

a new approach to accountability

Creating Effective Learning Environments for Programs

by Wendy Surr

Nearly 20 years into the era of results-based accountability, a new generation of afterschool accountability systems is emerging. Rather than aiming to test whether programs have produced desired youth outcomes, an increasing number of afterschool funders and sponsors are shaping more flexible, collaborative, and lower-stakes accountability systems.

Could they do even more? By designing accountability systems that fully embrace the notion of afterschool programs as *learning organizations* and by using research from organizational development, education, and youth development to create effective learning environments, funders and sponsors can help programs to improve quality—and therefore, to succeed in their goal of achieving better outcomes for young people.

Accountability in the Age of Outcomes

The 1990s, a time of national investment in afterschool, were also a time of increasing accountability. Passage of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 ushered in a new era of *results-based accountability* (Office of Management and Budget, 1993). Programs could no longer count delivery of services as evidence of dollars well spent; funders expected to see measurable youth outcomes (Fuhrman, 1999; Kane, 2004; Walker & Grossman, 1999). These outcomes were driven not by the goals of afterschool programs but by the interests of constituent groups that were looking to afterschool to solve societal ills ranging from poor academic

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performance to juvenile delinquency (Halpern, 2005). To ensure the value of their investments, many funders created accountability systems to test whether programs were producing the desired youth outcomes.

Eager for new private and public dollars, many afterschool programs began collecting data on youth's standardized test scores, grades, school attendance, and delinquency records, even when these outcomes didn't align with what programs were trying to accomplish. As large cities expanded the numbers of afterschool slots and sites, compliance led to creation of large-scale data management systems, new technologies such as swipe cards, and new mechanisms for gaining access to public school records. Some afterschool programs created administrative positions dedicated solely to managing youth outcome data (Fiester, 2004).

Just a few years into the outcomes accountability era, warning signals emerged. Researchers questioned whether the outcomes chosen by funders were appropriate, realistic, or even desirable goals for afterschool programs. Some expressed concern that funders hadn't acknowledged the supports programs would need to yield the results funders were looking for (Walker & Grossman, 1999). Others argued that outcomes measurement offered an opportunity for programs to focus on learning and improvement toward outcomes that were meaningful to their mission (Schilder, Horsch, Little, Brady, & Riel, 1998; Surr, 2000). Despite these reactions, youth outcomes—with an increasingly academic focus—remained a key focus for many accountability systems. When funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) was included in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, afterschool programs became even more explicitly focused on helping at-risk youth achieve school success.

In his paper *Confronting the Big Lie* (2005), Robert Halpern railed against the trend toward an academic focus in afterschool programs. Citing the 2004 evaluation of 21st CCLC (Dynarski et al., 2004), which failed to show academic effects for participating youth, Halpern argued that schools, not afterschool programs, should be accountable for academic outcomes. Forcing programs

to focus on academic outcomes sidetracked them from their true purpose: to support the healthy development of individual children and youth (Halpern, 2005). Similarly, an article released by the California Committee on Afterschool Accountability argued that afterschool programs should be valued as “unique institutions” (Piha, 2006, p. 8) supporting healthy youth development and a wide range of learning goals.

For many funders, results-based accountability has fallen short of hopes. Much of the research conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the aim of showing the impact of afterschool participation on academic achievement, particularly standardized test scores, did not meet stakeholder expectations (Bodily & Beckett,

2005; Dynarski et al., 2004; James-Burdumy et al., 2005; Kane, 2004). As researchers began to explore more deeply the relationship between program quality and youth outcomes (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Grossman, Campbell, & Raley, 2007; Miller, 2005; Raley, Grossman, & Walker, 2005; Scales et al., 2003), their results supported what many in the afterschool field already believed: that quality is essential to outcomes.

A New Generation of Accountability Systems

As a result of the growing consensus that program quality is essential to positive youth outcomes,

the afterschool field has renewed its focus on how best to improve quality (Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007; Stonehill & Little, 2008). Rather than testing whether programs have produced youth outcomes, an increasing number of afterschool funders are shaping flexible, collaborative accountability systems designed to help programs measure a range of early and intermediate outcomes that are better aligned with program goals and to strive for higher program quality.

