



SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH  
ASSOCIATES

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# San Francisco Youth Focus Groups for the Beacons Young Adolescent Initiative

**Summary of Findings**  
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## Overview

In December 2006, the Youth Development Institute (YDI)/Fund for the City of New York selected the San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI) as a partner for a four-year national project. Funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, the project aimed to increase the participation and engagement of 9-14 year olds in out-of-school programming. Other goals include strengthening the capacity of intermediaries to serve this age group; disseminating learning to the field of youth development; and strengthening local and national policy concerning young adolescents

To support the SFBI in gathering information on ways to increase the participation and engagement of 9-14 year olds in out-of-school programming, SFBI engaged Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to conduct a qualitative youth study. The purpose of this study was to understand three primary questions:

1. Why middle-school aged (ages 9-14) youth do or do not come to the Beacon program?
2. What factors might deepen their engagement?
3. What are youth's recommendations for improvement?

## Study Method

The primary method SPR used to selecting youth participants for the focus groups entailed working with the Beacons program directors to recruit youth who met the following criteria:

### Criteria for Youth Focus Group Participant Selection

- **“Non-participating” Youth Focus Group** included youth who attend the school served, but not participating in any or few after school programs. These youth reflect those identified as "hard-to-reach."
- **“Low-Participating” Youth Focus Group** included youth who attend the Beacon program in last 6 months, but are not regular participants. These youth reflect those identified as "hard-to-reach" and could be further engaged.

SPR's research team of culturally diverse members conducted a total of **16 focus groups** across the eight Beacons sites (two focus groups per site with each focus group lasting from 20-45 minutes each over 2.5 weeks in May 2007). We interviewed **a total of 95 youth** who met the “low-participating” and “non-participating” criteria.

Following each focus groups, we wrote 8-10 page summaries for each site, which were shared with the leaders of each of the Beacons sites. In addition to the focus group data, our analysis

was also informed by a Beacons Executive and Program Director Online Survey (N=11) and a review of proposals submitted to SFBI for the Beacon Initiative for Young Adolescents (BYA).

## Who Participated in the Youth Focus Groups?

Exhibit 1 below provides a summary of our overall sample and the breakdown of participant and non-participant groups' age, gender and racial/ethnic characteristics relative to the Beacons overall population. Based on our recruitment and selection of youth according to the criteria outline above, the following characteristics were notable in terms of who participated in our sample:

- **Gender.** The gender breakdown for our sample was 54% male and 46% female, which is highly comparable to 53% male and 47% female among all Beacon participants. However, a higher percent of girls are among the non-participants focus groups.
- **Age.** There is a larger percent of older youth among the non-participant groups.
- **Race and Ethnicity.** However, we over sampled particularly groups to get the perspectives of those who are hardest to reach. Fore example, African-American youth showed a steep drop in participation level (a decrease from 52% in 2004-2005 to 20% in 2005-2006). Therefore, in our sample, the percentage of African-Americans is greater than the general participation rate.

**Exhibit 1. BYA Youth Focus Group Participant vs. Beacons Population Characteristics**

Type of Respondents	Age	Gender	African-Americans	Latinos	Asians	Whites	Others
<b>Beacons Population (2005-2006)</b>	0-18+	Male: 53% Female: 47%	20%	22%	47%	3%	7%
<b>Overall Study Sample N = 95</b>	10-18	Male: 54% Female: 46%	<b>43%</b>	27%	<b>20%</b>	5%	2%
<b>Participants N=49</b>	11-14	Male: <b>73%</b> Female: 27%	<b>41%</b>	33%	<b>20%</b>	6%	0%
<b>Non-Participants N = 46</b>	<b>75% are 13 or older</b>	Male: 33% Female: <b>67%</b>	<b>46%</b>	22%	<b>20%</b>	4%	4%
<b>Comparison of Study Sample to Beacons Population</b>	Larger % of older youth among the non-participants	Similar overall, but a higher % of girls among the non-participants	Study sample % higher than Population	Similar %'s	Study Sample lower than Population	Similar %'s	Similar %'s

## Findings

When asked about what influenced youth to participate or not in the Beacon programs, youth were thoughtful and honest. While most of the reasons they cited were not altogether unexpected, what was surprising was some of the factors that youth identified could be both a positive and a negative influence on whether they participated or not. For example, “family expectations and role” was the most cited factor as to whether youth attended or participated in the Beacon programs. One hundred percent of youth in 16 of the 16 focus groups mentioned this. However, only 44% of the focus groups (7 of the 16 focus groups) explained that this was a positive influence while 56% said that their families’ role and expectations were a *negative* factor in their participation in the Beacons. Exhibit 2 below summarizes our key findings across the 16 focus groups conducted.

