

INSIGHT

Lessons learned from the CORAL initiative

Supporting Success

*Why and How to Improve Quality
in After-School Programs*

Jessica Sheldon and Leigh Hopkins

PPV *Public/Private Ventures*

The CORAL Series: Lessons learned from a major after-school initiative

Visit www.irvine.org or www.ppv.org to download these publications based on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL initiative.



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A Report on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL Experience

Reports circumstances and challenges related to midpoint change in the multiyear CORAL initiative. Informs grantmakers involved in major initiatives of the need to include midcourse assessment as a critical component in initiative design.



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Presents findings from independent research on CORAL. Demonstrates the relationship between high-quality literacy programming and academic gains. Informs the after-school field of the potential role of quality programs in the ongoing drive to improve academic achievement. Includes executive summary.



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Highlights findings from independent research on CORAL. Informs those who seek to fund, design, implement and otherwise advance effective after-school programs.



Supporting Success

Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs

Examines strategies used to promote quality academic programming in CORAL. Makes the case for after-school funders, advocates, intermediary organizations and practitioners to support investment in continuous program improvement.



After-School Toolkit

Tips, Techniques and Templates for Improving Program Quality

Provides a practical, hands-on guide for implementing high-quality after-school literacy programming. Supplies program managers with tested tools and techniques employed in CORAL.



Gaining Ground

Supporting English Learners Through After-School Literacy Programming

Demonstrates a relationship between key CORAL approaches and the academic progress of English learners. Makes the case for action by policymakers and funders interested in boosting the achievement of this growing student population.

Contents

Authors' Note	4
Executive Summary	5
Why Does Program Quality Matter?	
Strategies for Continuous Program Improvement	
The Cost of Quality	
A Shift in Focus: The Challenges of Building Quality Academics in After-School Programming	10
The Link Between Quality and Outcomes	
The After-School Workforce	
The Continuous Program Improvement Cycle	15
Laying the Groundwork for Program Improvement	
Step 1: Targeted Trainings Throughout the Year	
Step 2: On-Site Quality Monitoring and Coaching	
Step 3: Measuring Progress Through Data Collection and Analysis	
Making it Happen: The Role of Funders in Promoting Program Quality	26
Committing to a Culture of Program Improvement	
Key Investments in Program Improvement	
The Overall Cost of Program Improvement	
Conclusion	32
Appendix: Further Resources for Program Improvement	33
Endnotes	34
References	36

Authors' Note

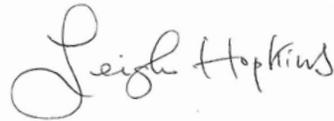
The findings and lessons described in this report are based on Public/Private Ventures' (P/PV) work with and research on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL initiative in five California cities: Fresno, Long Beach, Pasadena, Sacramento and San Jose. This report would not have been possible without the cooperation of the directors, staff, youth, parents and other members of these CORAL communities. Among other things, these individuals allowed our researchers to observe programming and conduct surveys and reading assessments. Program staff talked with us at length about their challenges and successes in adding a literacy component to their after-school offerings. We are deeply grateful to these individuals for their contributions to this project and their commitment to creating strong after-school programs for youth.

We would also like to thank six leaders in the out-of-school-time field with whom we conducted interviews about program quality and professional development: Erika Argersinger, Betsy Brand, Ron Fairchild, Bob Granger, Nancy Peter and Daniel Princiotta.

With the contributions of these and other individuals and groups, the CORAL initiative helped boost the achievement of participating youth—and shed new light on the potential of after-school programs. The insights gathered during this process formed the basis for this and other CORAL publications. Irvine and P/PV are hopeful that these lessons will help practitioners, funders and policymakers to better serve the neediest youth across California and beyond.



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views *from the* field

Program quality and professional development are on the minds of many who work in and support the after-school field, from program directors to foundations to policy organizations. P/PV interviewed six leaders in the field about current trends and needs in professional development for after-school time. Excerpts from their interviews are provided throughout this report, and the full texts of the interviews are available at www.ppv.org.

Executive Summary

What does it take for after-school programs to provide high-quality academic activities to children? In the current age of school accountability, in which after-school programs are increasingly expected to have an impact on participants' academic achievement, this is a critical question.

For most of their history, after-school programs served primarily as sources of child care and, more recently, as places where children had the opportunity to participate in new, enriching cultural or recreational activities. The past 10 to 15 years, however, have brought a significant shift in this role. From federal programs such as Supplemental Education Services and 21st Century Community Learning Centers to statewide initiatives in California and Massachusetts, public and private funders are increasingly investing in after-school programs with the goal of improving students' academic performance.

The relatively recent nature of this shift, however, means that there is little conclusive research on how after-school programs can be best positioned to impact academic achievement. The aim of this report is to contribute to this growing field by suggesting an answer to this question.

The lessons presented here are drawn from Public/Private Ventures' experience as researcher and technical assistance provider to The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL initiative, a large-scale after-school program located in some of the lowest-performing schools in five California cities. Although literacy instruction was CORAL's core academic component, the lessons in this report are likely applicable to a wide variety of settings. The continuous improvement strategies CORAL programs used (and their relationship to program quality) will be instructive for any after-school programs providing academic instruction, whether math, science, technology or other.

Putting Quality First: Recommendations

To create high-quality academic activities in after-school programs and improve student achievement:

- Institute a process of continuous program improvement with ongoing monitoring of quality and structured professional development at all levels of the organization
- Make the financial investments necessary to implement the improvement process (with investments made by the provider organization, as well as public and private funders)
- Secure the commitment and participation of staff at all levels

The initial CORAL philosophy reflected best practices in the fields of youth development programming and community initiatives, including an emphasis on consistent staffing to help promote positive adult-youth relationships, and policies and practices to promote regular and ongoing youth participation. All CORAL cities shared the goal of improving youth academic achievement, but the initiative had broad guidelines for implementation during its early years. As a result, the approach and content of the CORAL after-school programs varied greatly across the state. While the sites typically provided youth with some mix of homework help and enrichment activities, the actual programming focus was diverse — ranging from primarily a science-based enrichment curriculum in one site, to mostly homework help in a second site, to a focus on art and cultural experiences in a third site.

At the initiative's midpoint, its original goal of increased academic achievement was narrowed to focus specifically on improving children's reading abilities. CORAL leaders added balanced literacy curricula to program participants' daily schedules.¹ Beginning in 2004, CORAL made improving children's reading abilities one of its key goals, and their daily schedules came to reflect this new priority. In addition to snack and recess, children primarily participated in two types of activities: enrichment activities and balanced literacy. The enrichment activities, sometimes taught by CORAL staff and at other times by outside professionals, included dance, art and science.

COMMUNITIES ORGANIZING RESOURCES TO ADVANCE LEARNING (CORAL)

The James Irvine Foundation launched the eight-year CORAL after-school initiative in 1999 with the goal of helping to improve the academic achievement of children in the lowest-performing schools in five California cities: Fresno, Long Beach, Pasadena, Sacramento and San Jose.

Once fully operational, this large-scale initiative served approximately 5,000 children each year — more than half of whom were designated as English learners and many of whom came from low-income families — across over 30 school- and community-based sites. Most of the youth were of elementary-school age, primarily first- to fifth-graders, with a small proportion in middle-school grades. The Foundation provided implementation support in all of the cities, with the objective of funding the initiative for five to six years in each site. In total, the Foundation committed over \$58 million to CORAL, making it the most significant and ambitious initiative undertaken by Irvine.

Following disappointing outcomes identified through a midpoint review, CORAL focused the wide breadth of programs offered at its sites on literacy activities and boosted program quality through a rigorous process of continuous improvement and staff development. These changes led to pronounced gains in achievement for a range of students.

The children involved in CORAL represented great diversity in their ethnicity and language proficiency and also, to some degree, in their performance at school. This diversity adds dimension to an examination of the role that after-school programs can play in the lives of different subgroups of youth and, in particular, English learners — a topic often missing in after-school research.

CORAL offers several key lessons to those with a stake in the success of after-school programs. Chief among the lessons are that after-school programs can, indeed, help promote student academic achievement, and that success requires targeted investment, stakeholder commitments, focused academic support, quality programming, and a process of continual improvement to attain and maintain high levels of quality.

