FUNDERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
Beyond Academics: What Matters?

Funders get it.

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What outcomes matter most to funders who support youth programs? They care about what the program is trying to achieve, but most are far more interested in supporting youth-serving organizations because that is where the “light bulb is turned on” for most kids, outside of the school day.

Funders cite outcomes that include connections to caring adults, mastery of skills, and leadership development, among others. Many funders in this arena are passionate about young people and the programs that support them. They often conduct site visits as part of grant reviews and therefore have the opportunity to see youth work in action.

“We need to claim the social and emotional outcomes as it differentiates what we do from merely extending the school day” said one funder.

Most funders prefer not to impose outcomes – but rather look to grantees to create measurements that link to the specific goals of the program. But they struggle to support their grantees to develop outcomes that are reasonable, meaningful and measureable. Some funders default to academic outcomes because until recently, there were few reliable and research-based indicators that pointed to improvements in the social and emotional development of young people engaged in out-of-school time programs.

Many funders look for a combination of outcomes that include a better connection to school, and the personal and social skills that are so critical to success in work and life. One funder stated that, “we need to measure both in this field, because they are interdependent. Youth need positive connections to school and community.”

This balance is often difficult to manage, say funders. Trustees often ask: what difference does our funding make? What is our story about the difference that our dollars made in young people’s lives? Without some community agreement on youth indicators – many will continue to feel responsible only for the difference their dollars make. This tension leads to youth programs having to track different measures for different funders, a burden for many grantees. In particular, many small programs are challenged to get the outcome data promised in proposals, and then report on it.
Another challenge to funders is time. Most funders spend more time on the analysis of who to fund, rather than the results achieved through grants. They often spend more time on monitoring rather than helping organizations to use the data they gather for program improvement and sharing their knowledge with others.

**What youth program gets funded is also about outcomes.**

Funders’ decisions about what youth programs or organizations to support rely on another element of outcome measurement: program quality. Most funding guidelines include characteristics of high quality youth programs that have been researched and proven over the last decade to be the necessary “inputs” for success. These characteristics, such as adequate program intensity or dosage, a well-trained staff, and youth engagement in program planning, are *indicators* that funders use to determine who gets funding. Many funders will rely on these measures of quality as adequate to the question about what difference does this program make for youth.

In Minnesota, some of the larger youth program funders (private and public) have worked together for more than five years as part of Youth Community Connections, a statewide advocacy organization (now part of Youthprise) whose mission is to improve program quality and support communities to provide high quality out-of-school time programs. These funders and others have focused their collective work on improvements to quality in youth programs resulting in new conversations among funders and youth programs. Rather than focusing exclusively on program outcomes, these funders have said: we understand that if you are involved in program quality efforts, outcomes for youth will improve.

Both funders and advocates are calling for more robust community outcomes that can guide investments in out-of-school time. This last spring, The Wilder Foundation’s Compass Child and Youth indicators project convened youth advocates, youth serving organizations and funders from across Minnesota to select communitywide measures in the field. That group agreed to focus its indicator work on two non-academic outcomes: connections to caring adults and engagement in enrichment activities after school.

What is the bottom line with all of this? Funders are “on the journey” with their youth serving grantees, trying to both respond to trustees expectations about accountability for results, and yet remaining flexible and open to working with grantees to make sure they are measuring what matters most.