**Exhibit 2. Most Common Factors Influencing Youth Beacon Attendance and Participation**

Factors	% <sup>1</sup>	Positive Influence	Negative Influence
1. <b>Family Expectations &amp; Role</b>	100%	44%	56%
2. <b>Program Activities</b> (type and variety of program offerings)	81%	38%	38%
3. <b>Perception of &amp; Relationship with Staff</b>	81%	85%	8%
4. <b>Homework Assistance</b> (availability, staffing, & implementation)	75%	58%	17%
5. <b>Friends’ Role</b>	69%	64%	36%
6. <b>Competing Activities</b>	63%		100%
7. <b>Concerns for Safety</b>	56%		100%
8. <b>Transportation</b> (availability & perception of safe passage)	44%		100%
9. <b>Child care &amp; Other Family Obligations</b>	38%		100%
10. <b>Staff’s Communication with Parents</b>	38%	50%	50%
11. <b>Program Structure</b>	31%	20%	60%
12. <b>Broader Peers Influence &amp; Interactions</b>	31%	60%	20%
13. <b>Unfair Treatment</b>	25%		100%
14. <b>Strict Rules &amp; Rigid Program Structure</b>	25%		100%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages represent *the number of focus groups* out of 16 that cited these factors. Individual data is not available due to confidentiality and method of recording group responses. Following are percentage equivalents: 15=94%, 14=88%, 13=81%, 12=75%, 11=69%, 10=63%, 9=56%, 8=50%, 7=44%, 6=38%, 5=31%, 4=25%, etc.

<b>Factors</b>	<b>%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Positive Influence</b>	<b>Negative Influence</b>
15. <b>Staff &amp; Youth Diversity</b> (including honoring diversity)	25%	75%	
16. <b>Logistical Barriers</b> (permission slips, notification of summer program)	25%		100%
17. <b>Center's Location</b>	19%	33%	67%
18. <b>Mixing of Older with Younger Youth in Program</b>	19%	33%	67%
19. <b>Center Location in School Setting</b>	13%		100%
20. <b>Knowledgeable and Helpful Staff</b>	6%	100%	

The other factors that youth most often identified include: (2) types of program activities (81%), (3) relationship with staff, (4) quality of homework assistance, and (5) influence of friends. Like family influence, youth did not talk about these factors in entirely positive or negative influences on their participation.

To understanding these findings and their implications for policy and practice, we present the findings within a “Push/Pull Model” of factors that affect youth participation. The “Push/Pull Model” is an important way to think about the findings for several reasons.

- ***Determining what is feasible to address by stakeholders at different levels of the system.*** Some factors are within Beacon Directors’ control (e.g., program activities and structures) while others are broad based and would require concerted efforts across multiple agencies to address (e.g., safety and transportation).
- ***Focusing on factors can be readily addressed.*** Classification of influential factors in this manner can also help Beacon directors determine which push factors can be converted into pull factors.

We have grouped the factors influencing youth participation can into two major categories: (1) **Beacon-Center-Related Factors** and (2) **Community-related Factors**. Exhibit 3 provides a visual summary of our findings as they relate to the Push/Pull Model of analysis.

**Exhibit 3. “Push/Pull Model” of Youth Participation**



Overall, we found the following major themes.

- Low-participating youth are more likely to speak about Beacon-related factors, although some community related factors are just as pressing to them.
- Non-participating youth are more likely to speak about community-related factors as primary reasons for not participating in the Beacon Centers.
- Families’ understandings and expectations often mediate the community and Beacon push/pull factors through their expressed concerns and behaviors.
- Quality relationships with adult staff, followed by peer connections, are also influential factors in drawing hard-to-reach youth into the Beacon programs.
- Gender, racial, age differences are apparent in how youth viewed push/pull factors.
- Issues of safety and transportation are foremost in youth’s minds.
- There are a number of factors within the Beacons that can be refined to better engage hard-to-reach youth.

Exhibits 4 and 5—focusing on community related factors and Beacon-specific factors—elaborate on why youth perceive particular influences as having both a push and pull effect on their participation and engagement in the Beacon program. We also juxtapose questions for Steering Committee members and Beacon Directors to consider as they have implications for policy and practice.