Balanced Literacy Strategies

- Read alouds — staff read to children from works of fiction and nonfiction that can be completed in 10 or 15 minutes and from chapter books covered over the course of several days.
- Book discussions — staff lead children in talking about the story that has just been read.
- Writing activities — children write about topics they have just discussed, or they create their own stories.
- Vocabulary activities — children review or learn new words.
- Skill-development activities — children practice particular literacy skills, such as letter sounds or spelling.
- Independent reading — children spend time reading books of their choice at levels where they can read fluently and with high comprehension.

Why Does Program Quality Matter?

Although research on the potential impact of after-school programs on academic achievement is still inconclusive, it appears likely that the quality of academic activities — in both design and implementation — is a key element of their success. Where researchers have failed to find academic impacts in evaluations, they have frequently speculated that poor program quality may be the culprit. In successful programs, on the other hand, staff were found to play an active role in the classroom and skillfully implement well-designed academic curricula.²

One goal of the CORAL evaluation was to further explore the relationship between program quality and student gains through frequent activity observations and assessments of student reading levels. As detailed in other CORAL publications, participants who achieved the greatest reading gains were those who had participated in higher-quality activities, as rated by P/PV researchers during intensive observations over the course of the 2005–2006 school year. Across all types of youth that CORAL served — including the many participants who were initially reading below grade level and those who were designated as English learners — those who participated in higher-quality activities gained more than youth who participated in lower-quality activities.

CORAL participants who achieved the greatest reading gains were those who had participated in higher-quality activities.

In a second year of the evaluation, the CORAL sites renewed their commitment to improving the quality of their literacy programming, specifically those elements that research had shown to be most linked to academic gains. Judging from the second-year research observations, they were reasonably successful; program quality ratings increased in all dimensions of balanced literacy. In addition, average reading gains were 39 percent higher than in the first year. Although the relationship between program quality and student achievement is inconclusive, and research in the field is in its early stages, these findings add to a growing consensus that high-quality programming is in all likelihood an essential foundation for achieving academic gains.

Strategies for Continuous Program Improvement

The CORAL cities' rapid, significant increase in program quality between the first and second years of research can be attributed in part to the implementation of continuous program improvement strategies. To successfully implement this process, CORAL programs first needed to have two key elements in place: specific, clearly defined goals and a senior staff person — in this case, a literacy director — tasked expressly with improving quality. With these elements in place, program leaders could turn to a three-step cycle: 1) training staff, 2) monitoring program quality and coaching staff, and 3) collecting and analyzing data to track progress. Though each city varied in how and to what extent it implemented a system of continuous program improvement, all cities significantly expanded their processes and emerged with important lessons about improving program quality.

The continuous improvement cycle developed in CORAL's after-school programs begins with trainings that specifically match program goals. At their most effective, these trainings occur frequently, with each session reinforcing and building on previous ones. In CORAL's best training scenarios, professional development was individualized to challenge staff at all skill and experience levels. For example, newer and veteran staff were offered different trainings.

The next step is program monitoring and coaching — at the core of which is data collected from ongoing observations conducted by senior staff. These observations measure both the quality of activities offered to youth and the progress of staff as they work to implement strategies learned in trainings. Although each observation focuses on one or two staff people at a time, the emphasis of these observations and subsequent work with staff is on improving the quality of the programming as a whole. If observations reveal a specific instructor having trouble with one component of a program during one observation, evaluators may determine that this is a one-time issue that does not warrant more systematic attention. If, however, the same issue arises during observations in multiple classrooms, it is likely that this is evidence of a larger, program-wide challenge requiring new trainings, one-on-one coaching and follow-up observations.



Finally, staff collect and analyze data — ranging in type from surveys to attendance records to documented activity observations — that allow them to measure their program's overall progress toward its goals. This last step is critical to measuring whether program quality is actually improving and informing future training, monitoring and coaching. In reviewing data, senior staff prepare themselves to refine the steps in this cycle. In this way, the three-step system supports a program's constant growth and improvement.

The Cost of Quality

Evaluation of the CORAL initiative revealed that to successfully implement a cycle of continuous improvement, programs need commitment or buy-in from staff at all levels and targeted budgeting to support the process. When either of these was absent, program quality suffered. A cost survey of the CORAL cities suggested that implementing a system of continuous improvement does not have to be overwhelming or exceedingly costly and can be achieved with specific redirection of funds and/or slight increases in budget.

The key is to use funds effectively by shifting from traditional professional development approaches — such as “one-shot” trainings with little or no follow-up and only periodic observations — to a continuous system that supports improvement. This shift can have a significant impact on program quality, even if it represents only a small part of a program’s overall budget.

Continuous Improvement Investments

For the CORAL initiative, instituting a cycle of continuous improvement required critical investments. The five strategies below did not represent large portions of CORAL budgets. The most significant expense resulted from the addition of literacy directors, representing an average of 5 percent of the cities’ overall CORAL budgets. Other investments, such as paying staff to attend training or coaching sessions, represented between 1 and 3 percent of their budgets.

- Creating a staff literacy director position dedicated to monitoring and improving program quality
- Budgeting for staff time to attend training and coaching sessions
- Developing technology and a few targeted tools for data collection
- Investing in external technical assistance or consultants at key junctures
- Supporting all elements of a program improvement cycle, as they are most effective when implemented simultaneously

While both public and private funding for after-school programs has never been greater, rarely are funds earmarked for these types of investments in quality assurance and improvement. In fact, many funders limit the amount of funds that can be directed to overhead, including senior staff positions and staff training. The recent increases in overall funding for after-school programs represent a desire to expand access to and the availability of after-school programs, but it is essential not to overlook the issue of quality. A recent review of existing literature concluded that, “learning how to intervene effectively to improve programs is now the primary issue facing the after-school field. The availability of after-school programs has grown to the point where using resources to improve programs is ethical and feasible.”³ At this moment of expansion, after-school programs and funders have a unique opportunity to invest in program improvement practices that can lead to sustainable, high-quality offerings that may be significantly more likely to help students succeed.

A Shift in Focus

THE CHALLENGES OF BUILDING QUALITY ACADEMICS IN AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

Education policy and practices in the United States are constantly shifting, responding to new research findings and new ideas for supporting our children. Most recently, the shift is toward school accountability: the No Child Left Behind Act and subsequent state legislation have left schools grappling with high-stakes testing and pressure to make adequate yearly progress. With the risk of losing funding and facing state takeover if they fail to meet prescribed goals, schools and districts are searching for new strategies to increase student achievement. While many of these strategies have involved changes in school-day structures and practices, schools are also turning outward — to communities, parents and local organizations — for support. Increasingly, stakeholders are viewing after-school programs as one more piece in the puzzle of improving student achievement.

This is a new role for many programs. Historically, after-school programs have served primarily as a form of child care and, more recently, as opportunities for children to participate in new, enriching activities. While providers and local communities often envisioned a larger role for after-school programs, the programs received little large-scale policy or funding support.⁴ Beginning in the 1990s, however, policymakers began to expand their expectations for after-school programs and

A field that was previously heralded for giving children enrichment and developmental opportunities is now being held accountable for providing academic support.

extend the traditional role of these programs to include rigorous academic goals.

Today, federally funded after-school programs such as Supplemental Education Services and 21st Century Community Learning Centers include academic improvement as a key goal.

Large statewide education initiatives, such as those in California and Massachusetts, feature after-school programs as a critical strategy to increase student achievement. Private funders are also increasingly supporting academic opportunities in after-school programs and asking that grantees measure children's progress using report cards and standardized test scores. As a result, a field that was previously heralded for giving children enrichment and developmental opportunities is now also being held accountable for providing academic support.

Despite this trend, many questions remain about the role after-school programs can play in raising children's academic achievement. Research on the topic is limited, and existing studies suggest that most after-school programs take an informal, sporadic approach to academic programming — an approach unlikely to result in measurable gains. The most common academic component of after-school programs, for example, is homework help, an activity that is often poorly implemented and that research has not linked to measurable academic gains.⁵ These findings — combined with after-school programs' traditional role of primarily providing youth with enrichment opportunities

cause many researchers and providers to be cautious of the field's ability to have an impact on academic achievement.

If practitioners, policymakers and funders hope to overcome these reservations and make academic achievement a realistic goal for programs, they must look closely at what it would take to get there. Are after-school programs, in their structure, activities and staffing, currently prepared to provide quality academic activities? Is funding sufficient to implement best practices for targeting academic achievement? What else will programs need to meet new expectations for student achievement?

