



Youth & Family Centers
in our Public Schools

The Beacon Academy: A Peer-Led Training Model

Each summer, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative sponsors a peer-led training event called the Beacon Academy. A citywide gathering of youth development professionals focused on peer-led training, professional development and networking, the Academy brings together more than 100 Beacon staff from Centers across San Francisco. Beacon staff are offered an opportunity to learn new techniques and best practices from their peers at other Beacon Centers and come away with valuable information and resources to guide their work in the upcoming school year. The Academy also provides the Initiative with an opportunity to encourage professional development, foster improved morale and reward peer-leadership at Beacon Centers.

Key Elements of the Beacon Academy

Peer Leadership

One of the key elements of the Beacon Academy is its peer-leadership model. Every part of the process, from planning and logistics to training and workshops, is led entirely by youth development staff from Beacon Centers. The focus of the Academy is data-driven, determined by specific needs and challenges at Beacon Centers identified by the evaluators (see discussion of Beacon Quality Standards, below). Once the topics for training have been identified, the Beacon Initiative executive director designates two Academy co-chairs to provide planning and oversight. The co-chairs are responsible for setting the Academy schedule, recruiting and training the peer-trainers, and developing a budget for the event. As an enhancement to the professional development opportunities, the Academy co-chairs work intensively with trainers to identify needs and provide training help in preparing their workshops and presentations.

In order to include a broader Beacon perspective in the planning and oversight of the academy, the two co-chairs are joined by one staff member from each Beacon Center to form an advisory group. To ensure consistency in delivery of curriculum and facilitation of workshops, peer-trainers for the Academy are recruited through an RFP process, and interested staff are invited to submit a one-page training proposal. And, to encourage cross-Beacon collaboration, trainers are invited to pair with peers from other Centers to submit proposals. In addition to technical assistance in planning workshops and training in presentation skills, all peer-trainers receive training in cultural competency.

Workshops at the Academy incorporate promising practices, strategies and approaches drawn from the trainers' first-hand experiences at Beacon Centers. Workshops tend not to be dominated by "talking heads," but are instead dynamic and interactive, facilitating collaboration across Beacon Centers. The presenters represent a diversity of roles and experiences, which allow them to speak to the broad range of perspectives among the participants.



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*Beacon staff are
able to share
and learn about
innovative
programs and
promising
practices.*

Data-Driven Training Topics

The focus for the Academy is determined by challenges identified in an ongoing evaluation of the Beacon Centers by Resource Development Associates. This comprehensive evaluation includes pre- and post- assessments of youth outcomes, client survey data, and a range of interviews. Topics identified by the evaluators are discussed with Beacon directors and with the Beacon steering committee, the policy body, in order to ensure broad support and buy-in for the Academy. For example, in 2005 the Academy topics will be strategies for collaboration with the host school, and strategies for parent involvement. Because safety continues to be an urgent concern, the 2004 focus on safety will be continued in 2005 in the form of a safety seminar discussion.

Youth Leadership Opportunities

In keeping with the Initiative's commitment to an asset-based approach to youth development, youth play a visible and vital role in the Beacon Academy. A team of Beacon youth representing each Center takes an active leadership role in the planning and logistics for the Academy. This includes responsibility for the registration process, coordinating the food service, and organizing the Academy T-shirt and logo design contest. Oversight and training of youth workers is provided by the co-chairs and two youth-coordinators. Plus, a youth-led film crew videotaped the 2004 Academy and is working on developing a promotional video.

Beacon Academy Outcomes

There was a lot of hard work put into this. Everyone did a great job, from participants to staff facilitators and youth [workers]. I picture greater things to come for Beacon Academy in the future.

— Comment from Beacon staff member in Academy evaluation.

Evaluations collected at the end of the First Annual Beacon Academy revealed that this first effort was a great success. For many Beacon staff, the Academy was their first opportunity to meet their colleagues from other Beacon Centers. Staff appreciated the opportunity for networking and cross-Beacon interaction. Additionally, it provided a valuable opportunity for information-sharing and learning among peers. Through the workshops and promising practices presentations, Beacon staff were able to share and learn about innovative programs and promising practices at work in Beacon Centers. And, staff reported that the information and resources that they came away with would be useful to them as they prepare for the coming program year.

Following the success of this first implementation, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative intends to further build upon this model of peer-led training. The First Annual Beacon Academy provided the Initiative with an opportunity for reflection and planning for future training and technical assistance approaches. The lessons learned in this process will not only inform the direction of future academies, but will also provide the Initiative with guidance on providing ongoing technical assistance and training.

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