

Organization: YMCA

Project: Researching evaluation tools for the Beyond the Bell program

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About the Program:

From the community partner: "[Beyond the Bell](#) is a fully funded after school program that focuses on combining recreation, academic assistance, nutrition, and socialization activities to build confidence, develop social skills, promote physical activity and enhance learning. Beyond the Bell (BTB) is a national trademarked program for the YMCA that was developed by our YMCA in Hamilton, Burlington, Brantford. The program has been in operation since 2001, and has been met with great donor and community support. We work directly in schools with students from grades 1-5 and strive to reduce the impact of financial hardships of families in low-income neighbourhoods in our regions."

The current target demographic of the Beyond the Bell program is public, catholic, and federal (six nations) school students in grades 1-5 at risk of falling behind in their academics. Students are deemed at risk if they:

- Need assistance to get their homework completed
- Need to further develop their social skills
- Are doing well at school but are at risk of falling behind due to competing priorities between school and family.

The Request:

On Tuesday, April 19, 2022, the Research Shop Manager and Strategic Manager of Community-Engaged Research from McMaster's Office of Community Engagement met with leadership from the Beyond the Bell program to discuss their needs for program evaluation. Staff discussed how they are in a process of reexamining and (potentially) restructuring the program to better address community needs and evaluate their impact. As part of this process, we conducted a needs assessment of the program in the summer of 2022 to examine whether the program is responsive to the current needs of target participants.

Beyond the Bell leadership are seeking the Research Shop's assistance again to help them review and update their tools for evaluating the program. The program currently assesses increases in literacy and numeracy and uses independent reading and math scores as indicators, respectively. According to the program manager, they've been using the same tools to measure reading and math scores for over 13 years and are concerned about their validity/effectiveness. They want the research team to conduct a scan of other tools that could potentially replace the ones they are using. In reviewing potential tools, staff have stated that user friendliness is important such that the tool can be administered by someone without subject matter expertise and produce insights without requiring complex analyses.

Research Objectives:

1. Conduct a scan of evidence-based tools to effectively assess increases in reading and math abilities among grades 1-5 children.

2. Evaluate tools based on their cost, effectiveness, and user-friendliness.
3. Propose a shortlist of tools for the YMCA to use in evaluating the Beyond the Bell program.

Research Activities

This research will involve scanning for evaluation tools based on well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, evaluating the tools, and summarizing the findings and recommendations. Structured primary data collection may be required if information necessary for the analysis is unavailable online. For example, Research Associates may telephone authors of evaluation tools to gather more information about the cost and user friendliness if that information is missing from relevant online publications.

Audience:

This research will be used internally by Beyond the Bell leadership to consider changes to their evaluation tools.

Deliverable:

Plain language evaluation report with context, methods, findings, and conclusions. The partners have indicated a main feature of the findings should be a table/matrix that lists the tools included in the scan and our evaluation of each tool according to the criteria.

Timeline:

The proposed timeline for this phase of the research is January to end of April.

Community Partner Role:

The community partner will assist with project scoping where needed. They will meet with the Research Team, at minimum, once at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester, and beyond that be available by email (or some other mutually agreed medium) to help the Team with questions or challenges they might have.

Interest for Students:

Volunteers will be a good fit for this project if their interests include community education, program evaluation, and testing/measurement/assessment (e.g., psychometrics).