In short, this report argues that more — and more targeted — investments are necessary to position after-school programs to provide effective academic support. The experience gained through the CORAL initiative — a multisite after-school initiative in California — provides a useful lens for viewing these issues, particularly the importance of continuous program improvement as a system for supporting staff and continually elevating the quality of activities.

views
from the
field

THE ACCOUNTABILITY TREND

“The pressure of No Child Left Behind on school systems to increase student performance is also putting more pressure on out-of-school-time programs as a way to supplement and enhance what happens during the school day. Policymakers believe that if they are funding a program, it should help meet important goals, such as increasing academic performance... But practitioners and policymakers don't always have the opportunity to learn about research on effective practices. That is where professional development and continuous program improvement come into play.”

Betsy Brand, Director, American Youth Policy Forum

The Link Between Quality and Outcomes

Since academic achievement has only recently been widely adopted as a goal for after-school programs, research has yet to demonstrate conclusively that programs are or are not reaching this goal. Still, early research has provided emerging lessons about practices that can contribute to successful academic programming in the after-school hours. First, studies suggest that to be successful, programs need to provide participants with targeted academic programming on a regular basis. Programs with only youth development or enrichment opportunities, such as sports or arts programs, or those that provide only occasional academic activities may benefit children in many ways, but it is unlikely they will lead to measurable academic gains among participants.⁶ Second, the quality of academic activities — in both their design and implementation — is likely a key element of their success. Where researchers have failed to find academic impact, they have frequently speculated that

poor program quality may be the culprit. In successful programs, on the other hand, staff played an active role in the classroom and skillfully implemented well-designed academic curricula.⁷

Early research on the CORAL initiative reinforced these findings. In 2004, the initiative focused its academic goal on improving children’s reading abilities, as opposed to a broader aim of general academic achievement. In turn, it adopted an appropriate curriculum targeting this outcome. All of the sites implemented a balanced literacy model, an approach to literacy instruction that includes a range of activities, carefully selected materials for each activity and structured literacy interactions that move children to higher levels of understanding.⁸ Children attended these literacy activities for about 90 minutes a day, three or four days per week. In this way, the initiative incorporated the first lesson described above: Provide children with targeted academic activities on a regular basis.

Reading gains were achieved by students initially reading below grade level and those who were designated as English learners.

P/PV researchers carefully studied the implementation of these literacy activities and, based on data from the 2004–2005 school year, identified a relationship between the quality of activities and children’s academic gains. When reading gains from that period were analyzed, the children who improved the most were those who had participated in higher-quality activities, as rated by P/PV researchers during intensive observations over the course of the year.⁹ Across all readiness levels of youth that CORAL served—including the many participants who were initially reading below grade level and those who were designated as English learners—those who participated in higher-quality activities gained more than youth who participated in lower-quality activities.

Given this finding from the first year of research, the CORAL sites renewed their commitment to improving the quality of their literacy programming, focusing on those elements (such as read alouds and independent reading) that research had linked most closely to academic gains. Judging from the second-year research observations, they were fairly successful. During the first year, especially early on, staff had struggled to consistently implement literacy activities. Many had implemented only two or three of the key activities, and their approaches varied considerably, sometimes including hallmarks of quality but other times missing essential components. By the second year, researchers observed much greater consistency across classrooms and improved quality in all literacy elements. The team leaders regularly implemented all components of balanced literacy—and did so with higher quality than before. At the same time that program quality increased, so did reading gains. In the second year, average reading gains were 39 percent higher than in the first year.¹⁰

Though the relationship between program quality and student achievement is inconclusive and research in the field is in its early stages, findings from the CORAL initiative add to a growing consensus that high-quality programming is an important foundation for achieving student gains.

The After-School Workforce

Because it markedly improved program quality within a short period of time, the CORAL experience offers valuable lessons to the field, particularly about the benefits and challenges of the model of continuous program improvement. Before turning to this discussion, it is important to note that CORAL made its changes with a staff typical of many after-school programs: primarily young adults with little teaching experience. Studies of the after-school workforce have found that fewer than 50 percent of employees have a bachelor's degree, and among those who do, their degrees are often in fields unrelated to education or child care. Many after-school staff work part-time — some studies have put the figure as high as two-thirds of staff — and there are high levels of turnover both within programs and in the field as a whole.¹¹

Though CORAL, like most after-school programs, had some experienced and gifted staff, those who worked most closely with children were likely to be young adults who generally had not taught literacy before. These front-line staff, usually called “team leaders,” led literacy and most enrichment activities and supervised a group of 10 to 20 children throughout the afternoon. Most team leaders cared a great deal for children and were skilled in building relationships with them but were not experienced in the kind of professional teaching role required to lead high-quality literacy activities. In addition to team leaders, each CORAL site was supervised by a site coordinator who generally had more experience in the after-school field but, like team leaders, did not have experience in literacy specifically.

The quick improvement seen in CORAL's program quality, therefore, was not the result of hiring more skilled line staff. Early on in the initiative, it became clear that many of CORAL's team leaders, and even site coordinators, did not initially possess the skills to lead targeted academic activities. Rather, the sites needed to provide staff with basic instructional skills as soon as they were hired and then work with them throughout the year to help improve these skills over time. To do so, most CORAL sites gradually implemented an ongoing system of training, monitoring, coaching and analysis that not only increased staff's skills but also enhanced program quality, bringing the initiative closer to its ultimate goal of improving children's reading levels.

Table 1. Demographics of CORAL Team Leaders

Age	Team Leaders
21 years or less	44%
22 to 25 years	38%
26 to 29 years	9%
30+ years	9%
Highest Level of Education Completed	
High school not completed	4%
High school	65%
Associate's degree	18%
Bachelor's degree or higher	14%
Work Experience Before CORAL	
Experience working with children	83%
Experience providing literacy instruction	43%

Note: Data are based on a survey of 179 team leaders in 2004–2005. Percentages do not always add to 100 in cases where some staff did not respond to all questions.

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THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME WORKFORCE

“Line staff in the out-of-school-time field have little formal training on how to work with youth, and that situation is not likely to change given the economic structure of the field. This means that policymakers and administrators have a special need to fund and implement policies, management practices and other supports that improve how well line staff work with kids.”

Bob Granger, President, William T. Grant Foundation

“The fear of turnover — investing in staff when they rotate so quickly — should be addressed and overcome. We invest in children regardless of where they go next. Investments in out-of-school-time staff, if not applicable to the same program year after year, are sound investments in the OST workforce.”

Nancy Peter, Director, Out-of-School-Time Resource Center at the University of Pennsylvania

The next chapter provides details about how this system of continuous program improvement functioned in CORAL’s after-school setting. Although the examples are drawn from CORAL’s experience with literacy instruction, the lessons in this report are likely applicable to after-school programs providing any kind of academic instruction, be it math, science or technology. As after-school programs are asked to play a larger role in academic achievement, the importance of quality should not be underestimated. While program leaders may face challenges in terms of staff skill levels, they can apply strategies similar to those used in CORAL to help staff develop — and by extension, to measurably improve program quality and student achievement.

The Continuous Program Improvement Cycle

When the CORAL sites added balanced literacy as a key component of their offerings in 2004, they learned firsthand the challenges of successfully implementing academic programming in an after-school environment. At most sites, senior staff or consultants provided trainings at the beginning of the year either to the entire staff or to coordinators who, in turn, were expected to train their respective staffs. Despite these efforts, many instructors reported feeling uncomfortable with designing and leading literacy lessons; staff struggled, teaching lessons that were inconsistent and sometimes missing major components. At that time, senior staff were occupied with initial training and other aspects of program start-up and had little chance to thoroughly observe the quality of programming.

This experience is not atypical. Most program leaders intend to train and support staff, but doing so successfully is often a much more intensive process than expected. Research suggests that the common approaches to staff development, such as one-time demonstrations of new curricula and informal monitoring of staff progress, rarely have lasting impact on staff skills or program quality.¹² After the initial rush of program start-up, most of the CORAL site leaders came to the same conclusion: They were able to step back and realize that their training efforts were not producing the type of programming they had hoped for.

Laying the Groundwork for Program Improvement

If traditional efforts are not enough, what does it take to add quality academic activities to an after-school program? In the case of CORAL, implementing a cycle of continuous program improvement proved to be the most effective approach, but the program leaders also learned that two elements needed to be in place first.

Comparing Approaches to Staff Development

CORAL staff experienced an intensive, improvement-centered approach to their development.

Less Effective	More Effective
Varied focus	Focused on program goal
One-time	Ongoing
Universal	Graduated
Demonstration	Interaction
Informal monitoring	Structured monitoring
Little feedback, utilized informally	Regular feedback with coaching support
Anecdotal progress checks	Data analysis and program evaluation

Program leaders and funders must establish specific goals and have a clear vision of what quality programming should ultimately look like.