A key feature of these new lower-stakes accountability systems is a subtle but significant shift from viewing program improvement as an “add-on” to expecting programs to engage in self-assessment and to report on continuous improvement efforts. Though producing better youth outcomes remains a priority, funders using these new ac-

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accountability systems recognize that program quality and efforts to improve it are the essential means to achieving this goal. Many public and private funders are now integrating self-assessment into their accountability requirements. State-administered 21st CCLC programs provide some of the most compelling examples of this shift.

- In Massachusetts, 21st CCLC grantees are required to engage in continuous program improvement using the Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS), an integrated set of quality and outcome tools developed in partnership with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST). Grantees are required to share what they are learning from their APAS data. They must report on how they are using their data to guide program improvement and to increase their capacity to produce 21st century skills in youth (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).
- The Michigan Department of Education 21st CCLC program uses a “low stakes accountability and improvement system” (Smith, 2005, p. 5) developed in collaboration with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Programs are expected to use the Youth Program Quality Assessment for self-assessment and to demonstrate that they are using data-driven improvement plans and engaging in organizational learning.
- 21st CCLC grantees in Rhode Island are required to engage in continuous improvement using a customized version of the High/Scope assessment tool (Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2006).
- New York requires 21st CCLC grantees to use the New York State Afterschool Network’s Program Quality Self-Assessment twice a year for planning and ongoing program improvement (New York State Education Department, 2011).
- The Colorado Department of Education uses the standardized Monitoring and Quality Improvement Tool to evaluate its 21st CCLC grantees. These grantees are required to use this tool once annually as an internal self-assessment for planning and quality improvement (Colorado Department of Education, 2011).

Funders that require programs to engage in self-assessment and to use data to improve their quality essentially have adopted a view of afterschool programs not simply as deliverers of services but as learning organizations.

Public agencies are joined by large private organizations in a trend toward promoting self-assessment and continuous improvement as core components of their accountability systems. For instance, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America strongly encourages its sites to use its Youth Development Outcome Measurement Tool Kit (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2007). The United Way of America, one of the few funders that promoted a flexible, collaborative approach to measuring youth outcomes from the beginning (United Way of America, 1996), has for the past two decades supported affiliates to use outcome data in order to improve program quality (Hendricks, Plantz, & Pritchard, 2008). Currently NIOST is supporting the use of APAS by United Way affiliates in Philadelphia, Boston, and Atlanta. These affiliates are using components of APAS to help programs identify appropriate outcomes, assess quality, and use data for continuous improvement.

Growing evidence suggests that engaging in self-assessment can indeed lead to higher quality and be associated with better outcomes for young people. As explained by Weiss and Little (2008), self-assessment is associated with a “cycle of adaptation” in which afterschool sites collect and analyze data to bring about desired quality improvements as part of an ongoing process. Two qualitative studies (Pechman & Fiester, 2002; Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, & Pittman, 2007) suggest that afterschool staff are likely to view self-assessment findings as more credible and useful than results provided by external evaluations. Other afterschool studies have found that use of quality data motivates change (Akiva & Yohalem, 2006). Site-level engagement in self-assessment is likely to spawn changes in programming (Akiva & Smith, 2007; Harris, 2008; Smith, 2005) and, ultimately, improved outcomes (Sheldon & Hopkins, 2008).

Though self-assessment can help programs improve, simply engaging in self-assessment may not guarantee positive results. In fact, a study of self-assessment in healthcare names a number of factors necessary to bring about the positive effects of self-assessment, such as good alignment between self-assessment tools and desired areas of change, an open and trusting environment between frontline staff and supervisors, and constructive feedback and support during and following self-assessment (Bose, Oliveras, & Edson, 2001).

Afterschool Programs as Learning Organizations

Funders that require programs to engage in self-assessment and to use data to improve their quality essentially have adopted a view of afterschool programs not simply as deliverers of services but as *learning organizations*. Peter Senge (1990) describes learning organizations as dynamic institutions that expand their capacity to achieve results by engaging managers and employees in a process that helps them strive for personal mastery, create mental models, adopt a shared vision, promote team learning, and practice systems thinking.

