

Evaluation Principles and Practices:

Recommendations for the Illinois Afterschool System



Afterschool for Children and Teens

Quality Assurance, Outcomes, and Evaluation Committee

ACT Now Coalition

The ACT Now Coalition is a state-wide organization that works to ensure that young people in Illinois have access to quality and affordable afterschool and youth development programs. We believe that an increased commitment to young people beyond the traditional school day is a crucial part of their growth into healthy and productive individuals. ACT Now is a 160-member diverse coalition supported by Illinois families, educators, business leaders, community advocates, youth organizations, and policymakers. ACT Now convenes the Quality Assurance, Outcomes, and Evaluation Committee, which developed this document.

Purpose

The principles outlined in this document can serve as a foundation for a common understanding and consistent expectations about evaluation for after-school programs among funders, programs and evaluators. The Partnership recommends that these principles be integrated into funding expectations, program operations, and program evaluation activities , and provides specific practices to guide this integration.

Evaluation Philosophy

Principle 1: Evaluation is an integral part of program design and planning, implementation, and program improvement rather than a separate function. Each program should have a theory of change, or program design that describes how program activities are linked to intended outcomes. A program's evaluation should be aligned to this theory of change.

Practices

- Programs develop and clearly and accurately document their theory of change.
- Evaluators work with program staff to understand the design and goals of the program they are evaluating.
- Funders require documentation of a program's theory of change as part of funding proposals and/or reporting requirements and require programs to conduct an evaluation related to that theory of change.

Principle 2: Evaluation's fundamental purpose is ongoing program improvement. Depending on the nature of the evaluation it may also serve many other purposes such as acting as a needs assessment, measuring program effectiveness, program sustainability, assisting in the development of marketing techniques/funding strategies, identifying staff training needs or areas in which staff may benefit from professional development, and/or ensuring the program serves the needs of a full range of program stakeholders.

Practices

- Program administrators educate their staff about the purpose and goals of their program evaluation.
- Program administrators regularly update staff on the evaluation process and outcomes, and utilize evaluation data with staff during program planning and staff development activities.

- Evaluators provide regular feedback to program staff, funders, and/or other stakeholders so they can use data for program improvement throughout the course of the program.
- Evaluators and program staff work together to clearly define the evaluation's goals and collect appropriate data
- Funders promote the use of evaluation data for sound decision making and program improvement in their RFPs and Bidder's conferences, and other related resources. Funders explain the benefits of evaluation for programs and those they serve.
- Funders expect programs to demonstrate use of evaluation data in program planning. As appropriate, they require a program improvement plan based on evaluation finding and provide technical assistance to implement that plan.
- Funders allow appropriate program modifications during a grant year when based on data gathered from evaluation.
- Funders describe clearly the role of evaluation as more than program monitoring and performance measurement for grant making and reporting purposes.

Principle 3: The evaluation process includes multiple interlocking steps and stages, beginning with program clarification and needs assessment and continuing through tool development, data collection, and data utilization. Each stage of evaluation is important and provides the foundation for moving to the next stage.

Practices

- Program administrators, evaluators, and funders consider the program stage of development, the resources allocated to evaluation, and the program staff's experience in evaluation to determine appropriate evaluation methods and activities within each evaluation stage.
- Program administrators and funders expect all programs to measure their processes (activities, attendance, etc). Evaluation expectations increase as program capacity and experience increase, with programs progressing to outcomes measurement.
- Evaluators work closely with program staff to select appropriate strategies for the program being evaluated. Depending on the needs of the program, evaluation processes can be designed to gather qualitative and/or quantitative data.
- Funders, evaluators and program administrators utilize evaluation readiness assessments to determine appropriate evaluation design and expectations.

Principle 4: All Evaluations must follow ethical standards and all legal mandates regarding evaluation, and protect the rights and welfare of human subjects.

Practices

- Funders and evaluators provide guidance to programs regarding existing standards and legal mandates.
- When legally required, programs require participants in evaluation to sign informed consent and provide the option of declining to participate in the evaluation.
- Evaluators, funders, program staff, and other stakeholders disclose all potential conflicts of interest.
- When required, evaluations are externally reviewed by an Institutional Review Board or another appropriate agency. Funders and/or evaluators assist program staff in identifying the necessary resources for these reviews.
- Programs protect participants' confidentiality by collecting information in a way that does not identify participants.

