
Beacon Community School Expansion

Final Report Executive Summary



In the summer of 2019, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) was hired by the Department of Children Youth and Families (DCYF) in San Francisco to conduct an implementation and outcomes evaluation of the expansion of the Beacon Community School model. The evaluation was significantly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) schools from March 16, 2020, until April 10, 2021, and restricted SPR's in-person access to schools and programs for the entirety of the study period. In consultation with DCYF staff, the evaluation design evolved to become developmental and responsive, rather than outcomes oriented.

This Final Report draws on qualitative and quantitative data over a five-year period (2018-2023), including surveys, over 200 in-depth interviews, and data on program enrollment, attendance, and participant characteristics.

Beacon Expansion and the Beacon Ecosystem

The San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI) was launched in 1994, in partnership with SFUSD and the City of San Francisco. The [Beacon Program Model](#) aims to promote the development of community schools that provide comprehensive supports to children and families during the school day, after school, and in the summer.

In the spring of 2016, DCYF, SFBI and SFUSD went through a comprehensive planning and community engagement process, with the goal of expanding the program to bring about more equitable outcomes for the highest-need students in San Francisco. The collaborative process led to an ambitious plan for rapid expansion, from 9 to 27 schools. As core system partners, DCYF and SFUSD provide funding, coordination and professional development, while SFBI acts as the primary technical assistance provider for Beacon Programs.

Beacon Programs are located at 11 elementary schools, three K-8 schools, and 13 middle schools, and are operated by 13 Lead Agencies. Each Beacon Program is led by a full-time Beacon Director, who is responsible for managing budgets, fundraising, program development, staff supervision, and engaging partners. In School Year (SY) 22-23, staffing levels varied significantly across Beacon Programs, ranging from a low of one full-time staff member to a high of 15 full-time staff members, as well as varying levels of part-time staff. K-8 schools and middle schools generally had a higher number of staff compared to elementary schools, corresponding to the higher number of students that they serve.

Most programs and schools reported higher than average turnover and difficulty recruiting and retaining staff in SY21-22 and SY22-23, though staff shortages slowly improved in SY22-23. Respondents indicated that low pay makes it challenging to recruit staff with the right skill sets and that Beacon staff leave for jobs that offer more pay and opportunities for advancement. Programs have taken a multi-prong approach to addressing hiring and retention challenges. In

addition to using word-of-mouth recruitment strategies, they have worked on creating an inclusive team environment by holding staff appreciation events and expanding professional development. Starting in SY21-22, programs shifted towards having more full-time and fewer part-time staff, which supports the increased focus on providing school day services.

Despite challenges with recruitment and retention, school staff stressed the quality of Beacon staff, saying that their racial and linguistic diversity, youthfulness, and knowledge of San Francisco neighborhoods help them to connect with and support youth in ways that are distinct from school staff. In keeping with this feedback, 2023 survey results show that almost all programs (92%) have staff that speak Spanish, over a fifth (21%) have staff who speak Chinese (Cantonese or Mandarin), and programs also have staff that speak Tagalog, Arabic, and Samoan. At the time of our 2020 survey, 85% of Beacon staff members identified as BIPOC and 68% lived in San Francisco.

Community-based partners play an important role in ensuring Beacon Programs are able to provide robust services to meet the needs of students and their families. In SY22-23, most programs had at least one partner that provides enrichment programming (91%) and academic support (89%). Moreover, the percentage of programs partnering with mental and behavioral health providers nearly doubled from 44% in SY19-20 to 83% in SY22-23, likely in response to the increased behavioral health needs of students and families associated with the pandemic. Overall, survey respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their partnerships.

Beacon Participants

Annual enrollment in Beacon programming hovered around 7,000 students in both Fiscal Year (FY) 18-19 and FY21-22. In FY21-22, 5,841 students received services during the school year and 2,764 attended summer 2021 programs.¹ Below are some key findings about Beacon participants:

- The majority of FY21-22 Beacon participants identified as Hispanic/Latino or Asian.
- Slightly more males than females participated in Beacon activities tracked in CMS, DCYF’s client management system.
- Close to one-third of Beacon participants were English Learners (ELs).
- In both FY18-19 and FY21-22, close to half of students in Beacon Schools had attendance records in CMS.
- Students in grades 1-6 were the most likely to participate in Beacon programming.