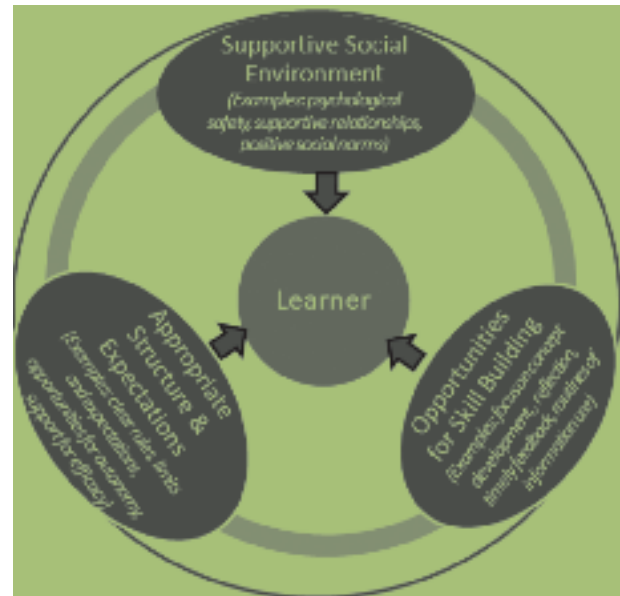
A more recent interpretation of Senge's work (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008) suggests that organizations can be most effective if they create a supportive learning environment where employees feel a sense of psychological safety, are encouraged to appreciate differences and new ideas, and have time for reflection. In successful learning organizations, "leaders actively question and listen to employees—and thereby prompt dialogue and debate" (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008, p. 113). Organizational change must happen at the ground level, not just at the top. Moynihan (2005) suggests that organizations are more likely to learn from their data when "routines of data collection and dissemination are followed by routines of information use" (p. 203) through learning forums.

A look at research findings from studies in education (Eccles & Roeser, 1999; Pianta, 2003; Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Pressley et al., 2003), youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), organizational learning (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008; Senge, 1990), and practitioner self-assessment (Bose, Oliveras, & Edson, 2001; Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, & Pittman, 2007) suggest that many of the practices recommended for supporting learners cut across disciplines. While there are variations in specific beliefs and approaches, three main domains of effective learning environments appear to be common across disciplines: supportive social environments, opportunities for skill building, and appropriate structure and expectations (Figure 1).

Accountability Systems Designed to Support Afterschool Programs as Learning Organizations

The new generation of accountability systems is bridging the arenas of continuous quality improvement and accountability. By acknowledging the central importance of quality, aligning outcomes with program practices, and using self-assessment as a driver for change, the funders and sponsors using these approaches to accountability

Figure 1. Elements of Effective Learning Environments



are likely to produce better results than will funders that require afterschool programs to report on academic and other long-term outcomes for youth.

For decades, the field of afterschool has sought to support children's positive development by creating quality standards for developmentally appropriate environments and by executing research-supported practices for advancing children's learning. These same principles can support the development of afterschool programs as learning organizations striving to improve quality.

Figure 2. Cycle of Afterschool Organizational Learning and Improvement



Supporting a Cycle of Afterschool Program Learning

Many funders, sponsors, and intermediary organizations, recognizing that programs need to learn, provide support, resources, and training to help programs use self-assessment. However, if architects of accountability systems are serious about improving program quality with an eye toward producing better youth outcomes, they should explicitly embrace the notion of afterschool programs as learning organizations.

Funders and sponsors that want to support programs as learning organizations could begin by recognizing the steps of the cycle of organizational learning and continuous program improvement (Figure 2). Many afterschool researchers and groups suggest a similar cycle, whose key steps are goal setting, planning, data collection, analysis, reflection, improvement, and reassessment (NIOST, 2011; Sheldon & Hopkins, 2008; Surr, Behler, & Milla-Lugo, 2009; Weiss & Little, 2008).

Accountability System Elements to Support the Learning Cycle

Drawing on research in organization development and education, funders and sponsors, in partnership with intermediary organizations, could explicitly support each step in this cycle by providing the key elements associated with effective learning environments (Figure 3). Afterschool programs receiving this combination of supports are more likely to become fully engaged “learners” and therefore to execute the quality improvements needed to produce positive youth outcomes.

