healthy development and strong families. They provide jobs to young people and adults, which contribute to local economic development. They help to make neighborhoods safe and connect residents to each other and to local resources. At a time when social services are increasingly located outside of the communities that need them, they serve as a hub for an array of social and educational supports.

Beacons were among the first citywide after-school initiatives. The massive expansion of after-school programs that began in 1992 was fueled in part by the early example of the Beacon movement. But while after-school programs use a service-delivery approach, Beacons use a comprehensive community development model with a focus on youth development. Activities in every area, from after-school to adult education, are embedded in the process of building community that:

- Supports and engages local youth.
- Feels a sense of ownership, with a desire to convert a school building into a community center.
- Recognizes and supports community resources, builds the capacity of youth and other community members to identify needs, address issues, and capitalize on different strengths.

The Beacons, while diverse and responsive to neighborhood interests and strengths, are shaped by a core set of youth development principles that research has shown help people to achieve stronger outcomes: caring relationships, high expectations, opportunities to contribute, engaging activities, and continuity in relationships.

As a result of their experience in developing Beacons, many organizations that started as “mom and pop” associations in response to neighborhood needs now offer extensive family and youth-supporting services including foster care, drop out prevention, summer youth employment, and out-of-school time activities. In New York City and San Francisco, these organizations advance school reform efforts. Applying youth development principles and a commitment to the success of all students, they have helped to reshape high schools, making them more personalized, and sharply increasing graduation rates among youth who previously would have dropped out.

The Beacons provide multiple opportunities for young people to build the 21st-century skills that are essential to their development and success as workers, citizens, and environmental stewards. They help young people respond to the changing demands of the workplace and the increased need for post-secondary education. In Beacons, young people:

- Work in teams, solve problems, and master critical skills.
- Take on powerful roles that make a difference to their peers and their communities
- Get involved in planning projects, assessing their communities, analyzing results, and taking action to address local problems.
- Master core literacy skills in reading, writing, media, and technology.
- Teach, mentor, and serve as role models for younger children.
- Collaborate with adults around important issues.
All these opportunities build the skills and knowledge the next generation needs to succeed in the 21st century and to sustain the well-being of the nation and earth.

Each Beacon city also includes an intermediary organization that provides training and support to the Beacon and works with policy makers to sustain the vision. For example, in New York City, the Youth Development Initiative, is one such intermediary that offers training and coaching to sites, develops programs, and works with the city and advocacy groups to support best practices. In San Francisco, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, convenes a citywide group of leaders in philanthropy and public agencies to build support for the Beacons, raise funds, and provide training and related supports to sites.

Evidence of Success & Continuing Need

Evaluations in New York and San Francisco find that Beacons attract participants of all ages, many of whom attend on a regular basis. Participation by substantial numbers of adolescents, traditionally the hardest to recruit and retain in out-of-school programs, is the result of adherence to youth development principles. Among adolescents, the Beacons increase young people’s self-efficacy and the level of effort they put into school, which are both critical factors in school success and persistence (Walker & Arbureton, 2004). They provide extensive homework help, enrichment activities that build skills and knowledge, and connections with schools and families on academic issues (Warren, 1999, pp 3-6). They help youth avoid negative behaviors such as drug use and fighting, and foster leadership and provide opportunities for volunteering and contributing to community (Ibid, p. 5). In neighborhoods like Red Hook in Brooklyn, where residents were once afraid to leave their apartments at night, the Beacon is not only a haven, but has, through its programs and networks, made the whole community safer (see Practices to Keep: Preventing Placement in Foster Care: Strengthening Family and Community Ties. Youth Development Institute, 2009).

The need for Beacons and other programs that build on similar principles is more urgent today than ever. The economic crisis that began in 2008 has affected every sector of society, but will inevitably hit poor communities where Beacons are located the hardest. Too often, services are removed from the very neighborhoods where they are needed most. The Beacons place services in the center of poor communities. The gains that Beacons helped create must be protected, as need increases for comprehensive and coordinated services, high quality education, work preparation, and community safety. Beacons have earned the trust and respect of the local residents, and provide a tested infrastructure for attaching additional or consolidating programs.

Practices to Keep illustrates how Beacons provide young people with pathways to increasingly responsible roles, involve youth and adults in improving their communities, and create environments of support to keep families together. They all depend on partnerships and all recognize that their impact is inextricably tied to collective action. All told, these efforts add up to potent forces for local economic development and building cohesive communities.