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Increasing Afterschool Program Impact: Data & System Best Practices

NATIONAL AfterSchool ASSOCIATION

Photo courtesy of Reading Partners.

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With Best Practices By: reading partners   URBAN INITIATIVES   Extend-A-Care for Kids

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From National AfterSchool Association (NAA)

WHY ARE DATA AND SYSTEMS IMPORTANT FOR AFTERSCHOOL ORGANIZATIONS?

Children, families and communities need high-quality afterschool programs. A strong understanding of data is key to operating a high-quality afterschool program. When resources are limited, afterschool leaders need to be able to make smart and sound investments that will bring the most positive impact to those they serve. Effective use of data is crucial for that.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES ORGANIZATIONS LIKE YOURS FACE IN COLLECTING AND USING DATA?

One of the biggest challenges afterschool organizations face is overcoming the mindset that only evaluators or researchers can collect data. I'm a huge advocate for democratizing the collection of data. Attendance rates, informal survey feedback, and student input are all examples of data that you can collect and use. Another key challenge is around the use of data. Many programs do a great job collecting data – files and files of it! But do they take the time to look at the data and actually use it for continuous program improvement?

HOW DO WE HOPE THIS EBOOK WILL HELP YOU?

I believe this ebook will help broaden the definition of data and make the collection of it seem less overwhelming and more useful to program leaders. Also, the best practices highlighted in the ebook will allow program leaders to learn from and replicate what other strong afterschool organizations are doing. One of the best qualities of afterschool programs is that they are flexible to meet the needs of students. Through regular collection and examination of data, staff can continually look at program strengths and see where improvements or changes need to be made to best serve students, families and communities.

Gina Warner
President and CEO
National Afterschool Association

Photo courtesy of Urban Initiatives.

From Exponent Partners

In your day-to-day work with students, collecting and using data may seem like a distraction, if not a detriment to pursuing your organization's mission. Data can take time to gather and pull you away from direct interaction with your students. However, in the long run, data and data-driven decision-making can help you more effectively achieve your mission and better serve the children in your programs.

In this ebook, you'll be introduced to real-life examples of how organizations are using data and systems. For example, you'll hear from Urban Initiatives, who came to us as they were rapidly expanding and adding a new program. The organization knew that data was crucial to support their expansion and to understand if their programs were

successful. Now their data and systems are an active part of the conversation during the organization's strategic planning process. The staff have also become enthusiastic partners in the data collection process:

> *"The biggest surprise was how excited our staff was about the system. They immediately saw value. Productivity has gone up. We hold mini-competitions on highest attendance rates or parent engagement, and staff can't wait to see midseason reports to see who's 'winning'!"*
>
> *– Katie Sullivan, Program Evaluation and Volunteer Manager at Urban Initiatives*

Photo courtesy of Urban Initiatives.

Katie also reports that, after going through the process of identifying the data they wanted to capture and then building a system to support them, staff are more naturally identifying ways to make common processes more efficient in the course of their day-to-day work. The impact data and system have led to Urban Initiatives staff approaching all of their work from a continuous improvement lens.

We hope these best practices and stories similarly help your organization start a journey of learning and improvement, powered by data and systems, that leads to greater impact in your mission.

Kristi Phillips, Education Solution Consultant
Jesse Maddex, Human Services Solution Consultant
Exponent Partners

Increasing Afterschool Program Impact

Data helps you make decisions in everyday life. When you want to find a restaurant to have dinner at, you might read the ratings on Yelp, both qualitative (the reviews) and quantitative (the average star rating) to help you pick the right restaurant for you. Ratings and reviews might not be the exact data you are using, but data can likewise make your program more effective and more efficient. How?

Increased Effectiveness

Data can help you understand where your programs and services are working and where they aren't, either in aggregate or for individual students. Reading Partners—a national organization that mobilizes communities to provide students with the proven, individualized reading support they need to read at grade level by fourth grade—uses a host of data to make sure that the support they are providing to individual students is making a difference for those students.