Figure 3. Accountability System Elements to Promote Afterschool Learning and Improvement

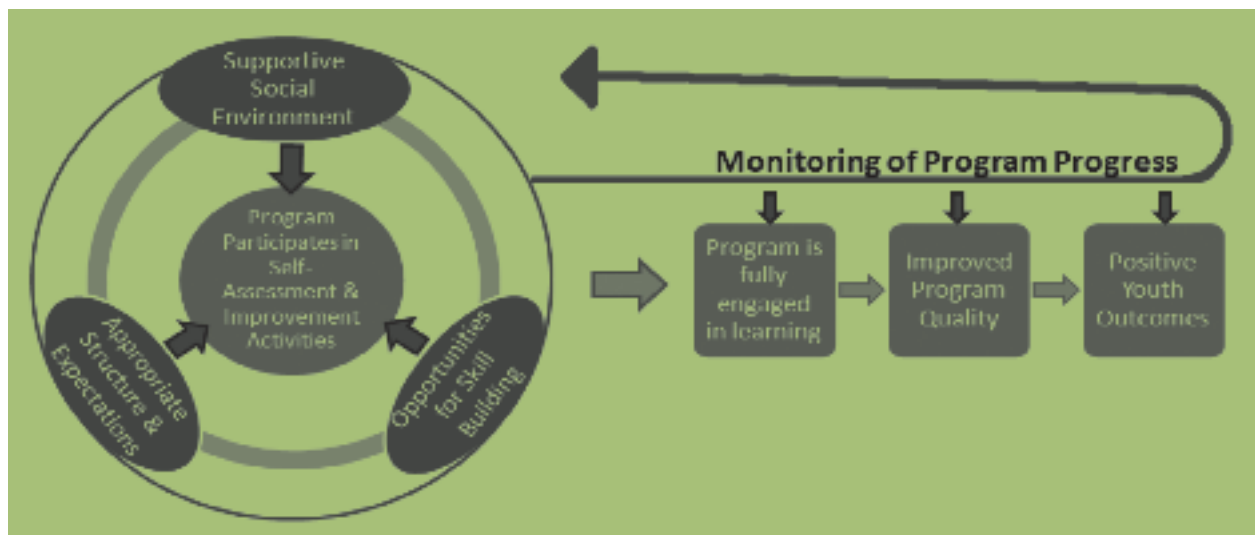


Figure 4. Accountability System Element: Supportive Social Environment



Supportive Social Environment

Research suggests that learning is more likely to take place in a supportive social environment (Akey, 2006; Benard, 1996; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Connell & Gambone, 2002; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Pianta, 2003). Afterschool funders and sponsors have traditionally relied on intermediary organizations to support programs by providing training, coaching, and technical assistance. This approach has many advantages: programs get support from individuals with true expertise in the field while feeling free to acknowledge areas of weakness without fearing loss of funding. Figure 4 suggests how funders and sponsors can retain their monitoring role while fostering a supportive social environment for programs.

Safe psychological environment. A lower-stakes funding environment, in which funders do not penalize programs for reporting less than desirable results and refrain from comparing programs publicly, may help programs to engage more authentically in self-assessment.

Encouragement, feedback, and problem-solving help. Program leaders need support, constructive feedback, and help with improvement priorities from an external, seasoned expert. Traditionally this supportive person has been a coach, trainer, or technical assistance provider from an intermediary organization. Funding that enables these external supports to continue will benefit program learning.

Opportunities for peer support and positive social norms. Many state and city initiatives provide peer networking opportunities. Funders, sponsors, and intermediaries can help to create positive social norms for assessment by, for example, publicizing examples of how programs are integrating continuous improvement into their practice.

Opportunities for Skill Building

Program assessment and improvement are not innate skills. In fact, the skills needed to self-assess, collect data, and interpret and use that data represent a completely different skill set from the curricular, instructional, and administrative competencies afterschool professionals are expected to have. By providing opportunities for program leaders to master these skills and requiring that they demonstrate how they are incorporating assessment into their everyday practice, funders and sponsors can increase the likelihood that programs become learning organizations, achieve higher levels of quality, and ultimately produce better youth outcomes. Figure 5 and its description below suggest how funders, sponsors, and intermediary organizations can promote program skill building.

Build assessment literacy. Many (probably most) program administrators need to build skills in identifying appropriate outcomes, selecting measurement tools, using data management systems, and analyzing and interpreting data. While many funders and intermediaries provide one-day workshops and general support for these activities, program leaders need more explicit, intensive, and extended instruction to master these tasks (Lukin, Bandalos, Eckhout, & Mickelson, 2004). One recent initiative, the Boston Capacity Institute, works with youth-serving orga-

Figure 5. Accountability System Element: Opportunities for Skill Building



nizations to assess and strengthen their data collection and performance management systems through a rigorous two-year support process (Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston, 2011). Such intensive and focused interventions are comparatively rare. When providing programs with assessment literacy internally is not feasible, funders could encourage cohorts of funded programs to pursue “insourcing,” in which programs share an external evaluator while practitioners focus on learning to understand and use actionable data (Miller, Kobayashi, & Noble, 2006).