Evaluation Planning

Principle 5: Evaluation should be planned and purposeful. Evaluation planning should be incorporated into initial program planning and relate directly to program needs, intended outcomes, and activities.

Practices

- Evaluators work closely with program staff to design an evaluation plan that is appropriate to the program, with the evaluation methods clearly described.
- Evaluators and program staff incorporate primary program goals into evaluation design to ensure the evaluation meets the needs of the participants.
- Funders align their evaluation expectations with their program priorities.
- Funders require programs to provide an evaluation plan that relates to the primary goals of the program **before** data collection begins.
- The manner in which the data may be used is determined by the evaluation team prior to collecting data.
- Program staff and evaluators determine questions to be answered by the evaluation by reviewing intended program goals, and the expected connection between the program's needs, outcomes, and activities.
- The information gathering procedures are chosen or developed so that they will assure that the interpretation arrived at is valid for the intended use.

Principle 6: Key program leadership demonstrates support for program evaluation.

Practices

- Program administrators allocate staff time to evaluation, including needs assessment, program clarification, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and identification of any needed program modification.
- Program administrators are clear about the purpose of program evaluation and communicate its benefits to program staff.

- Program administrators build evaluation activities into job expectations as appropriate.
- Program administrators discuss evaluation activities and results regularly with staff.

Principle 7: Evaluation is most effective when evaluators, staff and other stakeholders collaborate to determine evaluation questions, determine evaluation purposes, assess evaluation capacity, and determine the best methodology.

Practices

- Funders allow expenditures to support formal opportunities and incentives (i.e. focus groups) for students, parents, schools, funders, staff, etc. to describe what they want to get out of the program.
- Programs plan evaluations with stakeholders, creating opportunities for them to provide input on the evaluation design. Stakeholders, including staff, participants, family members, and other interested parties, are asked what questions they would like to have answered and their goals for the program.
- Evaluations are planned, conducted, and reported in ways that encourage follow-through by stakeholders, so that the likelihood that the evaluation will be used is increased.
- Evaluators are open and responsive to local evaluation needs.
- The evaluation planning team outlines clearly everyone's roles and responsibilities.
- A plan for use of evaluation results is openly communicated with stakeholders prior to the start of the evaluation.
- The evaluation procedures are practical to keep disruption to a minimum while needed information is obtained.

Evaluation Implementation

Principle 8: Evaluation should include the valid and systematic collection of data and be implemented in the manner that it was planned.

Practices

- Programs and evaluators ensure that the evaluation process is documented in enough detail, so that they can be identified and assessed.
- Evaluators document data collection methods and demonstrate how the validity and reliability of the data was ensured.
- Funders require that programs follow standard protocols when implementing their evaluation methods and require documentation of the methodology.
- Funders and evaluators share samples of valid data collection tools and data sources, along with instructions for use that have been utilized in other program evaluations, in an unbiased manner.
- Evaluators develop clear instructions for the administration of the evaluation. Evaluation instructions are written in sufficient detail to be replicated by other agencies.
- The sources of information used in a program evaluation are described in enough detail, so that the adequacy of the information can be assessed.
- The information gathering procedures are implemented so that they will ensure that the information obtained is sufficiently reliable for the intended use.
- The information collected, processed, and reported in an evaluation is systematically reviewed by the evaluator and program staff and any errors found corrected.
- Quantitative and qualitative information in an evaluation is appropriately and systematically analyzed by evaluators so that evaluation questions are effectively answered.
- The evaluation itself is formatively and summatively evaluated against these and other pertinent standards, so that its conduct is appropriately guided and, on completion, stakeholders can closely examine its strengths and weaknesses.

Evaluation Utilization

Principle 9: For evaluation to be useful, findings (including interim findings) need to be communicated to stakeholders in a timely and unbiased manner and in an appropriate format to be useful in decision-making.

Practices

- Funders outline their expectations about the type and scope of evaluation results they expect grantees to produce (i.e. through samples/outlines of evaluation reports).
- Funders, programs and evaluators agree upon a reporting template that meets the needs of the key stakeholders.
- Evaluation reports are reviewed by multiple people. If possible, program staff, parents, administrators, and funders review this information prior to formal presentation of data.
- Evaluators produce interim reports after the first round of data is collected to illustrate key findings and share with appropriate stakeholder groups.
- Programs ensure final evaluation findings are shared with all stakeholders and the conclusions reached are explicitly justified. As appropriate, the evaluation results are openly discussed with stakeholders and interested parties.