> We're able to track student progress and trends in reading centers, at the regional and national level, using Salesforce. This allows us to create tangible action plans for our program in a very timely and well-informed manner.
>
> **— Janet Tam, National Program Operations Manager, Reading Partners**

Increased Efficiency

Data can also help your organizational processes work more smoothly, ensure your program model is being implemented as planned, and reduce work for your staff. As with many nonprofits, turnover with each school year can be a big factor in Reading Partners programs.

To be able to leverage data both effectively and efficiently, you need a strong strategy to avoid collecting nonessential data.

> " Having our historical data stored in Salesforce allows us to have it available when we need it. For example, when we have a student referred to our program, we can look up any data we have on the student, to help us better serve the student. The same is true for our tutors. If our data show that a tutor worked well with a particular curriculum level in the past, then we can try to pair the tutor with a student working at that level, and they can hit the ground running.
>
> — Lindsey Kessel, Bay Area Program Director, Reading Partners

Increasing Afterschool Program Impact

Getting Started with a Data Strategy

Laying the Foundation

You are probably already collecting some data to complete grant applications or while running your programs (like student enrollment and attendance), but you might not be using it beyond those activities. Stepping back and assessing your data strategy can help you start using data to drive better programs and services. The key question is: "What data do I need to collect to understand whether we are meeting our goals and achieving our mission?"

There are many ways to begin. Organizations often start by doing work on their theory of change and logic model for a program, or by adopting common assessments used across similar programs. Some of your data is better suited to help you evaluate short-term results and some will be focused on long-term outcomes.

> We knew that we were rapidly expanding and wanted to have monthly implementation fidelity checks on all of the sites. We were trying to look at attendance, retention, program quality, and adherence to program model. We wanted basic check-ins on how each of our sites were going.
>
> **— Katie Sullivan, Program Evaluation and Volunteer Manager, Urban Initiatives**

> [I recommend they start with] 'what is their number one goal?'… Consider what the purpose of the data is trying to reveal. Is it to support their mission, a grant, or a new program project? It is easier to find your starting point when you figure out the data to collect that will help you speak to donors, supporters, clientele, and funders and tell your story best.
>
> **— Jaime Garcia, Operations Director, Extend-a-Care for Kids**

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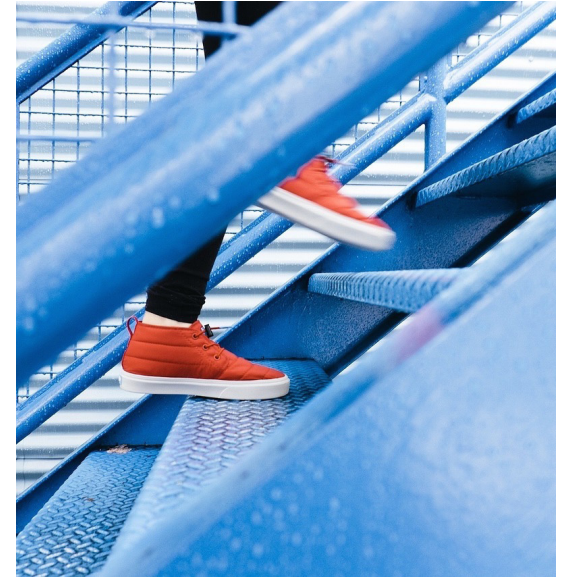
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Taking Your First Steps

While you might have lofty goals for all the data you want to eventually collect and analyze, you don't have to start collecting everything at once. You can begin by focusing on one program and determine what data you need to collect to support it. Or you can introduce an assessment tool and start tracking that data over time. Piloting data tracking and analysis on a small scale can help you learn how to manage data better on a larger scale. Extend-a-Care for Kids has worked on their data collection iteratively, to get their processes right before adding on more complexity.

> We started with a simple 5 question pre- and post-test, and we learned a little bit more every year. We quickly learned that we couldn't wait until the end of the year to compile all the data. We learned we need to have more information to identify the child (ex: age, campus) to easily compare pre and post-test, and we started to ensure that the data entry person was consistent. We learn and continuously improve each year ...I would recommend actually taking a pre-test and doing a pilot with a group of kids. This helps ensure your question comes across to children and staff the same as you intended for it to be read.
>
> **— Jaime Garcia, Operations Director, Extend-a-Care for Kids**

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Considering a System

If you're just getting the hang of data collection and analysis, you might be keeping it in a spreadsheet. This is a helpful first step. Soon though, you may find that it's hard to analyze the data and keep it consistent and clean in spreadsheets. Without a system, your data might be entered in a variety of formats which makes it hard to analyze the data.

