

## **Internal Spread Implementation Executive Summary YMCA-Harvard Food and Fitness Project**

This report discusses the implementation of YMCA Learning Collaboratives (YLC) in the four YMCA associations that participated in the YMCA/Harvard Afterschool Evaluation. Within each association, 3-5 afterschool sites were evaluated on uptake and impact of the YLC through the internal spread process. A similar number of comparison sites within each association continued programming as usual. This report summarizes organizational data that have been collected through environmental self-assessments, interviews, and snack menus. Our objective is to characterize each association's experience spreading the YLC to afterschool programming and to identify key elements for successful implementation of the model. Understanding how the YLC unfolded at each association is essential if we wish to identify the driving forces behind changes in program practice.

Four unique experiences with childcare internal spread emerged among the evaluation associations. Briefly, some of the YMCAs studied implemented the YLC with fidelity to the model laid out by YUSA—these associations held Learning Sessions that were accessible to childcare personnel, ensured further learning with structured supports and session for new staff learning, and were able to push the work deeper within their associations with a second round of internal spread. One YMCA engaged in consistent experimentation throughout and added extra supports (newsletters) and accountability (site observations) in year 2.

Conversely, in another YMCA studied, childcare staff had little involvement in formal Learning Sessions or other structured meetings. Restructuring of childcare and large turnover of leadership meant little attention was focused on integrating afterschools into the YLC. Finally, a fourth YMCA studied reported a great struggle and little progress with including childcare as part of the internal spread process in their organization. Although site directors sometimes attended learning session in the first year, there were no mechanisms for teaching new site staff the content of the intervention and experimentation was not introduced to afterschool programming until a January 2008 childcare booster rally.

### **Findings**

Despite differential implementation, YLC implementation appeared to have a positive effect on program practice changes—that is, we saw more improvements in intervention sites versus comparison overall. This improvement difference was more pronounced for the amount of progress made, whereas there was little difference in actual attainment of environmental standards between intervention and comparison sites.

- Using a scoring system devised for our project, sites reported environmental change scores ranging from -3 to 34 over the first 6 months of the intervention. At least two intervention sites from each association had change scores of 20 or more. Of the 12 sites with many improvements (20+)—9 were intervention sites. Four of 6 sites with few or negative changes were comparison sites.
- Scores ranged from -2 to 30 for change between spring 2007 and spring 2008. Only 7 sites achieved change scores of 20 or more. Six of these high performers were intervention sites. Nearly half of the sites made little to no improvements. Sites may have decreased their efforts during year 2, or high performing sites may have been working to maintain the gains they made in year 1. Physical activity improvements far outweighed changes in nutrition and the supportive environment in year 2.

- However, sites involved in the YLC did not fully reach the environmental standards at higher rates than controls over 2 years.

YLC involvement was just one factor in progress towards environmental change. Therefore, we consider the YLC process in isolation here and identify elements that seem to promote successful implementation of the process itself.

### ***Strength and Commitment of Management***

Management structure appears to be an important element for fidelity to the internal spread learning collaborative model. Associations that have clearly assigned oversight to an individual or team that is accountable for their work have moved the process forward with more ease. Leaders with an articulated mission to integrate childcare into internal spread from the start implemented the collaboratives with more fidelity to design than others.

### ***Childcare Staff Accommodation and Recognition***

The consideration of childcare staff needs and availability for Learning Sessions was one clear difference between associations that were most successful at involving childcare in internal spread and those that were not. Because childcare staff are needed for daily before and after school programming, a traditional 9-5 workday retreat does not accommodate childcare staff. Involving childcare site staff members is a marker of how these employees are valued in the process for change in their association.

### ***Childcare Spread Supports***

Formal structures to support childcare staff and programs during internal spread have emerged as perhaps the most important component for fidelity to the internal spread learning collaborative model. These supports include reviewing and teaching concepts after Learning Sessions, regular opportunities for coaching and sharing during Action Periods, and continual monitoring of progress.

### ***Areas for future study and consideration***

Staff characteristics such as buy in, attitudes, and relationships with the school and community were cited by liaisons and site directors at all four associations as mechanisms that impacted the uptake of the YLC. Resources such as sufficient budgets and adequate space for physical activity and healthy eating were also noted by staff at different levels. Those interviewed indicated that a positive organizational structure and cultural context with focused program priorities, supportive job responsibilities, and minimal bureaucracy would encourage environmental improvements.

### **Conclusion**

**Sites involved in YMCA Learning Collaboratives produced more program practice changes than comparison sites over the course of 2 years.** However, the YLC can unfold in radically different ways that have deep impact on its ultimate utility in local settings. Also, important externalities can weaken the connection between YLC and the program practice change it is intended to accelerate, or commendable program practice changes can occur in settings where the YLC process is not implemented with fidelity to design. We believe there is program improvement potential in the YLC process, although further work is needed to identify when and where the approach is most appropriate. Associations should consider the organizational strategies and recommendations outlined in this report to support collaboratives that lead to successful nutrition and physical activity program change within afterschool settings.