¹ This does not include students who attended services that were entered as “events” in Cityspan (SFUSD’s data management system) or students who received direct services that were not tracked in CMS. Most programs did not track all direct services they provided into CMS; therefore, the data presented is not inclusive of all participating students. Specifically, the tracking and recording of school day activities and family services differs across sites, and sometimes, across years within the same site. Programs consistently tracked expanded learning programs, while behavioral health services were the least likely to be tracked in CMS.

- African American students were the most likely to participate in Beacon programming, followed by Hispanic/Latino and Pacific Islander students. White and Filipino students were the least likely to attend Beacon programming.

School Partnerships

Coordination and alignment between Beacon Programs and their school sites is the foundation for the services and supports that they offer to students and families. Beacon Programs coordinate with school leadership through meetings and informal communication between the Beacon Director and school administrators, and through the Beacon Director’s participation in key leadership committees. About 80% of Beacon Programs communicate with the principal or assistant principal at least weekly. Beacon staff also collaborate with teachers, family liaisons, social workers, instructional coaches, and academic liaisons to support specific school activities.

Beacon and school staff identified regular standing meetings between Beacon Programs and school sites as the primary coordinating structure for their partnership. Meetings commonly focus on the vision and goals of the program, logistics around events, and the needs of specific students. These meetings commonly include student support and behavioral wellness meetings and standing one-on-one meetings with principals or assistant principals. Other common meetings include school staff meetings, family engagement committees, grade level meetings, and the school site council. Beacon and school staff from about two-thirds of the school sites highlighted the importance of informal check-ins that occur over text, in the hallways, and when staff stop into each other’s offices. Most Beacon Directors reported that they were satisfied with their level of communication with their school’s leadership and teachers.

School staff from about one-third of sites that were interviewed in fall 2022 identified having shared goals as a key component of their relationship with the Beacon Program. The degree to which Beacon Programs and their host schools collaborate around shared goals and strategies, however, varied. While some Beacon Programs fully participate in discussions around goal setting and planning school-wide strategies, others focus more on embracing the goals set by the school. In other cases, the school and the Beacon Program largely operate as two entities and there are few intentional efforts at aligning higher-level goals or strategies.

There are a variety of factors that facilitate or inhibit strong communication, alignment, and collaboration between Beacon Programs and schools. Partnership facilitators include the flexibility and responsiveness of Beacon Programs, strong relationships between Beacon staff and students, strong personal relationships between school and Beacon staff, co-location of Beacon and school offices, and collaboration between both leadership and line staff. Partnership inhibitors include Beacon and school staff turnover, school staff shortages, scheduling difficulties and competing priorities.

Beacon Services

The Beacon Program Model is comprised of five pillars – (1) school day services, (2) behavioral health and wellness, (3) expanded learning, (4) family engagement, and (5) transition services. Beacon Programs offer a range of activities within each service area that are tailored to the context and needs of each school site. SPR rated pillar development for 25 programs in 2020



and in 2023, pulling from all available data, to understand how program services within each of the pillars developed over time. Key findings include the following:

- **Overall, there was growth in all pillars between 2020 and 2023 except for expanded learning, which was already well developed.** The progress that programs made in the development of services needs to be considered within the context of the pandemic and staffing crises, as these created a significant “head wind” for programs.
- **The pillar that experienced the most growth in services was behavioral health and wellness.** This is consistent with the finding that programs nearly doubled their behavioral health partnerships between 2020 and 2023 and with interviews highlighting the importance of behavioral wellness services for students after the pandemic.
- **School day services saw the second highest level of growth.** Interview respondents consistently spoke about the increased reliance of school staff on Beacon Program support during the school day. Programs also hired more full-time staff, which expanded the number of people who could push into classrooms and support lunchtime activities.
- **Transition services were the least developed pillar in 2020 and remained so in 2023, despite deepening of services.** Although transition services were not the highest priority for programs, Beacon Programs provided substantial transition services but in a way that was more time-limited and periodic than the services in other Beacon pillars.
- **Although strategies for family engagement changed during the pandemic, the overall depth and extensiveness of family engagement services did not change significantly.** Interview respondents said that programs were very successful at supporting families during the shelter-in-place period and providing them with resources, such as food baskets and assistance filing for COVID-19 relief support. They also had success with virtual engagement of families. Once COVID-19 protocols relaxed in SY22-23, programs worked to re-establish in-person events and activities.