You may be keeping the data in multiple spreadsheets which makes the process of aggregating that data for analysis very time consuming. What value might a system bring you? While we won't go deep into selection, we will cover a few key examples of how a good system will benefit your organization.

Good Systems Encourage Consistent and Complete Data

These systems can require that users provide data in a certain format. For instance, grade level is always collected as a "3" versus "3rd" or "third." If you are trying to understand how many third graders are participating in your program and your data are not formatted uniformly, this will be hard to analyze. You can't add up 3 + 3rd + third with a formula.

Systems can also make sure you collect consistent data across each participant. If only some of your staff put in emergency contact information for their students, it's not going to help a child with missing contact information who has an emergency!

> We recognize that the primary goal of our system is to report that information back to the participants, and say 'look at all the progress you've made in attendance or academics.' If we were using Google spreadsheets, we wouldn't be able to share all the great things that our participants are doing back to them.
>
> **— Katie Sullivan, Program Evaluation and Volunteer Manager, Urban Initiatives**

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> My reports changed a lot over the season last year. Every time I was looking at the data I found a new question that was interesting to me. So they called it the "Katie's Curiosities" section. They were just fun things that I was finding and impacts that we didn't know we had until we could pull the reports all in one place.
>
> — **Katie Sullivan, Program Evaluation and Volunteer Manager, Urban Initiatives**

Good Systems Make Data Analysis Quicker

In most cases, analysis of data from spreadsheets ends up taking a lot of time and manual effort. Good systems are often designed to make this analysis fast and accessible to non-technical staff so you can easily get answers to questions.

> One of the biggest assets our fundraising team has is our data-driven mentality. We're able to track program data and report out on it in an easy manner through Salesforce, and we provide concrete results that back up what we tell funders we can do. That's one of the main factors in securing foundation funding and one of the reasons we've seen so much fundraising success in the past.
>
> — **Milla Nizar, Salesforce and Data Systems Analyst, Reading Partners**

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Good Systems Evolve With You As You Grow and/or Add New Programs to Scale Your Impact

As your organization grows, you will logically be collecting more data. And at a certain scale, spreadsheets just can't be manipulated effectively. Good systems can easily handle a greater quantity and complexity of data. They also make it easy for you to change and add fields so you can collect new and different data as your programs change. They should be flexible and configurable so changes don't take a lot of time, effort, and resources.
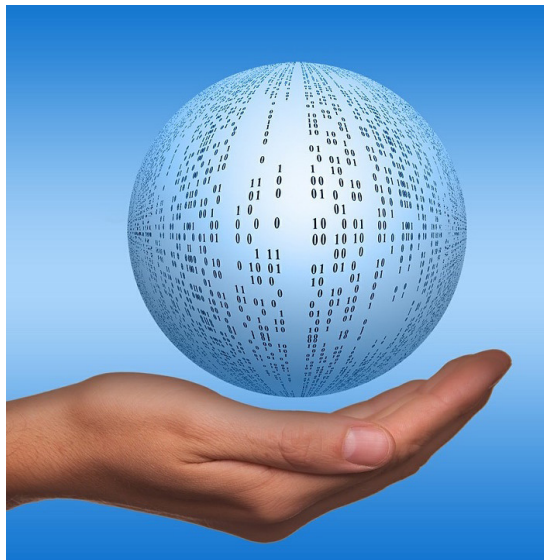
> Salesforce is that key resource that all of our program staff and AmeriCorps members are trained to utilize as part of their role. Salesforce allows us as national staff to get a good grasp of what's happening in every single one of our regions and reading centers without needing to physically be there. We create Salesforce dashboards and run reports to tell us different things about our program in action. Having this ability in Salesforce to dive into different layers of our data allows us to better understand how to support them nationally.

