

Youth Researchers Assess 21st Century Afterschool Program Quality



The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at the Wellesley Centers for Women, in partnership with Health Resources in Action, a leader in youth development and healthy living, recently launched an exciting state-wide pilot project designed to engage middle and high school students in assessing the quality of their own afterschool programs using a *youth participatory research approach*. This project is funded by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) Program.

What Is the Youth Participatory Research?

Youth participatory research is an approach whereby adults partner with youth to answer important research questions of relevance to youths' lives. Youth participatory research has been found to benefit youth (*and program staff*) in a myriad of ways, including:

- Enhanced personal development (leadership, and a sense of empowerment)
- Development of concrete research skills—such how to observe, conduct interviews, analyze data, practice active listening, and

participate in collaborative conversations.

- More collaborative relationships between staff and youth leading to a deeper understanding of youth perspectives by staff
- Greater engagement and ownership in the program

Why use a Youth Participatory Research approach to measure afterschool program quality?

Since 2003, administrators and staff of MA DESE 21st CCLC afterschool programs have used measurement tools developed by NIOST researchers, Wendy Surr, M.A. and Beth Miller, Ph.D., to examine program quality and youth outcomes. In the past few years, MA DESE has increased funding for afterschool programs serving teens. One of the most important features of a quality teen program is its ability to build youth leadership skills and fully engage youth in shaping their own program experiences. Rather than having staff be the only ones assessing the teen program quality, Surr launched this project to explore ways that youth could play a key role in the quality assessment process.

About the Youth Participatory Research Project

21st CCLC afterschool programs representing seven school districts from across the entire state have created Youth Researcher teams at their sites. This past January, staff and administrators from each site received a full-day training in quality assessment, research methods, and how to promote leadership skills in youth. Youth representatives from each of the seven sites then traveled to attend a Youth Research training session where they focused on building their leadership skills and received explicit instruction in research approaches and data collection methods—such as conducting observations, interviews, focus groups, and administering surveys and polls. Throughout the spring, each Youth Researcher Team will follow six research steps as they execute their project. Each group will begin with devising their main research question, and will be required to develop a “Project Plan.” This initial project planning will be followed by preparing for data collection, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting their data, and using their results for positive action, and will culminate with the opportunity to present their research and share their experiences to a state-wide audience of other youth and staff participating in the project from around the state.

—Wendy Surr, M.A.,
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