Summary of Independent Evaluation

Interfaith Action’s Culturally Based, Community-Connected Youth Development Programs

Evaluators

- Michael Quinn Patton, Founder and Director, Utilization-Focused Evaluation
- Nicole Martin Rogers, Senior Research Manager, Wilder Research

Programs Evaluated

- **Project SPIRIT**, an African-American culturally based after-school program with 71 elementary school students (grades K-5) at four St. Paul elementary schools; 99% of students and 90% of staff are African American; all students living at or below 200% of Federal poverty line
- **American Indian Youth Enrichment (AIYE)** program serves up to 100 American Indian students with both after-school and summer programs; all students and staff were American Indian; all students living at or below 200% of Federal poverty line

Methodology

- **Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs** was used as an inquiry framework to examine how the two programs support basic needs, safety and security, social belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization in culturally specific and developmentally appropriate ways.
- **Data collection** included classroom observations; reviews of curriculum; review of student work and staff records on student work; and interviews with students, parents, and staff.
- **An extensive literature review** connects the data collected to the evaluation’s conclusions.

Learning

- **Community Difficulties Become Children’s Difficulties**. What happens in the community filters into the classroom and after-school programs through children. Therefore, the effects of poverty are carried into learning environments.
- **Effectiveness of After-School Programs Should Not Be Measured Based Only on Academic Gains**. First, it is impossible to know what time of day academic gains were achieved. Second, the after-school time slot is not an appropriate time to focus mainly on academic gains.
- **Culture is Protective**. Culturally relevant and specific out-of-school time programming, done correctly, is one of the most protective infusions we can give to children living in poverty. Ample research supports this finding.
- **Culturally Based, Community-Connected Youth Development Programs Should Accomplish Ten Things**
  1. The students should **get fed**
  2. The students should **be safe**
  3. The students should **get help**, as needed, **completing their homework**
  4. The students should **get help solving personal problems**
5. The students should feel cared about, valued, and important
6. The students should engage with culturally appropriate and stimulating learning resources and develop a strong connection to their cultural heritage and identity
7. The students should get exposed to positive role models and build positive relationships as part of a culturally specific community
8. The students should develop interpersonal skills
9. The students should develop positive self-esteem grounded in their individual strengths and qualities
10. The students should be encouraged to aspire to live a fulfilling life.

Key Findings & Recommendations
The findings and recommendations include:

- Both Interfaith Action out-of-school time enrichment programs – Project SPIRIT and American Indian Youth Enrichment -- show substantial positive impacts on student participants related to cultural identity and connections. Importantly, these positive impacts are different from those of more traditional after-school programs.

- Evaluators recommend that we re-conceptualize, support, and fund these programs as culturally based, community-connected, youth development programs. “After-school” simply describes when these programs occur. These culturally focused, community-connected, student-centered, and trauma-informed Interfaith Action programs help students with homework and support all dimensions of healthy youth development, including strong cultural identity, which is positively related to academic outcomes.

New Instrument

- The Old Approach of Assessing After-School Programs Based Solely on Academic or Literacy Gains Was Misguided. Typical standardized evaluations do not take into account the role of culture in learning, yet extensive research now documents the importance of culturally appropriate learning environments and the role that a strong cultural identity plays in academic and social outcomes. With this evaluation, the researchers have developed a more meaningful, culturally responsive approach to evaluate culturally based community-connected out-of-school time educational programs.

- The Evaluators Developed A New, Powerful Instrument for Assessing Culturally Based Community-Connected Youth Development Programs The appropriate tools to evaluate these programs must be much more complex than traditional standardized tests. We now have a robust model for assessment.

Interfaith’s Takeaways

- The new instrument is a powerful tool for assessing culturally based community-connected youth development programs. The appropriate tools to evaluate these programs must be much more complex than traditional standardized tests. We now have a robust model for assessment.

- American Indian Youth Enrichment and Project SPIRIT both achieve all of the key competencies required of culturally based community-connected youth development programs. The evaluators concluded that American Indian Youth Enrichment and Project SPIRIT both meet all of the needs articulated in Maslow’s Hierarchy as interpreted in the new evaluation instrument.