Principle 10: The evaluation process serves to identify program strengths, as well as its needs and gaps. Both expected and unexpected results should be considered to determine any needed program modifications as part of the continuous improvement process

Practices

- Funders state in their expectations that evaluation findings that show needs and gaps are to be used by programs as opportunities for improvement and will not be used in a punitive way.
- Programs dedicate time to review evaluation findings with all stakeholders to identify program strengths as well as any needed program changes or enhancements.

- Programs develop goals and action plans to address identified needed program improvements.
- Funders request information on evaluation results and the role of data-based decision making in subsequent program planning.
- Evaluators ensure that key findings and their context are clearly understood by programs and stakeholders.
- When using the evaluation to make program changes, the reasoning and connections between the evaluative findings and proposed changes are made explicit.

Principle 11: The evaluation should be fair and as comprehensive as possible given the available resources, and consider the context in which the program exists.

Practices

- Evaluators document program strengths and weaknesses. Both positive and negative findings are described in the program evaluation.
- Programs involve multiple stakeholders in interpreting the evaluation.
- Prior to analyzing data, all stakeholders acknowledge their biases. Multiple individuals review the data in order to ensure it is received in the least biased manner possible.
- Evaluations consider the context (including internal and external resources, staff time, population served, etc.) of the program and examine the influence these factors have on the program.
- The perspectives, procedures, and rationale used to interpret the findings are carefully described, so that the bases for value judgments are clear.
- Any conflict of interest is dealt with openly and honestly, so that it does not compromise the evaluation processes and results.

Evaluation Capacity

Principle 12: Program personnel need time, training, and resources to participate in the evaluation, which may vary based on the nature of the evaluation. Technical assistance and/or resources should be available to programs to ensure staff members have these skills.

Practices

- Program staff is involved in reviewing the evaluation plan.
- Program administrators and/or evaluators teach program staff about the importance of quality assurance and their role in ensuring data is collected correctly.
- Program administrators build time for program evaluation activities into staff work schedule.
- Evaluators train staff on pertinent aspects of evaluation in which staff are involved.
- Evaluators meet with staff throughout the evaluation process and inform them of evaluation strategies and approaches.
- Funders allow ongoing evaluation training expenses in budgets for grantee professional development.

Principle 13: The person responsible for leading the evaluation should have expertise and experience related to program area so as to maximize their credibility and produce valid and useful results.

Practices

- Funders and/or programs select (internal or external) evaluators with experience/expertise in the type of evaluation that will be implemented.
- External evaluators agree to formal terms (what will be done, how, by whom, when, etc.) in evaluation proposal that clearly states what the programs can expect from their evaluation services.
- The evaluator is trustworthy and competent to perform the evaluation, so that the evaluation findings achieve maximum credibility and acceptance.
- Obligations of the formal parties to an evaluation (what is to be done, how, by whom, when) are agreed to in writing, so that these parties are

obligated to adhere to all conditions of the agreement or to formally renegotiate it.

Principle 14: Resources need to be dedicated to evaluation. The evaluation should be cost-effective.

Practices

- Program administrators ensure adequate resources are designated in operating budget for evaluation purposes.
- Evaluators and program staff involved in the evaluation are accountable for efficient and appropriate expenditures.
- Funders allow evaluation expenses in a grantees budget in an amount that is appropriate to the evaluation expectations they have for their grantees. These costs may include evaluation such as evaluation consultants, training, materials, and staff time.
- Funders' expectations for the evaluation are related to the evaluation's resources and design.

Recommended Evaluation Activities by Evaluation Type

Evaluation Tier	Evaluation Type	Evaluation Questions	Recommended Expectations/Activities
NEEDS ASSESSMENT	Needs assessment	What are the needs? How will program address the needs?	
PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT	Process Evaluation	What are activities and outputs of the program or initiative?	
	Process Evaluation	Does program or initiative achieve planned activities and outputs?	
	Outcomes Evaluation	Does program or initiative achieve intended outcomes and results?	
EXPERIMENTAL DESIGNS IN EVALUATION RESEARCH	Outcomes Evaluation	Compared to people not served, do participants do better on desired outcomes?	