Staff who are busy and overworked, as many after-school providers are, rarely have time to step back and assess what their specific goals are beyond the general mission of supporting youth. A common element in programs with successful academic activities, however, is that staff at all levels are

Staff who are busy and overworked, as many after-school providers are, rarely have time to step back and assess what their specific goals are beyond the general mission of supporting youth.

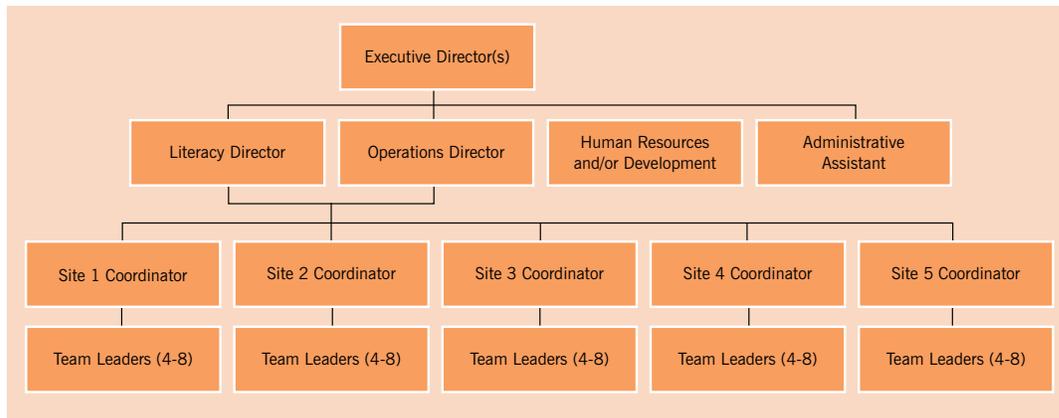
able to articulate the program’s goals.¹³ By working internally and with P/PV, CORAL sites learned about best practices in literacy programming and reflected on how these practices could be integrated into overall program goals. Similarly, other program leaders can identify a staff person to research effective practices in a respective program area and prioritize time for senior staff to define clear program goals.

In the case of CORAL, sites needed to move from general mission statements to specific, measurable goals. For instance, instead of “improving academic achievement,” program leaders needed to write out goals such as: “providing youth with a high-quality read aloud every day” or “developing supportive relationships among staff and youth.” The process of articulating and documenting goals may be complicated, involving input and consensus at multiple levels of staff. As one CORAL site coordinator explained, this process was ultimately worth it, allowing staff to more effectively work toward their goals:

“Over the Summer we had this huge series of several meetings in which we came up with: What are we doing? What are our goals?... The results of that analysis really helped us formulate our goals. We focused on the first two and said, ‘Who will work on them?’ And from there we devised committees. That was a really powerful and informative thing that we did right there. We listed all the work that we had to do, and then we just tackled it.”

Though it is important that all staff understand program goals and work toward program improvement, it is also important that organizations have someone to spearhead this process.

Figure 1. Typical CORAL Staffing Structure



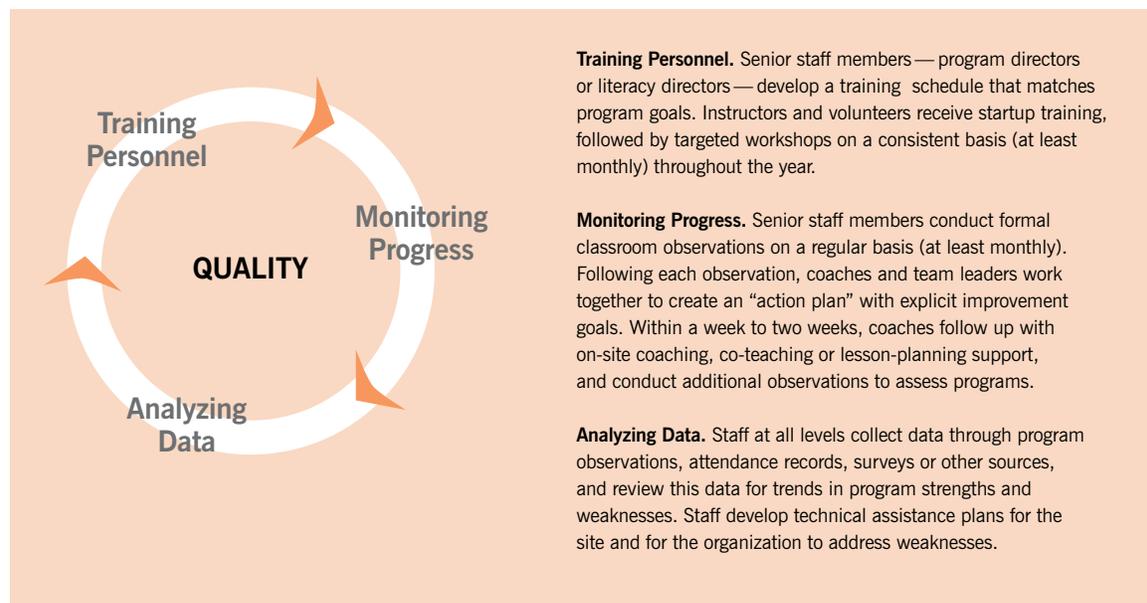
Programs need to hire a lead staff person skilled in their academic fields of focus, with experience as an educator and trainer.

The CORAL programs found that, above all else, hiring a literacy director — a senior staff member skilled in balanced literacy — was the key strategy in increasing program quality. Since most on-the-ground after-school staff have little experience or training with academic instruction, it is essential that there be at least one senior staff member who can serve as a resource in this area. With their experience, these individuals were able to identify program strengths and weaknesses. Unlike executive directors or site coordinators who were tasked with running and sustaining overall after-school programs, the literacy director’s primary responsibility was to improve the literacy component. The number of literacy directors each city hired depended on the number of sites and children served. On average, one literacy director was hired for every 600 participants, though many literacy directors worked closely with consultants or other staff who supported their role.¹⁴

With the goal of quality literacy programming in place, literacy directors took the lead in implementing and overseeing a system of continuous program improvement: training and retraining staff, observing and supporting staff on site and objectively evaluating the program’s progress (Figure 2). Beyond typical staff development efforts, a system of continuous program improvement allows for staff development at all levels and throughout the year, ensuring that programming is constantly moving toward established goals.

Figure 2. A Cycle of Continuous Program Improvement

A successful system of continuous program improvement begins by setting program goals and hiring a senior staff person charged with improving program quality. This lays the foundation for three repeating, complementary steps, illustrated below.



Step 1: Targeted Trainings Throughout the Year

While research suggests that traditional approaches to training may not have lasting impact, effective staff training remains a fundamental piece of professional development and program improvement. The difference: in a strong system of continuous program improvement, training is tied directly to program goals. The importance of tying training to program goals was one of the first lessons to emerge from CORAL's experience related to professional development, when early on some sites and staff noticed a gap between staff training and program improvement. In the early stages of the initiative, all staff were trained on a wide variety of topics, from CPR to family visits to read alouds, but this did not necessarily result in improvements in overall classroom quality. While staff did improve the skills in which they were trained, these skills were not always aligned with the program's core goal of better literacy instruction. By restructuring their trainings to match this goal, CORAL sites observed marked improvements in quality.

In a strong system of continuous program improvement, training is tied directly to program goals.

The use of goals and priorities is especially important for training at the beginning of a program year when providers are often faced with cadres of new staff. For a program like CORAL that offers a variety of activities and has many goals, setting priorities is necessary to focus trainings on what is most important for staff to learn from the start. One CORAL staff member, for example, complained that she wasn't given the training she really needed until after she had begun working with children:

“During the Summer, the [trainings] were more team-building [and] an overview of the program, like who are our funders, administrative things, reporting child abuse and start-a-job paperwork. It wasn't until we started [the year] that we got [literacy training].”

By the second year if not earlier, as CORAL sites prioritized their trainings and aligned them with their most immediate goals, most also corrected the misstep of failing to provide the most important trainings first. Among all the activities that program leaders wanted to provide, read alouds and independent reading were chosen as the fundamentals. Previous research has shown that these two components of a balanced literacy model are most directly related to participants' academic achievement, and first-year research on CORAL confirmed that the amount of independent reading time, in particular, was linked to reading gains.¹⁵ Rather than providing one training on an array of topics, as they had done in the past, many CORAL site leaders decided to provide multiple in-depth trainings on read alouds and independent reading, even if it meant postponing training in other areas. As a result, during subsequent observations, these components received the highest quality ratings out of all the literacy activities provided, and CORAL staff reported feeling more confident about implementing these activities.