#### Exhibit 4. Community-related Factors on Youth Participation & Engagement

Factors	Pull Factors	Push Factors	Questions for Consideration
1. Family Expectations & Actions	<p>Youth participation is helped by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents' positive perception of homework assistance by Beacons</li> <li>• Parents' perception of Beacon Center as a safe place for youth to go after school</li> </ul>	<p>Youth participation is hindered by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited parental knowledge of Beacons programs</li> <li>• Lack of trust between parents &amp; youth (e.g., youth actually attend program after school)</li> <li>• Parents' fear for youth's safety after they leave the program</li> <li>• Curfews set by parents</li> <li>• Parents' belief that home is the best place for homework</li> <li>• Parents' not allowing of Beacon attendance because of poor grades</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can families be <b>better engaged</b> to address issues of safety, transportation, childcare, and appropriate level of communication with staff about the Beacon program and their children's activities and progress?</li> </ul>
Factors	Pull Factors	Push Factors	Questions for Consideration
2. <b>Safety &amp; Transportation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents and youth's perception that the Beacons Center is a safe space.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents' concern about use of public transportation to get home in the evenings.</li> <li>• Girls' special concerns about issues of personal safety and transportation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can programs prepare for daylight savings time so that attrition doesn't occur?</li> <li>• What initiatives or policies can be developed to ensure safe passage home? (e.g., SF Gang Free Initiative)</li> <li>• What kinds of alternative transportation arrangements can be set up so that both youth and parents do not fear for youth's safety?</li> <li>• How can program staff and parents coordinate to improve transportation arrangements?</li> </ul>

Factors	Pull Factors	Push Factors	Questions for Consideration
3. <b>Childcare and Other Family Obligations</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents' expectations that girls assume primary responsibility for childcare responsibilities.</li> <li>• Parents' expectation that youth do chores and assist parents in other family matters (e.g., family business)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can Beacons programs coordinate efforts with other providers to fill the gap in services? (e.g., cross-age childcare)</li> <li>• How can Beacons attend to community-related factors to mitigate the inequitable effects on girls' participation? (e.g., safety, childcare, and transportation).</li> </ul>
4. <b>Competing Activities</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement in other activities in supervised, structured settings (e.g., school- or community-based youth programs, recreation centers, or job)</li> <li>• Time spent at home watching TV or playing on computer</li> <li>• Hanging out with friends (at the park, the mall, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are assumptions made about youth engagement in unstructured, peer-oriented activities?</li> <li>• How can Beacons programs coordinate with other providers to engage youth who would otherwise not go to the Beacon or other structured activities?</li> </ul>

### Beacon-Related Push/Pull Factors

We know from research that there are **outcomes related to quality youth development programs**, including safety, caring relationships with adult staff, youth participation, skill building, and community involvement. Beacons-related push pull factors which determined whether youth came to the Beacon Centers and participated or not, include the following: relationship with adult staff, friends, strict rules, unfair treatment, homework assistance, “fun” programs and activities, racial/ethnic diversity for staff and peers, and location.

### Exhibit 5. Beacon-related Factors on Youth’s Participation & Engagement

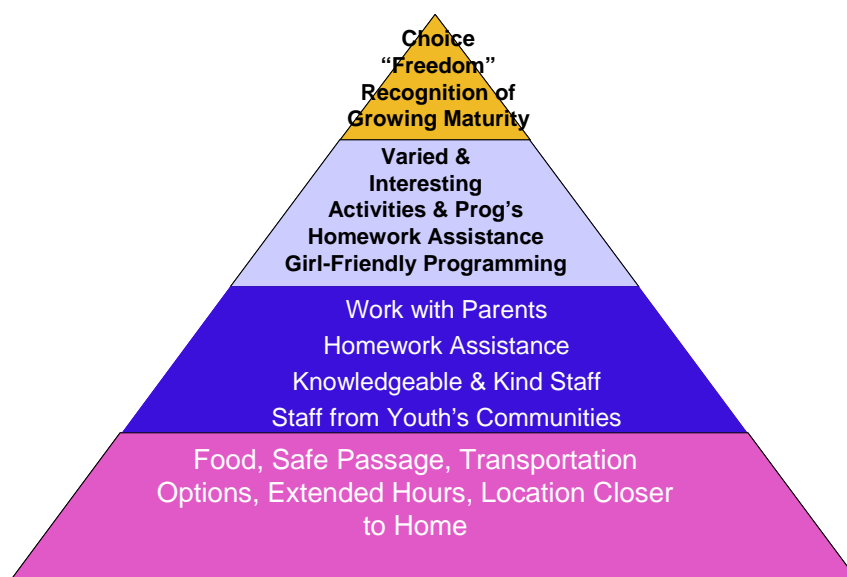
Factors	Pull Factors	Push Factors	Questions for Consideration
<p>1. <b>Relationships with adult staff</b></p>	<p>Youth appreciated staff who</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listened to youth, is a resource, &amp; are relatable</li> <li>• Were closer to their age and from their community.</li> <li>• Reflected their cultural background and interests</li> <li>• Able to reach out to their families in a positive and productive way</li> </ul>	<p>Youth reacted negatively to staff who were</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too strict and were not good with youth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can staff <b>strike the balance</b> between being an authority figure and exhibit characteristics that youth ask for of being “kinder,” “nicer” and “more encouraging”?</li> </ul>
<p>2. <b>Friends</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enthusiastic friends play an important role in attracting youth to programs</li> <li>• Older youth are less likely to speak about family exerting influence to participate.</li> <li>• Youth appreciated when it is easy to meet and make new friends at Beacons.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A smaller number of youth said when friends find the Beacons boring, this influenced their participation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can Beacons maximize opportunities for youth to make new friends so that youth are comfortable in the program environment?</li> </ul>
<p>3. <b>Unfair Treatment/ Strict Rules</b></p> <p>4. <b>Rigid Program Structure</b> (e.g. Length of program, staff/youth ratio, flexibility in homework time)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional safety undermined when youth see unfair or inequitable treatment.</li> <li>• Strict rules do not recognize youth’s increasing maturity (rules meant for the younger kids in the program).</li> <li>• Rules associated with enforcing a rigid program structure deter youth from participation: (e.g., program tied to EXCEL state program requirements)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there ways to set up &amp; administer rules that reflect youth’s development and increased maturity? (e.g., honor system, positive reinforcement)</li> <li>• How can programs be structured so that <b>older youth</b> have their own space and not feel like they are treated like the younger, “less mature” youth?</li> <li>• What are ways that staff can emphasize to older youth that privileges (less rules) in the Beacons has to be earned?</li> </ul>

