POLICY STUDIES ASSOCIATES, INC.

**THE BEACON COMMUNITY CENTERS
MIDDLE SCHOOL INITIATIVE:
Final Report on Implementation and Youth Experience
in the Initiative**

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The Beacon Community Centers were first developed in New York City in the early 1990s to serve as community resources in high-need neighborhoods. The Beacons, which are operated by community-based organizations, are located in selected public schools and serve youth and adults in the evenings, on weekends, over holidays, and during the summer. Cities throughout the country have replicated the Beacons model of youth and community development.

In September 2007, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) launched the Beacon Middle School Initiative to increase Beacon services targeted to youth in grades 5-8. Through this initiative, DYCD charged the Beacon Centers with providing middle-grades youth with ongoing, structured programming in academics, life skills, career awareness, civic engagement, physical health, arts, and culture. This initiative represented a new emphasis for the 80 Beacon Community Centers, which had previously delivered mainly after-school activities for children and drop-in programming for older youth and adults. DYCD set an enrollment target of 200 middle-grades youth per Beacon, out of 1,200 total participants at the typical Beacon Center. DYCD asked Beacons to accommodate the Middle School Initiative within annual DYCD operating budgets that declined from $400,000 per Beacon Center in 2006-07 to $365,000 in 2010-11 because of city-wide fiscal stringencies.

The Middle School Initiative aligned with efforts of the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to improve educational services and outcomes for middle-grades youth, and was grounded in earlier research about the within-school and out-of-school time needs of these youth. In particular, a study examining adolescents' progress toward graduation had highlighted the fact that failure in high school can be predicted during middle school, a time when youth may become involved in risky, dangerous behaviors (Balfanz & Herzog, 2006). Other research had found that, as students in the middle grades forge their identity as adolescents, they need the support of community resources to engage in activities that encourage physical, intellectual, emotional, and social growth (Eccles & Gootman [eds.], 2002).

Recent research examining out-of-school time programs that serve older youth also highlights the importance of sustained participation in out-of-school time programs in order for adolescent youth to achieve positive outcomes (Deschenes, Arbreton, Little, Herrera, Grossman, Weiss, & Lee, 2010). This study identified youth-program characteristics associated with sustained participation by older youth, including opportunities for youth to develop relationships with peers and adults, have new experiences, and make positive, developmentally appropriate choices.

DYCD contracted with Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA) to conduct a three-year evaluation of the Middle School Initiative. The evaluation was designed to inform DYCD about program-level implementation patterns, the characteristics of youth served by the initiative, their patterns of program participation, and relationships between Beacon Middle School program features and certain youth outcomes.

Who Participated in the Beacon Middle School Initiative?

Enrollment in the Beacon Middle School initiative increased slightly over the three years of the evaluation. The number of middle-grades youth participating in the initiative ranged from 20,269 in 2007 to 21,798 in 2009-10. During the 2009-10 program year (which includes summer 2009), about a third of the Centers' total enrollment (32 percent) were enrolled in the middle grades. During this period, the majority of Beacon Centers (64 of 80) met or exceeded the DYCD target of 200 enrolled middle-grades participants.

To help Beacons prioritize sustained youth participation (as recommended in Deschenes et al., 2010), DYCD established a program-level goal of providing 216 hours of programming to middle-grades participants during the 2009-10 school year. (This goal translates into 72 days of participation for an average of three hours per day.) Beacon middle-grades youth participated in an average of 189 hours of programming over the 12-month period. On average, 36 percent of a Center's middle-grades participants attended for 216 hours or more, compared to 34 percent of a Center's participants who met this participation level in 2008-09, the first year of the initiative. Among the participants who attended Beacon programming in 2009-10, 35 percent were returning participants who attended Beacon programming for at least one year prior to 2009-10. Twenty-three percent had attended for two previous programming years, and 12 percent had attended one previous year.

In general, demographics of Beacon participants reflected the larger New York City public middle school population. In 2009-10, the majority of youth participating in the Middle School Initiative were Latino(a) or African American (38 percent and 37 percent, respectively). However, a smaller proportion of Middle School Initiative youth performed at or above grade level on the 2009-10 citywide English Language Arts (ELA) assessment—meaning they scored at Level 3 or Level 4—when compared with the overall New York City middle school population (33 and 41 percent, respectively). A similar but slightly smaller proportion of Beacon middle-grades participants performed at or above grade level on the 2009-10 math assessment when compared with the total New York City middle school population (47 and 53 percent, respectively).

Who Staffs the Beacons?

Beacon Centers are managed by directors who oversee programming for both youth and adult participants. Beacon directors had extensive experience working in youth development, with the average Beacon director having worked more than 18 years in this field.

Under the supervision of the Beacon director, paid and volunteer program staff with varied backgrounds led activities for middle-grades youth. Beacons relied heavily on college students to staff middle-grades programming; nearly a third of middle-grades staff members in 2009-10 were college students, who worked an average of 16 hours per week at the Beacon. Specialists such as professional artists, dancers, and athletic instructors accounted for just more than a quarter of Middle School Initiative staff, and worked an average of 13 hours per week at the Beacon. Teens accounted for a similar proportion of program staff (25 percent) and also

worked an average of 13 hours each week. Beacons also employed certified teachers (14 percent of staff), who averaged 11 hours per week.