Even these targeted trainings, however, were not sufficient for real program improvement. To reach higher levels of program quality and move closer to the program's goals, training must be an ongoing process that is built into an organization's culture. When CORAL staff members received only one beginning-of-the-year training — even when it was an extensive weeklong training — they soon faced challenges. Some CORAL staff reported that they had learned so much about so many

topics in their initial training that they could only remember pieces of these lessons. Others noted that everything seemed to be clear and manageable during training, but once the program started they discovered a range of questions and challenges they hadn't expected. Their experience matches previous research findings that the effects of training on program quality tend to fade over time.¹⁶ While effective trainings can have an immediate impact, lasting change require frequent updates.

Ongoing training can be viewed as a stepwise approach to skill development: With each step, staff build on previous trainings and learn new skills. The CORAL city leaders adopted this approach with monthly or bimonthly trainings, each time addressing a different step in the ladder of skills team leaders needed for literacy instruction. In some cases, the cities set these ongoing training schedules at the beginning of the year. In the best cases they left this schedule flexible and were able to respond to needs that arose during the course of the year.

As one trainer noted, "All plans look great until the kids show up. You have the human element of working with kids and adults."

Though schedules can be left flexible, it is important that training continue throughout the year, even as staff becomes more comfortable in their roles. Training schedules tend to deteriorate as the school year goes on due to the assumption that by April, for instance, staff does not need more training. When this occurred in the CORAL program (during the first year of P/PV's research), program quality was, in fact, relatively weak, but senior staff were not observing or working with team leaders with enough frequency to recognize this reality.

The general strategy at CORAL sites was to train staff on basic skills and program goals first, and then move on to more difficult or specialized skills. Typically, this was training implemented on a city wide basis. Basic literacy trainings were offered at the beginning of the year, while more technical trainings took place later in the term.

In one city, this progression was offered on an individual level. Staff were grouped into "modules" according to experience, skill and previous trainings attended. Each group participated in specific sessions allowing all staff to continuously have exposure to new skills, to build on previous knowledge and be challenged. This intensive process required the literacy director and other senior staff to work with educators to develop the trainings, offer multiple specialized sessions (rather than a single one-size-fits-all version) and observe staff frequently to decide when they should be "bumped up" to the next level. This CORAL city stood out among the others for this effort, for its high staff satisfaction with training and support, and for some of the highest-quality activities observed.

To reach higher levels of program quality and move closer to the program's goals, training must be an ongoing process that is built into an organization's culture.

views
from the
field

ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“Policymakers and funders need to understand that continuous program improvement is not a one-time event, but rather a process that never ends. Oftentimes policymakers will be content to fund or support a one-time activity or event such as professional development without understanding that a one-time event won’t have much of an impact on quality and effectiveness. Policymakers and funders need to value professional and organizational development efforts and allow funding to be used to support those activities on an ongoing basis.”

Betsy Brand, Director, American Youth Policy Forum

“Given high rates of turnover among program staff in the field, it is critically important to view professional development as an ongoing process. In addition to supporting one-time professional development ‘events,’ there needs to be more focus on initiating and sustaining longer-term organizational change processes that have a lasting impact on the culture and results of organizations... In our experience, many policies and investments have a three- to five-year lifespan before they end or change dramatically. Yet it often takes close to this amount of time for organizations to successfully implement change efforts. In some cases, policies and investments end at the precise moment when they are most critical to ensuring lasting change.”

Ron Fairchild, Executive Director, Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University

Step 2: On-Site Quality Monitoring and Coaching

The next step in a continuous program improvement cycle, monitoring and coaching, fills a gap that many CORAL sites identified between training and program improvement. This gap is not unique to CORAL: Studies on professional development have found that after-school staff often appreciate trainings but fail to apply them to their daily work. For various reasons — lack of support from other staff, lack of time, an incomplete understanding of the content — staff fail to implement the new practices.¹⁷

It is important to note that providers who have been held accountable for delivering services without the benefit of professional development, such as regular follow-up training or coaching support, may be wary of the term “monitoring.” In the CORAL initiative, “monitoring” was used to emphasize the importance of observing programming on a regular basis, and using the findings from those observations to provide coaching and training for the purpose of improving program quality. Effective monitoring can identify which areas have or have not improved, and subsequent coaching provides staff with one-on-one assistance to implement new skills. These practices are not only important for program improvement but also help make trainings even more effective.

A standardized monitoring process by multiple staff reveals — in an objective, systematic way — what programming looks like on the ground.

A standardized monitoring process by multiple staff members reveals — in an objective, systematic way — what programming looks like on the ground. Program monitoring involves regular, formal observations of lessons to document program practices and determine staff strengths and weaknesses. Although each observation focuses on one or two staff at a time, the emphasis of these observations and subsequent work with staff is placed on improving the quality of the programming as a whole. If observations reveal a specific instructor having trouble with one component of a program during one observation, evaluators may determine that this is a one-time issue that does not warrant more systematic attention. If, however, the same issue arises during observations in multiple classrooms, it is likely that this is evidence of a larger, program-wide challenge that requires new trainings, one-on-one coaching and follow-up observations.

Most CORAL program leaders learned and integrated program monitoring practices by watching P/PV researchers and technical assistance providers as they were conducting classroom observations. Working with technical assistance providers, the CORAL program teams were able to adapt this research-oriented process for use as an internal monitoring process with program improvement as the ultimate goal. Program leaders or technical assistance providers developed customized observation tools — two to four pages of behaviors and strategies they expected to observe during a lesson — and made sure that team leaders saw the observation tool and knew what would be documented. Most CORAL program teams established a regular schedule of monitoring, so that team leaders knew who would observe them and when. Schedules tracked multiple observations of all team leaders, enabling senior staff to identify potential problems quickly and to recognize improvement over time. Through their use of a common form during observations, multiple staff members — the literacy director, other senior staff, site coordinators — were able to conduct observations. A team leader could be observed by any staff member and know that he or she was being judged by a single set of criteria. Likewise, CORAL staff could feel confident in comparing observations across sites and over time, even if many different individuals were doing the monitoring.

Monitoring Practices

CORAL staff experienced an intensive, improvement-centered approach to their development.

- Watch for patterns in individual and group performance
- Use common evaluation tools, sharing them with those observed
- Track progress and problems
- Respond with coaching

Given their multiple responsibilities, it can be hard for senior staff to find time to visit sites and carefully observe programs. Too often, their understanding of program quality is based on infrequent observations or anecdotes heard in meetings. By establishing a regular monitoring schedule and assigning staff to conduct each observation, CORAL program leaders ensured that senior staff had a full understanding of program quality.

The primary goal of monitoring, however, is not just to understand programming on the ground but to use that knowledge for improvement. By pairing monitoring with effective coaching, program leaders can use the knowledge gained from observations to improve program quality. Coaching provides a crucial second step in the monitoring process. Observations alone, without coaching, can become frustrating for both observers and team leaders. The process becomes tedious for observers if they do not act on their observations, and team leaders may feel as if they are being judged without adequate support. Regular coaching gives observers a chance to provide feedback to team leaders and gives team leaders a one-on-one opportunity for skill-building.

Coaching involves working hands-on with instructors to help them improve and implement new techniques. Unlike training, coaching happens on site and usually one-on-one, but it can take many forms. It generally begins with the coach providing feedback after an observation, sharing what

By pairing monitoring with effective coaching, programs can use the knowledge gained from observations to improve program quality.

was documented and the strengths and weaknesses that were identified. In most CORAL sites, the observation tool included space to document an action plan. After observers shared their thoughts with team leaders, they identified individual goals together, categorized them as immediate, short-term and long-term, and recorded these goals on the observation tool. An immediate goal for a team leader, for example, might be to write the afternoon's schedule on the board each day, while a long-term goal

could be to set aside time to create a week or month's worth of lesson plans in advance. By recording these goals on an action plan, an observer could measure a team leader's progress during his or her next observations.

Coaching also involves outlining the steps needed to work toward these goals. Coaches might sit down one-on-one with a team leader and share strategies for improvement. They might find instructional books or resources that match the team leader's goals. Often coaches act as models, teaching part of a lesson while the team leader observes. Whatever the approach, it is important that the team leaders receive support designed to address their specific needs so they feel confident in their ability to improve by the next observation.

