

Beyond Measure? The State of Evaluation and Action in Ontario's Youth Sector

TEN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS, YOUTH SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS AND YOUTH PROGRAMS

The five key messages from the “*Beyond Measure? The State of Evaluation and Action in Ontario's Youth Sector*” report can facilitate strategic and critical dialogue and action on how the youth sector can develop responsive evaluation processes and practices that are uniquely suited to the organizational, social and political realities of grassroots youth programs. To begin these collaborative conversations, YouthREX has developed the following 10 recommendations for funders of youth programs (#1 to #4), youth sector capacity building organizations (#5 to #8) and youth organizations (#9 to #10).

FUNDERS

01. Embrace a contextualized evaluation approach

There is an urgent need for funders to encourage expanded notions of evaluation to include evaluation methods that allow youth programs to tell rich and nuanced stories of their program's processes and outcomes that acknowledge the complexity and dynamism of youth work. Funders need to embrace the rich, contextual insights that mixed-methods can provide an evaluation of a youth program.

02. Embrace a learning-focused evaluation model

Funders should emphasize a ‘use-oriented’ purpose of evaluation by recognizing that program evaluation for grassroots youth sector programs is better focused on improving the program, rather than just proving the worth of the program. Evaluation can help programs develop insights and findings that a program can learn from to improve outcomes for youth – evaluation can help a program do what they do, better. Funders should become more engaged in the evaluation process, and offer feedback on completed and submitted evaluations.

03. Match realistic evaluation expectations to resource constraints

It's important to acknowledge that at the same youth sector organizations are expected to expand their evaluation

activities, they also face shrinking funding and financial instability. Often, frontline staff who deliver programs and support youth are also the ones who are entrusted with the task of evaluation. Funders should provide enhanced funding (in addition to, and separate from the program fund) to support evaluation in these organizations.

04. Streamline the reporting burden on youth organizations

Funders should collaborate to develop streamlined evaluation and standardized tools (that are customizable) to reduce the burden of creating multiple reports for multiple funders.

YOUTH SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS

05. Meet youth organizations where they are

While grassroots organizations share many similarities, they are also unique, have different histories, work in different contexts and have staff with varying capacities. Youth sector capacity building organizations need to take the time to learn about these unique aspects of a youth organization so that the supports they provide take into consideration the organization's social and political realities.

06. Provide opportunities for frontline staff to learn the fundamentals of evaluation

Evaluation is a skill and also a great opportunity for professional development. Opportunities to learn about evaluation and build transferable skills should always be extended to frontline staff so they can participate in evaluations of their programs, strengthen these evaluations and grow professionally. Evaluation is always better when stakeholders are engaged in the process.

07. Develop a strategy for supporting evaluation in Ontario's Northern, remote and rural communities

These communities are generally under-resourced and less likely to have access to evaluation supports and capacity building opportunities that organizations in Southern Ontario, especially in the Greater Toronto Area have. Youth sector capacity building organizations should develop a strategy to provide evaluation supports to these communities including connecting them to well-resourced research and evaluation institutions like universities, colleges and health sector institutions.

08. Develop innovative, “ready to use” tools and encourage standardization where appropriate

Youth sector capacity building organizations should develop a suite of common evaluation tools including measures for both process and outcome evaluation at the program and youth levels that can be easily customized. Ideally, these tools should have the potential to be either completed online or with a hand-held device and uploaded to a secure online storage space.

YOUTH PROGRAMS

09. Embrace an understanding that evaluation activities are part of youth work practice and incorporate evaluation activities into organizational learning and strategic planning

Evaluation should not be seen as getting in the way of good youth work. Involvement in research and evaluation can support the outcomes that the youth sector is working to achieve; it can be an important road map for decision-making for youth organizations. Organizations/programs should seek ways to broaden the knowledge base that informs youth work practice by developing a knowledge strategy that encourages documentation and a culture of learning.

10. Keep exploring how to meaningfully engage youth in evaluations of youth programs

Both our survey and interview results indicate that while there is widespread agreement that youth have much to gain from being included in evaluation activities, there are barriers to making this happen. Youth programs can broaden the knowledge base that informs youth work practice by developing a knowledge mobilization strategy that encourages the sharing of experiences and learning meaningfully engaging youth in evaluation. This would build the capacity of the sector as a whole to learn from day-to-day program implementation and governance.