Directors were most likely to report that certified teachers were responsible for leading academic activities. However, among Beacons that employed certified teachers, fewer than half of directors reported that teachers served in leadership roles, such as master teacher, or took on supervisory roles that would enable them to share their instructional expertise with the larger Beacon staff.

How Did Beacons Support Participants' Social and Academic Development?

Beacon Centers were expected to provide structured middle-grades programming in six core activity areas: sports and recreation, academic enhancement, culture and arts, civic engagement, career awareness, and life skills. Beacons track participant activity attendance using DYCD's management information system, and evaluators used those records to analyze the types of activities in which middle-grades youth engaged at the Beacon Centers.

During both the 2009-10 summer and school-year programming periods, youth spent most of their time in recreational activities (45 and 43 percent of hours in the summer and school-year sessions, respectively), followed by academic enhancement activities (31 and 14 percent, respectively). This represents an increase in recreation and decrease in academic enhancement time during school year programming, compared to the 2008-09 school year (36 and 39 percent of hours, respectively). During the 2009-10 school year, youth spent less than one-quarter of their time in enrichment activities related to the arts, social development, civic engagement, and career awareness. All Beacon Centers offered at least some activities in each of the six core areas, with the exception of career awareness and civic engagement.

During spring 2010, evaluators visited 10 Beacon Centers and conducted structured observations of Middle School Initiative activities. Because the observation data are not representative of all Middle School Initiative activities, the results should be interpreted with caution. Research suggests that high-quality youth programs can encourage youth to master new skills through project-based learning that connects smaller learning goals to an end-product, (Grossman, Campbell, & Raley, 2007). In general, the observed activities effectively engaged youth and promoted positive relationships between staff and youth and among youth. Youth were typically on-task and engaged, and staff were warm and caring in their interactions with youth. However, program activities did not consistently promote skill development or mastery.

In order to support learning goals for youth, activities need to be clearly planned and delivered. One way that Beacon directors can help their staff to carry out structured activities is to require that staff submit lesson plans and to give staff critical feedback on those plans. On the Beacon director survey, however, only 17 percent of directors reported requiring at least some staff to submit lesson plans on a regular basis. The majority of Beacon directors reported that they regularly communicated with host school staff about issues related to using school space for programming (70 percent). Directors were less likely to report that they communicated with school staff about issues related to participants' academic performance. Fifty-five percent of

directors reported that they discussed homework with school personnel, and 45 percent discussed curricular concepts being taught in the school with school staff at least once a month.

How Do Local Councils Help Guide the Beacons?

At each Beacon, an Advisory Council made up of representatives from the Beacon and the surrounding community helps to guide the work of the Center. Most directors reported that parents of participants (as reported by 83 percent of directors) and Beacon staff members (83 percent of directors) served on their Advisory Councils. Most directors also reported that youth participants and Beacon staff were represented on the Advisory Councils (68 and 67 percent, respectively).

Overall, Beacon directors indicated that few external representatives served on Advisory Councils. Just more than half of directors said that a school principal or assistant principal served on their Council, and only a quarter of Beacon directors said that local business owners or government officials were involved in their Advisory Council.

We asked Beacon directors to identify the primary roles that their Advisory Councils played in guiding the work of the Centers. Directors were most likely to report that the Advisory Council provided: feedback and suggestions for Beacon programming (96 percent), a means of communication between the Beacon and the local community (84 percent), and suggestions for resources, such as businesses that could donate materials or services to support the work of the Beacon (77 percent).

In addition to the Beacon Advisory Council, Beacon Centers also convene Youth Councils that are designed to give youth direct input into the work of the Beacon. While Youth Councils tend to be comprised of older participants, 81 percent of Beacon directors reported that middle-grades youth served on their Beacon's Youth Council. Beacon directors were most likely to report that their Youth Council was responsible for planning community service projects (85 percent), identifying activities to be offered at the Beacon (79 percent), and planning community events and events for families (78 percent).

What Is the Youth Experience at the Beacon?

In general, in survey responses, middle-grades youth were positive about their experiences at the Beacon. More than two-thirds of all respondents, for example, agreed that Beacon activities were engaging and offered opportunities to try new things, helped them feel more confident playing sports, and helped them finish homework more often. Nearly all reported trying hard in school and paying attention in class. In interviews, one middle-grades participant explained that the Beacon Center helped with homework completion and school performance: "Since I started Beacon, I get better grades on my tests in reading. When we go in the classroom, it's a quiet place to work so I can finish my reading homework." Another participant explained that her Beacon provides a comfortable place to play sports: "There is good sportsmanship here, you don't yell at each other when you're playing."

The majority of participants also reported strong relationships with their peers at the Beacon and being treated with respect by the Beacon staff. One participant reflected on the positive and trusting relationship with staff members, explaining, "[The staff member] keeps secrets. If you have a problem, she will solve it for you and help you talk about it. When you have a problem with someone, she fixes it in the calm way."