While the use of a common tool allows many staff to successfully monitor programming, effective coaching requires a special combination of skill, experience and diplomacy. At CORAL sites, the literacy directors — with their experience and training — tended to be best suited for these roles. But to effectively reach all team leaders, some of this responsibility had to be passed on to others. When they had sufficient resources, a few CORAL sites were able to hire literacy coaches — reading specialists and experienced teachers who worked with CORAL a few hours a week to observe and coach team leaders. More frequently, however, site coordinators were expected to monitor and coach at their sites, which was a new task for many. The literacy director's role, then, became a mix of direct monitoring and coaching, as well as implementing a “train the trainer” program to build site coordinators' skills in these areas.

Step 3: Measuring Progress Through Data Collection and Analysis

The purpose of continuous program improvement goes beyond simply informing staff training — it aims to move a program closer to its goals of both program quality and student achievement. It is essential, then, that the continuous improvement cycle include a way to determine how far the program has progressed toward these goals. By collecting data aligned with program goals, staff and directors can analyze their progress and learn which improvement strategies have been successful and which areas need more support.¹⁸ The idea of collecting and analyzing data often sounds overwhelming to after-school staff members who are already busy. Staff members rarely feel they have time to add another responsibility to their days, and the very word “data” may conjure images of complicated databases and statistics. Following are ways to address these hesitations.

Program leaders should choose to collect those types of data that are most useful.

A frequent obstacle to getting staff buy-in around the use of data stems from the idea that “data” must involve standardized test scores or other equally “formal” numbers. Staff members may be reluctant to adopt a data collection practice if they think it will entail tedious data entry or lead to judging outcomes based only on students’ test scores and to the exclusion of achievements in areas such as social skills or character development. In fact, standardized tests scores are just one form of data — they may be informative for some programs, but there are many other types that may be more useful for program improvement.

views *from the* field

PROGRAM EXPANSION VS. PROGRAM QUALITY

“The current investments in professional development are not enough. The press is for more program supply with too little attention to program effectiveness. And when people do get interested in staff development as a road to better services, it usually takes the form of short-term courses and workshops that are far away from the actual work with young people.”

Bob Granger, President, William T. Grant Foundation

“Programs today are struggling mightily with too few resources to meet demand and making impossible choices between improving their services and serving more children. We need to invest adequately in after-school so that programs and communities don’t have to choose between quality and quantity, and so we can ensure quality after-school programming for all children.”

Erika Argersinger, Policy Director, Afterschool Alliance

Program leaders that are just beginning to integrate data collection into their operations can find relatively easy ways to use this information. Something as simple as recording how many staff attend trainings is a step toward understanding potential strengths or weaknesses. Staff who lead the trainings can distribute feedback forms to measure satisfaction with the session and identify other areas in which more training is needed. Documenting activity observations is often the most helpful form of data collection for improving overall program quality. In addition to using each observation to improve an individual instructor's skill, CORAL approaches also attempted to record observation notes in a central location so that staff could examine trends across many instructors and many sites.

Another strategy is to align data collection for program improvement with data collection for funder or grant requirements. Most after-school funding sources require some form of regular reporting or progress measures. Rather than adding internal data collection on top of this, program leaders may want to see if they can use the data they are already collecting — or perhaps make small additions to this process — for program monitoring and improvement. For example, since program staff members are already required to collect daily attendance data, they might also decide to document each child's daily activities by type, resulting in detailed information about how often children participate in academically oriented activities.

Data Pointers

Consider the following tips for manageable and effective use of data:

- Build on the data requirements of funders
- Spread data collection responsibility among many staff
- Hire external research help
- Limit data collected to the amount used in analysis
- Choose to collect information directly related to program improvement

Implementing data collection and analysis systems can be made more successful by assigning tasks to the right staff.

In the case of CORAL, data collection was often added to the responsibilities of literacy directors. As with monitoring, it soon became clear that this was too much for one person to handle successfully, and site coordinators were added to the team of data collectors. By delegating the task of data collection to multiple staff members, program teams were able to collect more data and the data were also more reliable. The greater the number of staff involved, the more likely that errors will be noticed. Including multiple staff in the process also increases understanding of the purpose and potential usefulness of data.

Another option is to hire external researchers to collect data. This is generally more expensive than relying on program staff, but it has notable benefits. External researchers bring objectivity and experience that are generally not found internally. In undertaking data collection and analysis tasks, researchers free staff to focus on immediate issues of program quality and improvement. Additionally, staff may be more motivated by the presence of an outside professional than by an internal data collection system. Many CORAL staff who were observed by P/PV reported preparing and reviewing their lessons many times prior to observations, wanting to be as strong as possible. One city, referring to P/PV's 1-to-5 rating scale, adopted the motto "Strive for Five," illustrating the impact an external observer can have on staff's motivation. But, if it is to be useful, externally collected data must be paired with internally developed responses for program improvement.

Collected data is only as valuable as its analysis.

Once program leaders decide which types of data are most useful to collect and how they will be collected, these data must be analyzed and used to inform programming. Faced with the wide range of data available, some CORAL sites collected more than they could use and did not have the resources to analyze it. They soon realized that data should not be collected for its own sake. Instead, when resources are limited, program teams should focus on collecting smaller amounts of data and analyzing all of it.

Each program team and funder will need to decide individually what type and how much data to collect and analyze. Whatever the approach, data's role in program improvement should not be underestimated. Many program leaders, stretched for time and money, rely on anecdotes from a few staff members or occasional glances into classrooms to stay informed of program quality. While these informal practices are important for staying in touch with staff, they can easily mislead management about a program's successes and needs if they are not accompanied by consistent data collection.

Making It Happen

THE ROLE OF FUNDERS IN PROMOTING PROGRAM QUALITY

How can programs move from understanding the steps in a continuous program improvement cycle to implementing them? Creating this change in an organization requires real commitments of energy and time by program staff — and of targeted investments by program funders.

Committing to a Culture of Program Improvement

Implementing a system of continuous program improvement requires, first, a commitment from program staff at all levels to work toward building a better program. It is not enough to want to help children succeed or to love working with children; staff need to commit, day in and day out, to taking the steps necessary to create higher-quality activities.

The challenge in making this culture shift was illustrated by the comments of one CORAL site coordinator: “One of the biggest challenges we’re facing is the expectations of the team leaders,” he noted. “They are expected to do a lot and have lots of training... For those team leaders that just want to work with kids and have fun, this much structure is not for them.”

As this site coordinator suggests, creating a culture dedicated to program improvement may require a shift in how staff think about their jobs. It could involve, for example, an expansion of some staff’s responsibilities or increased teamwork across an organization. Senior staff will need to

Ultimately everyone must be committed to providing children with higher-quality programs — and to undertaking the effort associated with improving quality.

hold frequent trainings, and attending these trainings should be included in staff job descriptions. Senior staff must schedule time to regularly observe activities, and instructors must be open to feedback. At first, staff may resist adding new responsibilities to their busy schedules, or team leaders may be reluctant to hear the constructive criticism essential to program improvement.

Ultimately, however, everyone must be committed to providing children with higher-quality programs and must be willing to undertake the effort associated with improving quality. By the second year of implementing balanced literacy at CORAL, in fact, team leaders were eager for more support and more feedback. Many were so committed to improving that they reported wanting to spend even more time being observed, coached and trained.

Key Investments in Program Improvement

This type of commitment from staff at all levels is the first step toward program improvement, but, by itself, it is not enough. Successful program improvement also demands an investment of financial resources. There are a variety of reasons that after-school programs don’t spend sufficient time on program improvement, but one of the most common is that they lack the resources — for

materials, additional staff, consultants — to do so. If policymakers, funders and program directors hope for academic outcomes from after-school activities, they must make program quality a priority that is reflected in budgets and funding.

As revealed through the experience of CORAL and other programs, it is not sufficient to simply increase funding for trainings or workshops. Even if funds are greatly increased, expanding the number of traditional trainings is unlikely to lead to better programs or academic outcomes for children. One CORAL staff member, for example, was frustrated by training after training on the same topic and complained, “If I have to go to another lesson-planning training, I’m going to crack!”

Increasing training funds without increasing training effectiveness will not improve quality.

