



## Twenty-first Century Community Learning Centers Program Evaluation Capacity

ActKnowledge is a university-based, woman-owned social enterprise that works with community organizations, not-for-profits, and foundations through all stages of the evaluation process to demonstrate their outcomes and build their capacity to undertake and make use of their own evaluation research. We view evaluation as an opportunity to learn together with our partners about what works and how to make mid-course improvements.

ActKnowledge works with many programs that have youth development and education enrichment goals, including several 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center grantees in New York City. We work with your program to develop a research plan that addresses state-mandated evaluation requirements. A recognized leader in the Theory of Change approach to evaluation, ActKnowledge begins evaluations by helping organizations articulate their “theory” of what impacts and outcomes they expect their work to have. The resulting, program-specific Theory of Change establishes targets against which to evaluate actual program accomplishments. In a field in which more traditionally scientific methodologies are often too difficult and expensive to apply, theory-based evaluation provides a rigorous and cost-effective alternative. Theory-based evaluation is especially relevant to youth and education programs, which are increasingly expected to demonstrate program results.

We apply a variety of research methods triangulated to produce the soundest data and findings about developmental and educational outcomes. Additionally, our evaluations address questions of program implementation by engaging program staff and participants to understand the context and constraints under which the program operates.

Specifically, we can work with you to accomplish the following:

### ***Develop a theory of change framework.***

A theory of change framework graphically models the causal relationships between activities and results. It maps backwards from long-term outcomes to more specific and short-term outcomes. This framework will be the basis of subsequent evaluation activities; ActKnowledge will help you to decide which of your program goals and (if in New York) New York State performance indicators should be included in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century evaluation and when each should be measured.

### ***Create or adapt research tools.***

ActKnowledge has developed youth survey instruments that measure youth developmental and educational outcomes, and we can adapt these to your specific program. We can also work with you to refine program surveys that you have developed to be sure that they capture outcomes for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers, or we may help you to identify standardized assessment tools that would be appropriate to use.

### ***Gather academic data.***

For NYC projects we frequently use data from the New York City Department of Education as indicators of academic outcomes for youth. These data include state and city test scores, school attendance, and student demographic information, which may be tracked over time to monitor progress and benchmarks.

***☞ Provide information for the Annual Performance Report (APR).***

ActKnowledge has expertise in advanced statistical analysis and has the capacity to create and maintain a database that tracks individual student data. As needed, we share student data with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center programs in order to support them in completing the APR.

***☞ Include staff, students, and families.***

Staff, students, and families may be involved in program evaluation in a number of ways, all of which can help programs to better learn about how they work. One way is through focus groups, which gather information about what program participants and stakeholders believe to be important outcomes and the activities that help to achieve those outcomes. Staff and youth may also be directly involved in designing and carrying out evaluation research, for example by conducting surveys or focus groups. We work with programs to make decisions about whom to involve and to build needed capacity for this kind of participatory approach.

***☞ Learn about program implementation.***

In order to understand how and why programs are achieving outcomes for youth, it is also important to know how, and how well, programs are being implemented. The New York State After School Network (NYSAN) Quality Self-Assessment Tool required for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers is one measure of program implementation. As with youth outcome measurement instruments, we can help you to select or adapt the right tools to measure program implementation, and to understand what they tell you about outcomes for your program.

***☞ Make recommendations for continuous improvement.***

An overarching outcome of our work is helping program providers to learn about and improve their work. Therefore, we share what we have learned directly with program stakeholders in the context of program planning. We also provide written reports that make recommendations and connect findings to each program's outcomes and theory of change for youth and families.

## **Contact Us**

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