As part of the Middle School Initiative, youth were expected to participate in structured activities focused on civic engagement. More than two-thirds of respondents agreed that they had gained awareness of the community and about how they can help others from their participation at the Beacon Center. For example, one middle-grades participant explained, "[the Beacon] helped me to be a good leader to younger people. We also did good things for our community and other people, we had a food drive to collect food for Haiti."

However, youth survey results also suggested areas for improvement. For instance, youth reported that the Beacon did not help them learn about jobs or careers, write better, make smart decisions about money, or use computers to do schoolwork better, highlighting possible areas for improvement. In addition, on questions about relationships, youth did not report that they had the opportunity to get to know other young people really well, indicating that the Beacons may further improve the experience of middle-grades participants by strengthening programming focused on inter-personal relationships, peer support, and team-building.

What Beacon Characteristics Are Most Closely Associated with Positive Outcomes?

Evaluators developed a series of statistical models to predict the effects of various Center characteristics on the enrollment, participation levels, and experiences of youth enrolled at that Center. From these analyses emerged the following important features of Beacon Centers:

■　　The **number of middle school students who attended the host school** was a statistically significant predictor for the size of the middle school enrollment at each Beacon Center. Beacons that enrolled large numbers of middle-grades youth were more likely to be housed at middle schools, suggesting that Centers located in elementary or high schools may need to conduct additional outreach efforts to attract middle-grades youth.

■　　Directors at the Beacons with the highest proportion of participants meeting the participation target **interacted more frequently each month with families** than did the directors at the Beacons with the lowest proportion of participants meeting the target. Although data are not available on the content of these interactions, the finding suggests that Beacons that are better connected to the families of participants have greater success in achieving regular attendance among participants.

■   The directors of Beacons where participants reported more opportunities for new and interesting experiences **interacted more frequently with the staff at their host schools** than did the directors at the Beacons where participants responded less positively.

■   In addition, the Beacons where youth gave high ratings to their opportunities to try new and interesting things were those Beacons where the director reported that the **Youth Council had more input**. This finding suggests that, when youth have an opportunity to help select program activities, they may provide suggestions that meet with the approval of their peers.

Recommendations for Program Improvement

Based on the findings presented in this report, the following recommendations are offered for strengthening the programming offered to middle-grades participants at the Beacon Centers:

■   **Conduct targeted outreach efforts to recruit and engage middle-grades participants.** Beacons with the highest levels of middle-grades enrollment were, not surprisingly, located in middle schools. Beacon Centers located in schools serving other grade levels may need to more actively promote their programs through partnerships with surrounding middle schools to recruit these youth.

■   **Strengthen connections with the families of participants.** The evaluation found that the Beacons with the greatest proportions of high-attending middle-grades participants interacted frequently with families. These regular interactions may help families view the Beacon as an important resource and support for youth during the out-of-school time hours.

■   **Increase staff focus on participants' academic needs.** Based on evidence of participants' academic needs in English Language Arts and math, Beacon Centers may need to work more with participants' schools to ensure that Beacon staff are aware of participants' learning needs and provide programming that can address these needs.

■   **Assign staff members who are certified teachers to serve as education specialists or master teachers.** The majority of Beacon Centers have certified teachers on staff, although few directors reported using these teachers to guide or design the academic activities offered at the Beacon or to supervise and train other staff on how to lead academic activities. Encouraging certified teachers to help guide academic programming at the Beacon could help connect Beacon activities to what participants are learning during the school day.

■   **Support Beacons in learning how to work effectively with the host school.** Analyses showed that participants at those Beacons that had strong relationships with the host schools rated their Beacon experiences more highly. However,

many Beacon directors still communicate with school staff about only transactional issues, such as space and discipline, and only occasionally talk with school staff about alignment of learning goals or the progress of individual students. Evaluators recommend that DYCD help Beacons create deeper, more substantive relationships with schools in order to support the Beacons' work with youth.

■ **Encourage directors to require that staff submit structured lesson plans with clearly outlined activity plans and learning goals.** Observations revealed that many middle-grades activities had neither a clear learning structure nor a focus on engaging youth in active learning. While the study's observation data are not necessarily representative, they echo survey findings that the majority of Beacon directors do not require staff to submit lesson plans for Middle School Initiative activities. By requiring that staff create lesson plans for Beacon activities, and then reviewing those plans and providing feedback, Beacon directors would be better able to improve the quality of middle-grades activities.

■ **Provide additional guidance and support for Beacons' facilitation of their Advisory Councils and Youth Advisory Councils.** In light of findings that Beacons where youth gave high ratings to their exposure to new and interesting experiences at the Beacon were also more likely to have active Youth Councils, evaluators recommend that DYCD ramp up help to Beacons in developing and supporting their Youth Councils. Additionally, given the current budgetary challenges facing Beacons, Advisory Councils could play a larger role in helping Beacon Centers to develop their capacity to fundraise.