Increasing training funds without increasing training effectiveness will not improve quality. On the other hand, targeted investments in each piece of a comprehensive program improvement system may lead to higher quality and generate a program’s desired outcomes. A wide array of investments can lead to an institutional commitment to program improvement, but the few key investments that emerged from CORAL are as follows:

1. Create at least one senior staff position dedicated to improving the quality of academic programming. This investment, above all else, may be the key to program improvement.

When program improvement is one more task added to the responsibility of an executive director or operations manager, it often gets overlooked as day-to-day needs take precedence.

One executive director explained simply how he splits tasks with the literacy director: “I don’t get to the sites day to day. That’s [the literacy director’s] job. If I did that, I couldn’t get to sustainability or to my policy work.”

When programs have a goal of improving academic outcomes and include an academic component in their offerings, it is essential that they have someone on staff who is trained and experienced in that field. This individual should be sufficiently dedicated to the task of implementing and maintaining the comprehensive program improvement system. An experienced educator or trainer position may be relatively expensive for after-school programs to maintain, but the value of a staff person who can hit the ground running and improve programming cannot be underestimated. In the case of CORAL, the programs spent an average of \$42,300 per literacy director, each of whom supervised an average of 3.5 sites or 600 youth.¹⁹

These positions proved to be a crucial factor in programs’ early successes or struggles.²⁰

“Without that literacy director, we were going in the wrong direction in terms of what our key people needed,” one CORAL executive director explained. “Our site coordinators were running a model and a program that we asked, but it was nowhere near as effective as with the literacy director.”

2. Budget the staff time necessary for regular training and monitoring. A frequent complaint in the after-school field is that not enough time is allotted for staff training. Most staff, particularly the classroom instructors or team leaders who work most closely with the children, are

part-time employees who are paid hourly for time spent in the classroom. A commitment to program improvement, however, requires significant time spent outside of the classroom in trainings, coaching sessions, lesson planning and meetings.

A commitment to program improvement requires significant time spent outside of the classroom.

Some of the CORAL sites found creative ways to fit these training and coaching sessions into the day, such as combining two groups of youth so that one of their instructors could meet with coaches. Ultimately, though, implementing these practices too often during programming time can diminish the quality of programming itself, and staff will need to attend trainings outside of regular program hours.

Paying staff for this time must be built into program budgets. In 2005–2006, CORAL staff each spent an average of 76 hours in training. Paying staff at their normal hourly rates for this time added approximately \$830 to the cost of each team leader position and \$1,484 to the cost of each site coordinator position. Weekly activity observations, another key element of program improvement, cost the CORAL cities about \$1,437 annually for each site coordinator’s time. If not specifically budgeted and scheduled, this time easily could have been consumed by the site coordinators’ many other responsibilities.

3. Develop the tools and technology for effective data collection. Providing staff with the right support for data collection, such as easy-to-use computer systems or brief but effective surveys and observation forms, can reduce much anxiety about the time or frustration of using data. The early process of developing these tools — whether by staff themselves, by working with a consultant or by hiring a computer programmer — may require a significant investment of time and money. Introducing these tools also involves training staff to help them understand the tools’ purpose and use, ensuring that everyone is committed to the importance of data and prepared to collect it in the same way. These upfront investments are worth the results: Better tools make it easier to collect data, understand program needs and respond in ways that allow the program to progress toward strong outcomes.

4. Invest in external technical assistance or consultants at key junctures. No matter how skilled or experienced CORAL literacy directors and senior staff were, on their own they weren’t able to implement all the necessary professional development practices in a way that could lead to quick program improvement. In the most successful cases, the directors relied on consultants or technical assistance providers at important moments for advice or support. This was especially important at program start-up, as multiple systems and practices were being developed at once. Within a short period of time, for example, senior staff needed to choose a balanced literacy curriculum, find and purchase needed materials, and train the other staff on this new approach, all while fulfilling their ongoing daily responsibilities. Ultimately the decisions were made by program staff, but consultants facilitated the process by giving advice about various curricula and training options.

During and after start-up, many sites found it useful to receive trainings from outside experts, but even more so when these experts helped them develop internal training systems that would lead to ongoing, long-term program improvement. One CORAL city, for example, decided to restructure its training format and hired experienced local teachers to consult on the process (at an annual cost of \$22,000, which also included assistance with trainings and observations). The result was the creation of a strong, individualized training model that allowed the city to improve programming at all levels throughout the year — a vastly better arrangement than the previous training structure employed.

Consultants can also play a key role in developing data collection systems. The CORAL programs, for example, worked with P/PV researchers and technical assistance providers to develop observation tools. The program teams had multiple discussions and went through multiple revisions before finding the most useful system, but in the end they developed tools that trained staff could use with ease. P/PV also developed, in conjunction with the programs, a computerized attendance collection and tracking system that required unique technical skills that most after-school programs do not possess in-house. Developing this system and training staff on its use initially cost between \$20,000 and \$25,000 per city, resulting in a lasting system with minimal future expenses.

In each of these examples, by investing in consultants at important junctures, the programs created structures and practices that will continue to serve them long after the consultants' contracts end.

By investing in consultants at important junctures, the programs created structures and practices that will continue to serve them long after the consultants' contracts end.

5. Support all components of the program improvement cycle. These components work best in tandem. When funds are limited, it is tempting to focus on one aspect of professional development and hope that effort will lead to program improvement. But the practices outlined here are least successful when applied in isolation. The benefit of a program improvement cycle that uses all available components is that each item provides different information about the program and feeds into the success of others. For example, the process of monitoring illustrates staff strengths and weaknesses, allowing trainers to develop more targeted approaches for the future. With successful monitoring, trainings become more effective. Likewise, data collection and analysis reveal progress toward program goals and provide the opportunity for adjustment in training and coaching if goals in these areas are not being met. Rather than committing funds to training strategies that may or may not work, a continuous improvement cycle includes checks to make sure that all strategies are effective — and to change course if they're not.

The Overall Cost of Program Improvement

The CORAL experience illustrated that these five strategies were key to the implementation of a successful continuous improvement cycle and, ultimately, to the creation of higher-quality programs. The experience also revealed that these practices, when combined as a system, do not have to significantly increase the cost of programming. For example, the addition of literacy directors represented between 3 and 7 percent of the cities' total CORAL budgets. Paying staff to attend trainings increased team leader salaries by an average of 11 percent and site coordinator salaries by about 4 percent.²¹ Table 2 summarizes the average costs reported by the CORAL cities on some of these program improvement practices. These investments were relatively small compared to programs' overall budgets but were critical in supporting quality improvements — mirroring findings from the early childhood education field indicating that higher-quality programs cost more, but not significantly more, than lower-quality programs.²²

Table 2. Average CORAL Costs of Select Program Improvement Elements

	Average Expense for CORAL Cities	Annual Cost per Child	Percent of Total Budget
Literacy director(s)	\$84,577	\$71	5%
Staff training time	\$44,740	\$38	3%
Other training costs (registrations, materials)	\$11,855	\$10	1%
Activity observations by site coordinators	\$9,151	\$8	1%
Attendance system development and training	\$22,250	\$20	1%
Data collection and data entry staff	\$34,798	\$29	2%

Note: The types of investments and costs will vary depending on a program's size, goals and other factors. The literacy director expense, for example, varies based on the number of children served and number of directors hired. (In some cities, more than one director was hired.) The cost presented here is the average total expense of the position(s) across multiple staff hired within each city.

As a large-scale initiative, CORAL was able to spread the costs of program improvement across multiple sites and many children. The capacity to offer a training to 40 team leaders rather than 10, for example, leads to a much lower per-staff training cost. Similarly, the expense of hiring and supporting a literacy director spread across 600 participants rather than 100 results in a much lower per-child cost. On the other hand, as programs expand, at some point additional investments are necessary. Programs should be careful not to try to spread these investments over too large a scale. One CORAL city, for example, initially had too few literacy directors for the number of sites. There, a director noted, “It’s hard for the two of us to get to 12 sites. That’s like 80 team leaders [for the two of us to support].” This program eventually hired additional literacy directors, increasing the per-child cost but also improving program quality.

