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## Strengthening After-School Programs by Building a 'Knowledge Neighborhood'

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This post is by [Miranda Yates](#), Assistant Executive Director for Strategy, Evaluation, and Learning at [Good Shepherd Services](#) ([@GoodShepherdNYC](#)).

Today's post is the practitioner perspective on Monday's post: [The Role of After-School Environments in Students' Academic Performance](#).

High quality after-school programs play an important and impactful role in children's learning and development, and research links after-school participation to [the development of social-emotional skills](#) and [improved academic behaviors and performance](#). With [10.2 million children attending after-school programs nationwide](#), these programs are an essential part of many children's learning ecosystems. Both New York state and New York City (NYC) leadership have recently pushed [expansion of after-schools in poor districts as a strategy to address inequities in educational opportunities](#).



According to a 2014 national survey by the Afterschool Alliance, [a large percent of after-school programs are run by community partners](#). One such partner is [Good Shepherd Services](#), a community-based organization with [youth and family development programs strategically located in low-resourced NYC communities](#). Good Shepherd is one of the largest providers of after-schools in the city, serving over 3,000 elementary and middle school students in 23 programs. These programs share a commitment to creating safe, engaging, and inclusive after-school communities. They are rich in developmental opportunities that help youth to identify their talents and cultivate a sense of belonging, skill mastery, and leadership.

To further strengthen our youth development outcomes and community impact, Good Shepherd formed a research-practice partnership with [NYU's Institute of Human Development and Social Change](#) at the [NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development](#) in 2014. From the outset, we hoped to establish a long-term thought partnership based on our shared aspirations for children and families in NYC. Led by [Elise Cappella](#), [Sophia Hwang](#) and [Michael Kieffer](#) from NYU and [myself](#) from Good Shepherd, we called our partnership ACROSS (Advancing Collaborative Research in Out-of-School Settings) and laid out the following 3 goals: produce shared knowledge, strengthen best practices, and build evaluation capacity.

While [research-practice partnerships between academic institutions and large public systems](#) (e.g., school systems) have been the focus of recent efforts to increase research utilization, research-practice partnerships involving community-based organizations also offer exciting possibilities for joining research and action. Our initial project addressed two important and interrelated questions: How can we best support after-school staff in delivering highest quality programs and activities? What are theoretically-grounded and practical ways that we can assess social and emotional learning?

Data collected from 2015-2016 produced useful findings and insights:

- Our work [demonstrated a connection between positive after-school environments \(defined as providing positive social dynamics, responsive instruction, and organized management\) and growth in academic confidence and skills](#).
- Employing tablet technology and peer network analysis techniques previously applied in school settings, we mapped shifts in peer networks across a program year; this shed light on young people's developing experiences of social support and belonging, which are key outcomes for participants across all Good Shepherd's programs.
- We learned about the characteristics, strengths, aspirations, and needs of our youth workers, some of whom are former program

participants.

Over the past three years, our partnership has evolved in promising ways. In alignment with Good Shepherd's program model and our research-practice partnership research interest in social networks, we have come to increasingly experience our partnership less as a two-way bridge and more as a "**knowledge neighborhood**" with **knowledge flowing in multiple directions**. We see ourselves as collaborating in a partnership that connects as many people as possible within our organizations in multiple, creative ways. To this end, our activities include not only a long-term commitment to original research and its dissemination in traditional academic outlets, but also student internships, coauthored tools for policy and practice, ad hoc technical assistance, and access to NYU and Good Shepherd conferences and professional development workshops. In this way, we have truly combined forces to share knowledge, create opportunities for innovation and strengthened practice, and build evaluation capacity--all aimed at addressing structural inequities and bolstering learning opportunities for children living in low-resourced NYC communities.

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