Factors	Pull Factors	Push Factors	Questions for Consideration
5. <b>Diversity of Staff &amp; Youth in Program</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diversity of staff and youth...</li> <li>Increase level of comfort (not being the only one of a kind)</li> <li>Increase likelihood of youth finding role models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of space for particular ethnic or racial groups (e.g. Afro-centric space)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can staff offer safe, ethnic-specific space or programs for youth of color to feel a greater sense of belonging and support without alienating other groups?</li> </ul>
6. <b>Homework Assistance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helpful to have structured time to do homework and get help was a big sell for parents.</li> <li>Knowledgeable and helpful staff who know the subject and is good at tutoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong emphasis on homework tips the balance between academics and fun activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can older youth be engaged in <b>cross-age tutoring</b>?</li> <li>Can the school district offer training for staff on curriculum and tutoring techniques?</li> </ul>
7. <b>School-based Center Location</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convenient</li> <li>Accessible</li> <li>Safe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School-based setting can be too academically focused:</li> <li>"More of the same," "Had enough"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can <b>satellite sites</b> be arranged as an alternative to school-based Beacon programs?</li> </ul>
8. <b>Communication with parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive, ongoing staff relationship with parents</li> <li>Parents are informed about program &amp; structure</li> <li>Parents are confident that their children are regularly attending</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents don't know about program,</li> <li>Mistrusts youth when they come home w/o their homework done</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can program staff better inform parents on an ongoing basis of youth's (1) attendance record, and (2) their progress (positively or negatively)?</li> </ul>
9. <b>Program activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number &amp; variation in programs offered</li> <li>Cooking, field trips, sports most frequently &amp; favorably mentioned</li> <li>Most programs set up to appeal to boys (e.g., sports).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gap in programming that is appealing to girls. (Both girls and boys observed that there are much fewer options for girls.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can Beacons attend to Beacon-related factors to mitigate the <b>inequitable effect on girls' participation</b>? (e.g., programming that appeal to girls).</li> </ul>

## Recommendations

Many of the recommendations are embedded in the questions raised for consideration in the two summary tables. Below, we have provided a visual summary of youth's and our recommendations of "pull factors." These merit particular attention because these features, according to youth, bring them in the door and more importantly, keep them engaged. The factors listed at the bottom of the pyramid represent youth (and their families') basic needs related to food, safety, and transportation. As basic needs are met, youth acknowledge that the quality of staff and their background are instrumental in helping them and their families to feel connected to the Beacon centers. The factors listed top of the pyramid reflect increasing needs as youth mature look for increased responsibilities and role in their immediate communities.

**Exhibit 6. Summary of Recommendations for Areas of Focus to Deepen Youth Engagement**



## Other Resources from this Study

For more in-depth, site specific data, please see the following:

1. *Youth Focus Group Site Report: Bayview Hunter's Point*
2. *Youth Focus Group Site Report: Chinatown*
3. *Youth Focus Group Site Report: Mission*
4. *Youth Focus Group Site Report: OMI/Excelsior*
5. *Youth Focus Group Site Report: Richmond*
6. *Youth Focus Group Site Report: Sunset*
7. *Youth Focus Group Site Report: Visitacion Valley*
8. *Youth Focus Group Site Report: Western Addition*