

TIP SHEET: Research and Out-of-School Time Learning



The Engage Every Student Initiative was created by the U.S. Department of Education to provide high-quality out-of-school time learning opportunities for every child who wants to participate.

What is the value of conducting research in OST? What does research tell us? Where can we find existing research? What kinds of research can be conducted? How can an OST organization conduct research? This guide will help answer these questions.

The Value of Research and Data in OST

High-quality research helps us better understand factors that contribute to student learning and development and, ultimately, “what works” to support student success. Decades of research on OST programs have demonstrated their potential to improve student outcomes (see box). Programs that have been shown to be effective in the past can guide program design and implementation today.

Once a program *is* implemented, providers can use program data to help them teach and lead more strategically. The thoughtful collection and use of data about important student outcomes can also help programs become more effective.

Both high-quality data and the use of data for program improvement are critical to building evidence about effective OST programs, improving practice, and shifting policy.

Existing Research and Resources

[ED’s What Works Clearinghouse Structuring Out of School Time to Improve Academic Achievement](#)

[Wallace Foundation’s Afterschool Knowledge Center](#)

[Afterschool Alliance’s Impacts Database](#)

[NSLA’s Knowledge Center](#)

The Purposes of Collecting Program Data

OST providers should consider collecting data for at least three related purposes: supporting Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) efforts for their program, meeting mandatory reporting requirements, and contributing to larger research efforts. Data can be used to:

Inform existing funders how their financial commitments are paying off.

Promote your program. Positive results for participants can be highlighted in marketing materials to draw in new participants and advertise the program to the media, potential donors, and community partners.

Ensure sustainability. Results from your program can show the benefits to participants, families, schools, and the community-- which can help you get the financing and other resources you need to keep your program running.

Often, the data needed for each of these purposes is similar. Data might include:

- Student attendance and demographic data;
- Survey data capturing information about the program and the experiences of students, educators, and families/caregivers with the program; and
- Data from reliable and valid measures of student learning and development.





Why Now

In the wake of school closures, remote learning, and the trauma associated with a global pandemic, we are faced with the need to dramatically accelerate student learning and development. Research conducted during and after the pandemic can yield new insights into which OST models “worked, for whom, and under what conditions.” Credible data about the outcomes associated with individual programs is also critical. Significant federal, state, local, and philanthropic investments have created the need—and opportunity—to demonstrate who was served by OST programs, what they experienced, and how they might have benefitted.

What Types of Research Are Typical for OST Programs?

Different types of research are used to answer different types of questions.

Qualitative research typically uses narrative (non-numeric) data to gain an understanding of individuals’ experiences in their own voices. This can help better understand their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations. This type of research does not answer questions about impacts, efficacy, or effectiveness (“what works”), but can be a critical complement to other types of research that can.

Implementation research typically uses quantitative (numeric) and qualitative (non-numeric) data to describe how a program was implemented. It does not answer questions about “what works.” However, when done well, this kind of research can provide useful information for future program implementation.

Outcomes research uses quantitative data to describe the outcomes of program participants. Although this type of research focuses on student outcomes, it is only descriptive—not causal—in nature. As a result, we cannot conclude that it was the *program* that resulted in the reported outcomes.

Research on Program Effectiveness

Not all types of high-quality research are designed to answer questions about whether a program “works.” Research that does is often referred to as *impact* research, *efficacy* research, or *effectiveness* research. Impact research uses rigorous methods that allow us to be confident that it was a student’s participation in a program—not some other factor—that resulted in the outcomes we observe. Two common methods include:

Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) - participants are divided by chance into two groups. One group participates in the program, while the other does not (or participates in a different activity, often called “business as usual”). RCTs are widely considered to be the “gold standard” in answering questions about whether a program was effective.

Quasi-experimental Designs (QEDs), in which the participants are not randomly assigned to participate (or not) in the treatment. Researchers may be less confident in findings based on QEDs than in those from RCTs.

Using Research-Practitioner Partnerships to Collect Data and Conduct Research

Many OST programs may not have the capacity to collect data or conduct research without support. Many OST leaders are partnering with external researchers to augment their capacity to build evidence about their programs. Both parties can benefit, with practitioners using the partnership to better meet program goals and researchers focusing on building knowledge for the field. Through collaboration, these research-practice partnerships can build high-quality evidence that informs both future policy and practice.

Looking for detailed instructions on how to develop and implement a study? Try this: [Learning Before Going to Scale: An Introduction to Conducting Pilot Studies \(ed.gov\)](#)