— **Janet Tam, National Program Operations Manager, Reading Partners**

Repetition and consistency are often key in education. These practices are also important for your data strategy and systems. You need to have a long-term plan to reinforce good, consistent data practices. This also involves working effectively with your staff to foster buy-in and embed the purpose of the data into your organizational culture. Otherwise, you won't get the benefits described above. A good rollout of a new strategy or system is only half the battle.

Identify and Engage Executive Sponsors and Champions

Buy-in from the top is important. If the executive director demonstrates how data is important in decision-making and consistently uses data to make points, staff will be more likely to want to spend the time collecting data and learning about a new system. Champions across the organization can lead their peers in these behaviors. The best way to get buy-in is by proving the value of (and need for) the tool.

> "
> 'Data Drive Decisions' is one of Reading Partners' core values. One of the things that helps motivate people responsible for data entry is knowing their work informs our strategies.
>
> — Katy Kondo, Research Coordinator, Reading Partners

> " Reports features [were our] key to buy-in. A lot of my staff would be tracking information on their own. Let's say they made a parent call home and someone RSVP'd to a big event. Being able to quickly pull how many calls ended with a 'yes' RSVP and how many calls they need to make their target goals and connecting their needs to the system has been my number one priority. If they feel the system is solving a problem that would take them longer elsewhere, they are going to be excited to use the system.

> **— Katie Sullivan, Program Evaluation and Volunteer Manager, Urban Initiatives**

Provide Training and More Training

Have a plan to train your staff on collecting the data and/or using the system. For system training, train on the whole process (for example, how collecting case notes fits into the process of working with students each day) and not just the features of the system. Assume one training won't be all you need. You'll be most successful if you tailor your training to specific roles or departments. Plan on follow-up trainings as people use the system. Be sure to train new staff on the system when they join.

Have a Solid Process for Providing Ongoing Support

People get frustrated if they are trying to do something new and can't get their questions answered. For larger organizations with more robust systems, a help ticketing system might be required. For more simple systems, monthly "office hours" where staff can get help and questions answered may be all you need. They may also serve as ongoing training!

> " It is important to make sure that the folks who interact with the data are trained so they know what the data are used for. I would strongly suggest you make sure that people know what the data are, what the definitions of each data point are, why the data are getting collected, and how they are going to reap the benefits of that data collection, so that feedback loop is there. That increases motivation to enter data correctly and in a timely manner.

> **— Lindsey Kessel, Bay Area Program Director, Reading Partners**

It's a Journey, Not a Destination.

Photo courtesy of Reading Partners.

Data strategies and systems are ever-evolving. You don't have to figure things out all at once. If you are using your data to learn and then applying what you learn, your organization will naturally grow and adapt. That will mean better programs and services for your students, a better experience for your staff, and a bigger impact on your mission.

> A lot of the data that we're gathering and analyzing really facilitates organization-wide shifts and improvements, especially around different aspects of our program. We're constantly using our data to better serve our students and help drive our decisions.
>
> **— Janet Tam, National Program Operations Manager, Reading Partners**

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ℹ About Us

Exponent Partners

Exponent Partners builds technology for social change. We help afterschool, K-12 education, youth development, and human services organizations leverage data to improve their programs and services and to understand outcomes. We build specialized systems to fit a diverse set of program needs, including those for student data tracking, applications and program enrollment tracking, case management, student outcomes, fundraising and more. As a B Corp and a California Benefit Corporation, we pursue our mission to make the social sector more effective by delivering the insights that create impact.

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For a free consultation about your project or to find out more, contact us:
www.exponentpartners.com
800.918.2917
info@exponentpartners.com

National AfterSchool Association (NAA)

National AfterSchool Association (NAA) fosters development, provides education, and encourages advocacy for the out-of-school-time community. We are the membership association for professionals who work with children and youth in diverse school and community-based settings to provide a variety of extended learning opportunities and care during out-of-school hours. Our members include afterschool program directors, front-line staff, school leaders, principals, teachers, board of education members, non-profit leaders, community leaders, policymakers, researchers, and more. NAA works to assure that the vision of high-quality learning experiences for all children and youth, both in and out of school, becomes a reality.

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To learn more about becoming a member and the impact it can have on the success of your program, contact us:
www.naaweb.org/membership
info@naaweb.org