While there was progress in the development of pillars, there was tremendous cross-site variation in pillar development based on the size and needs of the school; the Lead Agencies’ strengths, resources, and partnerships; and program staffing and capacity. SPR also documented variations in services by grade level. Elementary and K-8 schools were more likely than middle schools to follow-up with families to support student success during the school day; offer parent workshops; use a social emotional curriculum to engage students; and provide individual tutoring after school. Middle schools, on the other hand, were more likely to provide support for special education classes; offer identity-based affinity groups and leadership opportunities; and provide support groups, individual therapy, and case management.

SPR also found some common challenges related to pillar development. Both Beacon Directors and school staff indicated that Beacon staff were providing academic and behavioral support that was not aligned with their training or experience level. Another common challenge was that programs had difficulty finding partners with culturally responsive and bilingual staff. The stresses of the pandemic also made it harder to reach certain families within certain demographic groups. Finally, some expanded learning programs had challenges with enrollment. Some programs had waiting lists and did not have the staffing to serve all of the

students that wanted to enroll. Others, particularly middle schools, experienced lower enrollment and attendance than they had prior to the pandemic.

Preliminary Outcomes

Given the pandemic and subsequent staffing crises, the expansion to 18 new sites and the Beacon Programs' ability to continue serving children and families with creative programming is a tremendous achievement. Due to the pandemic, the evaluation lacks the quantitative data, program observations, and interviews with students and families needed to present concrete outcomes. The preliminary outcomes documented here can hopefully inform future research and evaluation efforts.

- **School Outcomes.** School staff who were interviewed said that having a Beacon Program at their site helped teachers feel more supported and less burned out, better aligned after school programs with school day instruction, strengthened school staff members' connections with students and families, and improved the school climate.
- **Student Outcomes.** Interview respondents described that the rich array of Beacon services led to improved academic skills, communication and social emotional skills, exposure to new activities and ideas, enhanced peer relationships, a sense of safety and belonging, leadership, connection to caring adults, and improved attendance.
- **Family Outcomes.** Beacon Programs provide families with a safe space for their children to go after school for no or low cost. In addition to this overarching benefit, interview respondents indicated that because of Beacon Programs, families developed stronger connections to their child's school; access to resources, support, and skill development opportunities; and stronger relationships with their children.

Lessons Learned and Considerations

The evaluation yielded the following key lessons learned and strategies for Beacon partners to consider as they seek to strengthen Beacon Programs moving forward.

Lessons Learned on Program Expansion

- It is important for funders to invest in an intermediary organization, like SFBI, to support program expansion and development.
- Although all stakeholders said that the expansion was a success, in the future it would be less stressful for SFBI and Beacon Lead Agencies to scale up the number of programs gradually over the course of several years and to build in more time for planning.
- In addition to expanding services at schools, it is important to prioritize thoughtful planning and systems of support for program expansion, including resources for staffing and recruitment.

Lessons Learned on Program and School Partnerships

- Responsiveness to school requests helps to build and deepen trust.

- Once trust has been developed, there is room for Beacon staff to draw boundaries in order to increase fidelity to the Beacon Program Model.
- Beacon and school partnerships are more resilient to turnover when Beacon staff have built relationships with school staff at multiple levels, particularly with teachers.

Lessons Learned on Program Implementation

- Programs take time and consistent leadership to fully mature and develop.
- By providing vital support to schools, Beacon Programs can make them more resilient during times of great need, such as the pandemic.

Considerations to Strengthen Programs and Services

- Strive to create more clarity and consistency in the set of services offered by Beacon Programs across school sites.
- Promote promising approaches by providing opportunities for Beacon and school staff to observe and talk to staff from strong programs.
- Promote resource and information sharing to support higher quality and more consistent programming across sites.
- Clarify role of the Lead Agency and their oversight of the Beacon Program.

Considerations to Strengthen Partnerships

- Deepen buy-in and understanding of the Beacon Program Model across all SFUSD departments, including departments that oversee school principals.
- Improve processes for systems alignment with DCYF, SFBI, and SFUSD.
- Create more joint opportunities for training and professional development for Beacon and school staff.
- Make sure all programs have access to student data.

Considerations to Improve Data Quality

- Align ExCEL and DCYF quality and reporting requirements to reduce burden on Beacon staff.
- Provide more guidance to programs around how data on attendance and activities should be entered into CMS.

Conclusion

Over the last five years, Beacon Programs have expanded to 18 new schools, deepened their school partnerships, and significantly expanded their school day and behavioral health supports. Having successfully navigated through a period of upheaval and crises, Beacon Programs are well positioned to deepen their impact moving forward.