For an initiative the size of CORAL, an investment in key program improvement practices represented a relatively small percentage of the overall budget, and CORAL had the flexibility and funder support to make these investments. This is rarely the case. Many after-school program teams do not enjoy even a small leeway in budgeting. In such cases, program leaders may consider creating partnerships with other local organizations to share expenses such as training or program monitoring. As the importance of program improvement practices gains increasing recognition, local and regional networks of providers and trainers are forming. These networks represent an important resource for programs small and large. Relationships with partner schools and districts can be another important resource. Even as a larger-scale initiative, CORAL drew on these partnerships, for example, in hiring school-day teachers for a few hours of observations or training each week. Relationships of this type may prove even more crucial for smaller programs.

views
from the
field

EFFECTIVE INVESTMENTS IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“Funders and policymakers should direct resources specifically to professional development and networking. There should be rigorous evaluation of such set-asides to gauge their impact on program outcomes. If funders and policymakers are expecting particular results connected to professional development, they should explain this in RFPs, and provide training for grantees on how to measure progress against those outcomes.”

Ron Fairchild, Executive Director, Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University

“Some states coordinate dollars across funding streams to support broad-based expanded learning opportunity (ELO) quality efforts at the state level. As a case in point, Missouri uses quality dollars from [the two largest federal funding sources for after-school] to support the Missouri Afterschool Resource Center, which provides technical assistance, support services and training to after-school programs in the state. By taking a systemic approach, states can make dollars invested in ELO quality go further.”

Daniel Princiotta, Senior Policy Analyst, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices

It is unlikely that these strategies alone will prove sufficient for real program improvement if not paired with targeted funding. Public and private funds for after-school programs have never been greater than in recent years, but these funding streams rarely earmark money for professional development. In fact, many sources limit the amount of funds that can be directed to overhead. California, for example, recently made a five-fold increase in after-school funding but limits programs to using just 15 percent of their \$7.50 per child grants for administrative expenses, including training, consultants and senior staff.²³ The low per-child amounts generally allocated to after-school programs and the even smaller amounts available for overhead leave programs little flexibility to implement the type of program improvement practices suggested here. This gap — between the increasing availability of general after-school funds and the lack of specific professional development funds — represents a significant opportunity for policymakers and private funders to step in with targeted support.

Conclusion

Implementing an effective program improvement cycle can be a daunting undertaking for any after-school program. After two years of working with P/PV researchers and technical assistance, the CORAL programs implemented many elements of this cycle. But even with extensive support, they are still learning how best to develop staff and improve programming. Yet in this early stage, the payoffs have been significant: The quality and consistency of literacy activities increased dramatically after just one year of implementing these strategies.

Including academics in the after-school hours is a new role for many programs. If programs are expected to add academic activities to their offerings, they must be provided with the tools to succeed. Continuous program improvement is demanding, but it is an essential process in implementing high-quality academic activities. Currently, most after-school programs meet with children for relatively short periods of time, do not have a history of supporting academics, and thus are not in a position to achieve the academic outcomes that are increasingly expected of them.²⁴ To make the transition into this new, academically intensive role, programs require commitment to new goals, the right staff, adequate time and effective training. They also require an investment of the resources and funding necessary to produce positive outcomes.

Appendix

FURTHER RESOURCES FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

This report outlines a comprehensive cycle of continuous program improvement. After-school program staff interested in implementing such a system should begin by applying the lessons presented in *After-School Toolkit: Tips, Techniques and Templates for Improving Program Quality*: Determine your program's goals; hire or partner with an experienced educator to lead improvement; and map out a process of training, monitoring and data analysis linked to program goals.

The following publications and websites may also prove useful for practitioners interested in program improvement:

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (www.niost.org)

Several organizations and reports assemble information about existing professional development best practices and opportunities. The National Institute on Out-of-School Time is one of the best known, acting as a clearinghouse for new findings on the OST workforce, publishing research and tools for programs, and offering trainings for staff at various levels.

The Forum for Youth Investment (www.forumfyi.org)

The Forum offers research, publications and training on a wide range of topics, including extensive attention to out-of-school time. The Forum has recently published two reports that address program quality. *Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools* (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom 2007) summarizes and compares current tools for assessing program quality. *Building Quality Improvement Systems: Lessons From Three Emerging Efforts in the Youth-Serving Sector* (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Pittman 2007) considers how quality can be maintained as program size increases.

Two other recent publications include lists of resources that may be useful for after-school program leaders concerned about improving program quality and professional development. *Youth Program Quality: Key Resources From the Forum and the Field* (2005) highlights reports, articles and assessment tools that discuss the importance of program quality, ways to assess it and principles for improving and sustaining quality. *Promoting Quality Through Professional Development: A Framework for Evaluation* (Bouffard, Little 2004) addresses the question of how to measure the effectiveness of professional development efforts and includes a selected list of applicable resources.

Public/Private Ventures (www.ppv.org)

P/PV has conducted a wealth of research on best practices in after-school programs. *Getting It Right: Strategies for After-School Success* (Raley, Grossman, Walker 2005) compiles the findings from several recent P/PV evaluations, including a chapter on lessons in developing strong management. Practitioners interested in learning more about the important role that data analysis can play in quality monitoring and improvement should read *Good Stories Aren't Enough: Becoming Outcomes-Driven in Workforce Development* (Miles 2006). Though based on experiences with workforce development organizations, the report describes many practices that may also inform the after-school field.

Endnotes

- ¹“Balanced literacy” is a research-based instructional approach that seeks to increase reading comprehension and fluency skills by exposing children to “read alouds” (which allow them to hear fluent reading modeled) and by having them practice writing, discuss books and the vocabulary in books, practice phonetics and word attack skills, and spend time reading self-selected books at an independent level at which they can read fluently with high comprehension.
- ² U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, 2003. Spielberger and Halpern, 2002.
- ³ Granger et al., 2007.
- ⁴ Halpern, 2005.
- ⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, 2003. Spielberger and Halpern, 2002. Hollister, 2003. Britsch et al., 2005.
- ⁶ Walker and Arbreton, 2004. A recent meta-analysis of research found that programs with evidence-based skills curricula may impact academic achievement, but that well-run academic components were the primary predictor of gains (Durlak and Weissberg, 2007).
- ⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, 2003. Halpern and Spielberger, 2002.
- ⁸ Dorn et al., 1998.
- ⁹ In evaluating the CORAL initiative, researchers used definitions of quality that apply in any type of youth programming, such as evidence of staff organization and planning, positive and constructive feedback to youth, clear activity instructions, effective and positive behavior management strategies and connections between the material and youth’s interests. Researchers also looked for high-quality practices specific to CORAL’s reading goal, such as providing an engaging read aloud, working individually with children during independent reading and leading inclusive discussions about books. Researchers rated each activity on a scale of one to five along multiple dimensions and used the ratings from across the year to create average measures of quality.
- ¹⁰ Researchers administered Individual Reading Assessments to a sample of youth at the beginning and end of each school year. Average IRI gains in 2004–2005 were 0.31 for all youth in the sample. In 2005–2006, the average gains were 0.44.
- ¹¹ Dennehy and Noam, 2005. *Understanding the Afterschool Workforce: Opportunities and Challenges for an Emerging Profession*, 2006.
- ¹² Blau, 1997. Clarke-Stewart et al., 2002. DuBois et al., 2002.
- ¹³ Halpern, 2005. Spielberger and Halpern, 2002.
- ¹⁴ It is impossible to generalize from this research about how many youth or sites can be successfully managed by one literacy director. Future research over a larger number of after-school organizations is necessary to determine a literacy director’s ideal capacity.
- ¹⁵ Ryan et al., 2002. Arbreton et al., 2005.
- ¹⁶ Blau, 1997. Clarke-Stewart et al., 2002.
- ¹⁷ Buher-Kane et al., 2006.
- ¹⁸ A recent P/PV publication, *Good Stories Aren’t Enough*, addresses many of the issues discussed in this section, including the importance of and strategies for data collection and analysis. Though *Good Stories Aren’t Enough* is based on the workforce development field, many of the conclusions parallel those presented here and are informative for after-school practitioners.

¹⁹ The CORAL cost data reported here are based on a one-time cost survey completed by four cities (Fresno, Long Beach, Sacramento and San Jose) in which programs described their budgets, staff salaries and funding sources. The numbers include in-kind donations of books, snacks and staff. (In two cities, some of the team leader positions were funded by partner organizations.)

²⁰ Arbreton et al., 2007.

²¹ Since site coordinators worked more hours per week than team leaders, training time represents a smaller percentage of their overall time and salary. For the purposes of these calculations, it was assumed that team leaders and site coordinators attended the same number of hours of training. Many site coordinators did participate in additional skill-building activities, such as meetings and workshops that are not included in these training numbers.

²² Grossman et al., 2007.

²³ California Public Law Chapter 380, 2006.

²⁴ Kane, 2004. Halpern, 2005. Piha, Sam 2007.

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