



School's Out New York City Initiative Year 1 Report: Executive Summary

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SEPTEMBER 2015

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3251_09/15

Executive Summary

The Comprehensive After School System of NYC (COMPASS NYC) comprises more than 900 programs serving young people enrolled in Grades K–12. School’s Out New York City (SONYC) serves as a pathway to success for youth in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Structured like clubs, the model offers young people a choice in how they spend their time, provides rigorous instruction in sports and arts, and requires youth leadership through service. In 2014, an increase in funding and steadfast commitment from Mayor Bill de Blasio and his administration enabled the SONYC initiative to more than double its size. In response to the expansion, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) contracted with American Institutes for Research (AIR) to conduct an evaluation of the School’s Out New York City (SONYC) initiative. The AIR team is using a mixed-methods approach to conduct two separate but related studies—one focused on implementation and one on outcomes. This report contains the methods and findings from the first year of the evaluation. Year 1 has been primarily dedicated to implementation study activities, including conducting a descriptive scan of the SONYC initiative and participant information to provide DYCD with an overview of who is participating in SONYC programs and in what ways, and an in-depth case study of 37 SONYC programs. The AIR team also began outcome-study activities, including piloting a youth survey and examining stakeholder perceptions. Year 1 focused on answering the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of successful or innovative models of partnerships? How are resources being leveraged?
2. How do SONYC programs use educational standards to guide program development?
3. How are participants with varying needs served in the program?
4. How do programs provide professional staff development? Do community-based organization (CBO) staff benefit from professional development opportunities geared toward teachers? Do school-day teachers benefit from professional development opportunities geared toward CBO staff about youth development?
5. How do programs engage parents to encourage regular participation in programs?
6. How do programs address social and emotional skill-building among their participants?
7. How do programs define and measure participant outcomes in the content areas in which they provide programming, as well as social and emotional skills?

Key findings from the first year of the evaluation suggest that the majority of stakeholders and program staff feel the SONYC expansion has been highly successful and that the program is high quality, offers benefits to youth participants, and has been a positive addition to schools across the city. The program is serving more than 55,000¹ middle school youth across the city, and the

¹ This figure represents a point-in-time snapshot of the SONYC initiative and is based on the current data as of July, 2015. At the end of the 2014-15 school year, the total enrollment across SONYC programs was 58,745.

reach of the program matches the SONYC initiatives' intended audience. Although some respondents highlighted challenges with the new program's requirements, the SONYC expansion was effective in extending the program to reach more youth across New York City. While this is a strength of the initiative, the majority of principals and teachers and some program staff noted that they wished the program could serve even more youth in their schools.

Overall, we found that programs demonstrate strong management practices (e.g., professional development for staff; recruitment and enrollment strategies, and inclusionary practices that allow youth to participate in the program) and that the quality of programs is high. School staff generally have a positive impression of the program. Findings also suggest that school staff share a vision that programs should support participants' social and emotional development, skill-building, and academic success. To date, program and school staff report seeing improvements in participants' outcomes, particularly in their social and emotional development and leadership skills. Both school and program staff see program activities as a key strength, with youth and families reporting high levels of satisfaction with the quality of programs. Likewise, programs are creating a warm and welcoming environment. Youth report being happy and feeling safe in their programs, and family members agree that their children are enjoying their program experience. However, although programs report they are offering opportunities for youth voice and leadership, youth perceive their opportunities for voice and leadership as mixed. This perception is not uncommon in afterschool programs and may be an issue of how adults view choice and leadership versus how youth view opportunities for choice and leadership.

In preparation for the outcome study in Year 2, activities during the first year of the evaluation also included the pilot of a youth outcome measure and a technology "field test" of survey implementation using iPod touch technology, followed by focus groups with program staff and youth to debrief. Findings from both activities revealed challenges (e.g., parent/guardian consent forms, logistics, survey length) and successes (e.g., youth enjoyed the opportunity to take a survey using an iPod touch) that will be used to inform the design of the evaluation going forward. The majority of program staff and youth reported that young people were generally uninterested in the surveys, questioned the relevance of the surveys, and, in some cases, "complained about taking another survey."

Ultimately, the findings present opportunities for DYCD in the coming years, in terms of programming and evaluation activities. We highlight recommended strategies that may serve to strengthen DYCD's and providers' efforts; however, we also identify areas of strength, where the focus should be on maintaining the good work programs are doing.

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