Help programs integrate self-assessment into ongoing practice. One of the more promising methods of self-assessment is observation followed by structured reflection and a discussion of practice (Seidman, Tseng, & Weisner, 2006; Smith, 2005; Surr, Behler, & Milla-Lugo, 2009). Yet few program directors know how to conduct an observation, and fewer know how to lead staff in reflection on and discussion of practice. Another critical skill is the ability to articulate clear goals and devise realistic action plans on an ongoing basis (Moynihan, 2005). Funders and sponsors can help by asking leaders to communicate their improvement goals, to create written action plans that are clearly linked to their data findings, and to articulate how they are incorporating assessment into everyday practice.

Help directors learn to lead improvement efforts and engage staff in the assessment process. To facilitate program improvement, change must take place on the

front lines where staff members deliver programming to youth. Funders and intermediary organizations should set the expectation that assessment efforts will engage frontline staff and should teach administrators to train their staff in self-assessment.

Provide professional development that uses research-based instructional practices. Too many professional development workshops rely on written materials, slide presentations, and lecture rather than using the instructional methods research says will engage practitioners. Adult learners, like children and youth, respond best to teaching practices that are developmentally appropriate, that engage them in interactive and cooperative learning, and that help them construct meaning and build understanding from their existing knowledge and skill base.

Appropriate Structure and Expectations

Research suggests that effective learning environments balance a high degree of structure, rules, and routines with opportunities for learners to contribute, make decisions, and exercise their autonomy (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Funders and sponsors are in a unique position to offer programs the right blend of structure and flexibility and to set expectations that will lead to success. The building blocks of appropriate structure and expectations are outlined in Figure 6 and below.

Offer voice, choice, and opportunities for contribution and decision making. Like children and youth, afterschool practitioners need voice and choice in order to engage fully in learning. Giving them at least some choice in selecting areas for improvement and allowing them to target short-term outcomes appropriate to their programs will increase buy-in so that the data collected will reflect program goals and actually be used to inform practice. When appropriate, offering program administrators and staff the chance to contribute to or give feedback on accountability expectations will enhance their motivation to meet those expectations.

Set reasonable expectations for data collection. When they collect too much data, administrators and staff have difficulty understanding and using the information (Fischer, 2004; Harris, 2008; Sternberg, 2006). If practitioners are involved in decisions about which and how much data to collect—if they are encouraged to limit the amount of data they collect and to articulate the research questions the data will help them answer—then they will be more likely to use assessment data for change.

Figure 6. Accountability System Element: Appropriate Structure and Expectations



Offer enough time on task. Program improvement must be recognized as an integral piece of quality youth programming. Funders must, therefore, provide money to allow programs to dedicate *paid* staff time to assessment and improvement. Otherwise, these activities will continue to take a back seat to program operations and other daily responsibilities. Ideally large programs would dedicate one experienced staff person to lead assessment and improvement activities.

Set high, achievable, and developmentally appropriate expectations. As we know from the fields of education and youth development, one key element for effective learning is communicating, and holding learners to, high expectations (Benard, 1996; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Learners respond best to expectations and learning goals that fit their developmental levels, are appropriately challenging, and can realistically be achieved (Akey, 2006; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Most afterschool programs will experience more success if, rather than striving for better student test scores, they promote appropriate short-term outcomes—such as youth engagement, social skills, and problem solving—that are linked to longer-term academic outcomes. Funders that set clear, high, and appropriate expectations for programs can motivate administrators and staff to keep improvement efforts on the front burner.

A New Direction for Accountability Systems

In the end, programs have to be held accountable for how they are benefiting the youth they serve. Given the overwhelming evidence that high-quality programs are essential to helping our children learn, funders and sponsors should uphold high expectations for quality, and, ultimately, for appropriate and realistic youth outcomes. But high expectations and accountability for outcomes alone are not enough. Accountability systems that embrace afterschool programs as learning organizations and offer them the structure, skill-building opportunities, and support they need to improve quality are most likely to succeed in their goal of achieving better outcomes for young people.

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